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Another defeat for Washington in the Middle East

Lebanon: Crisis not over

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[This interview was conducted on May 20, 2008 by Foti Benlisoy and Aykut Kiliç for the critical review Mesele (Question), printed in Turkey. It is published in the June 2008 issue of the review.]

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II Manifesto: After the recent events, the situation today seems to confirm the victory of Hezbollah and its allies in the "first round." What do you think?

GA: What happened is very clearly that a change in the balance of forces that until now had remained hidden has now become explicit. Hezbollah and its allies have resorted to military means in order to take control of West Beirut. This included control of predominantly Sunni areas of the capital, Christians being in a majority only in East Beirut, which remained unaffected. Fighting expanded to other regions of Lebanon, but without the dramatic implications it had in Beirut.

It is above all what happened in Beirut that revealed a situation in which Hezbollah and its allies confirmed in the face of the governmental majority that they are vastly superior militarily.

From this angle, it is a further blatant defeat for Washington, since the governmental majority is an ally of the United States, supported by Arab allies of the United States, like the Saudi kingdom and Egypt.

The Bush administration is accumulating defeat after defeat in the Middle East. It resembles a football team that has already clearly lost while its opponents continue to score new goals against it until the very last minutes of the game.

This last goal scored by Hezbollah and its allies, including Syria and Iran, confirms what has been clear since the 2006 war against Lebanon: namely, that the Bush administration is as much a disaster in foreign policy as it is in domestic policy.

In this situation, what is the role of the Lebanese army?

The attitude of the Lebanese army is determined by two major parameters.

The first one is that this army cannot play in any case an "interventionist" role in the conflict. It can only act as an "interposition" force — one could say that it is similar to UN Blue Helmets. This is because it is an army that reflects the composition of the population of the country and if it were to take an active part in the clashes, on behalf of one side or the other, it would rapidly split. It would produce anew a phenomenon well known in Lebanon: the explosion of the army.

The second parameter is that the head of the army is accepted by Washington and the other camp including Hezbollah as the future President of the Republic, and he is keen on cultivating this image of neutrality in the domestic conflict to safeguard the possibility of being elected.

These two parameters — the composition of the army and the ambitions of its commander — result in the army

being confined to a role of interposition.

In your opinion, is there a link between the general strike and the clashes that erupted on the same day?

No, honestly, I think that the general strike was a mere pretext. Moreover the social and economic demands for which it was called were very soon forgotten.

The strike had been supported as a move against the government, but the opposition in which Hezbollah is hegemonic does not refer to its demands.

Everything is focused, on the one hand, on the decisions by the government that ignited the explosion and, on the other hand, on political negotiations about the future of the institutions between the opposition and the parliamentary majority. I specify "parliamentary" because it is the majority in parliament, but probably not in the country.

In the West many describe the action of Hezbollah as a coup d'état, comparing it with the action of Hamas in Gaza in June 2007. Many Western observers argue that the goal of Hezbollah is to establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon: What is your comment?

Let me begin from the end: No, I do not believe that the ultimate goal of Hezbollah is to establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon. That is absurd.

It is more serious to ask if this is a "coup d'état" and if there are similarities with what Hamas did in Gaza. In this respect, I would say that there are points in common, as well as important differences between the two situations.

Let's start with the differences. Gaza, first of all, is geographically isolated from the rest of the Palestinian territories, while Beirut is the capital of Lebanon, well-connected to the rest of the country. Secondly the population of Gaza is homogeneous with regard to its religious sectarian composition, and therefore seizure of power in Gaza was possible and Hamas did it.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah knows perfectly well that it cannot take power. It has explicitly stated this since its official foundation. It indicated that there are no conditions for establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon, because it is a multi-religious and multi-sectarian country. Hezbollah is mainly concerned with controlling its own sectarian community.

What happened recently in Beirut was not a "seizure of power" by Hezbollah. It was, very obviously, a military action against the opposite camp, a "seizure of territory" by Hezbollah and its allies, for the most part forces closely linked to Syria. Even Hezbollah is linked to Syria, of course, but it is primarily linked to Iran, as is well known.

Hezbollah itself asked the army to deploy in the areas it conquered militarily, while repeating that it had no intention of taking power. However, it stated repeatedly that it wanted to reveal the balance of forces and show who is stronger.

At first, Hezbollah presented its action as a defensive move. It said: The government declared war against us in deciding to dismantle our telecommunication network and displace the military officer in charge of the airport's security, a man close to the opposition. Hezbollah interpreted these decisions as a further signal of the intention to

attack it not only politically, but also militarily. It reacted then as we have seen.

But, looking at what it did and the scope of the action, no one can pretend that it was a defensive action, unless one means "preventive defense." Hezbollah launched a military offensive that went far beyond what was necessary to revoke the decisions taken by the government against it.

From this point of view, there is one point in common with Gaza, namely that in Gaza too the action of Hamas was a preventive move against what was being prepared by [Muhammad] Dahlan, the faction of the Palestinian Authority most closely linked to Washington. This faction, helped by Washington, was indeed preparing an action against Hamas, which then opted for a preventive move.

The difference is that in Gaza Hamas went far beyond the dismantling of Dahlan's forces. It simply suppressed the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the Gaza strip. But Hamas could also rightly claim to be the elected government in the Palestinian territories. In Lebanon, even though Hezbollah did not seize power, as I said and repeat, I think that it went in its military action far beyond what was necessary.

Today, after this action, Hezbollah's image as a military force that has always defined itself as a resistance movement and was therefore different from the militias that existed and still exist in Lebanon, this image on which Hezbollah based its legitimacy has been heavily damaged. This is because Hezbollah did use its military force, in alliance with groups most of which are agents of Damascus and real gangs with no political legitimacy whatsoever, unlike Hezbollah. Starting with Amal, Hezbollah's closest ally, an organization that is much closer to a sectarian militia than to a resistance force.

Hezbollah joined its military force with these allies, in an action aimed at seizing control of West Beirut, including predominantly Sunni areas. From that moment on, Hezbollah appeared as a force that uses its weapons in the Lebanese sectarian conflict. This has already aggravated the sectarian polarization and one must strongly fear that what some media predict will become true, namely: the "Iraqization" of Lebanon. This expression refers to the situation in which Shiite forces that became dominant in Iraq after the U.S. invasion had to cope with a sectarian war launched by Sunni forces, a very bloody war that has included suicide attacks, car bombs, etc.

I fear that this could also happen in Lebanon in the near future and that Wahhabi and Salafi factions, such as those acting in Iraq, might enter the fray in Lebanon against the Shiites, reinforcing the religious and sectarian war dynamics that were unleashed anew by the recent clashes. Until now this was avoided in Lebanon precisely thanks to Hezbollah's image and the sort of "peace agreement" between communities that has existed since the end of the civil war in 1990. Indeed, the fact that Hezbollah appears as a defense force oriented against Israel led to a situation where even extremist Salafis of bin Laden's type could not attack the Lebanese Shiites because that would have been extremely unpopular in the Arab world.

After what happened, Hezbollah's image has been changing, although not completely yet. But it must be said that the recent events have strengthened the propaganda through which Washington's allies — the Saudi kingdom, Egypt and Jordan — have been trying, in particular since the summer of 2006, to discredit Iran and Hezbollah using the sectarian argument, until now with little impact.

And this is the most dangerous aspect.

In this situation, can Israel seize the opportunity to intervene?

I believe that Israel is unable, in part because of its internal crisis, to embark again on a military action as large as that of 2006 in Lebanon. Not because of the presence of UNIFIL (the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon). This is definitely not what could prevent Israel from invading Lebanon if it wanted to do so. An Israeli intervention would not be stopped by NATO troops. The true obstacle is represented by the strength of the resistance that Israeli troops have already met in Lebanon. Already in 2000 they had to withdraw from the last part of southern Lebanon that they occupied since 1982. This is what deters Israel from considering a new land invasion. So I believe that the Israelis, in order to take revenge for the humiliation they suffered in 2006, are considering more narrowly targeted attacks. The assassination of Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's military leader, some time ago was perceived by Hezbollah as a signal.

This, I believe, also played a role in the recent events. Namely, the fear of an Israeli targeted operation, including a commando operation, whose goal would be to decapitate Hezbollah. This is indeed why Nasrallah no longer appears in public. He did it on few occasions immediately after the summer of 2006, but he knew then that Israel was still in a state of shock from the defeat it suffered. Nasrallah knows that he is threatened and that Israel, at the earliest opportunity, will try to assassinate him.

On the other hand, nobody calls for an Israeli intervention in the Lebanese conflict. Even Washington does not want one, because it would seriously embarrass its allies.

The Lebanese government majority also does not want Israel to intervene.

Moreover, the United States itself cannot go beyond bombing from its naval and air forces. It is in such a tight spot in Afghanistan and Iraq that it is hardly imaginable that it would open a new front, with a new land intervention. Especially such a difficult front, as shown by the resistance capacity of Hezbollah in 2006.

Hezbollah feels under threat nevertheless and sees an accumulation of worrying signs; including the declarations by Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi and his minister of Foreign Affairs about changing the UNIFIL's mandate.

These statements were interpreted by Hezbollah as revealing an intention to implement what appears to be Washington's initial plan – namely, a combination of Lebanese troops, the army and its allies, and NATO forces present in Lebanon that would clash with Hezbollah. As Hezbollah knows very well, this is the scenario designed by Washington.

But even though Hezbollah's action was an act of preventive defense in this context, it has exceeded the limits, in my opinion, and created a situation that, in the medium term, could prove dangerous and harmful. It is quite possible that what just happened will be seen by history not as an isolated episode, but as the first round of a new war in Lebanon, although there could be more or less long periods of truce between successive rounds. This is because accumulated grievances and tensions are strong, while on the other hand it has been demonstrated that the coexistence between Hezbollah's military force and a Lebanese state sovereign on its territory is almost impossible.

Hezbollah is a state within the state, which has confirmed on top of that its ability to impose its conditions on the state, whereas in the past it could appear as a "state of resistance" against Israeli invasions, invasions that the state, precisely, is unable to counter, as it is also unable to defend the people of southern Lebanon.

How do you interpret the fact that Michel Aoun has not taken part in the conflict?

Yes, he stayed out of the clashes. I think that he has no interest in joining them. If Aoun intervened there would be a clash between Christians. He knows that he could easily be defeated militarily by Samir Geagea, the leader of the

hawkish rightwing Lebanese Forces. Besides, Geagea today is probably more popular in the Christian areas and Aoun has no interest in moving the conflict into these areas.

The interesting thing, however, is that Geagea himself did not enter the fray. I think this is because public opinion in the Christian regions is very much hostile to any kind of clashes within its areas. They want to stay away from clashes, as happened this time. People see the advantages of preserving peace. Extending the conflict into Christian areas would have dealt a blow to Geagea's popularity. I think that he has waited also because he knows that if clashes were to break out in the Christian areas, they would not remain limited to these areas. In such a case, Hezbollah would give support to Aoun and this would have put the whole country to fire and plunged it deep into civil war.

If the present dynamic continues to worsen, and there is a strong possibility that this might happen in the long term, it would become hard to imagine the conditions for a political settlement. If conditions deteriorate, we could witness another civil war in Lebanon, the explosion of the army, aid and intervention from regional and international powers in support of each camp.

What role does Syria play?

Syria fears the spread of the Lebanese sectarian war inside its territory: in northern Lebanon there are already conflicts between Lebanese Alawites and Sunnis. This represents a risk for the Syrian regime, because it is ruled by Alawites, a minority group in Syria, a country whose population is overwhelmingly Sunni. If a sectarian conflict were to break out in Syria, it would lead to the end of the present regime. But for now, the regime has things firmly under control.

On the other hand, it is sufficient to read the many comments in the Israeli press saying that neither Israel nor Washington can resolve the problem of Hezbollah. No need to mention Europe. As for Arab troops, I think that they would find it difficult to deal with the situation without an agreement with Damascus. Therefore, the only solution is to talk with Damascus. In Haaretz and other Israeli newspapers one can read reproaches made to Washington for preventing the Israeli government from talking with Damascus. Consider also the recommendations of the "Iraq Study Group" of Baker-Hamilton, in which negotiations with Damascus are an important element. Syria can interpret all this as indications in its favor.

Therefore, it is clear that Syria will put everything on the negotiating table, requiring: 1) the revocation of all threats against it, especially the international Special Tribunal investigating Rafik Hariri's assassination, and 2) a change of stance toward it and the acknowledgment of its tutelage over Lebanon. One should not forget that Damascus intervened two times already in Beirut, in 1976 and 1987, the first time in order to rescue Washington's allies after Syria had supported the enemies of the United States from outside. The second time was followed by clashes between Syrian troops and Hezbollah. There may be a third time.

One cannot rule out that the Syrian regime may be "implored" to intervene again militarily, whether directly or indirectly, i.e. by sealing off the ways through which Iranian help for Hezbollah passes through Syria, since for both Israel and Washington, the Syrian regime is less worrying than the Iranian one. Israel does not have a problem with the Syrian regime: Israel's border with Syria is the quietest.

These are, of course, elements of the complicated Middle Eastern equation, of which Lebanon is an integral part.

Postscript

(The above interview was conducted on May 13. Since its publication in *Il Manifesto* was postponed for many days, the following comment was added on the agreement reached by the various Lebanese factions and signed in Doha (Qatar) on May 21.)

1. As was emphasized in most serious comments, the Doha agreement is no miracle solution to the new Lebanese conflict, but at best an agreement opening an interim period during which the two opposed camps will continue their confrontation by other means, while new armed rounds will remain possible in the more or less distant future. The intermittent 15-year Lebanon war (1975-1990) was studded with agreements of this kind. It is to be feared that it is the case again, unless regional/international dealings kill in the bud the new civil war dynamics that have been set in motion. The possibility of a change in Washington's Middle East policy, as a result of the forthcoming American election, is, incidentally, one of the key factors underlying the Doha truce.
2. The Doha agreement is nothing more than a new compromise on the distribution of institutional positions between socially conservative political-sectarian forces – essentially between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, with Lebanese Christians being split between the two camps. The new-old electoral law agreed upon, which goes back to a smaller division of constituencies, is such that it will reinforce the sectarian dynamics that have rebounded in Lebanon during the last few years. It stands at the exact opposite of the demand by the Lebanese left of elections on a proportional basis with Lebanon as a single constituency, in order to favor political cleavages and multi-sectarian forces.
3. The parliamentary majority, allied with Riyadh and Washington, accepted the opposition's main demand – veto power within the government – when the opposition finally imposed on the ground, with arms, this veto power that it could not obtain through the peaceful mobilization that it launched since December 2006. Given that there is less than one year left before the next parliamentary election, the current parliamentary majority estimated that an interim government ruling by consensus is acceptable in exchange for guaranteeing that the current parliament will elect, for six years, a president of the republic whom it approves, the commander of the Lebanese army, Michel Suleiman. This is all the more important given that the current majority is definitely not sure that it will remain so after the parliamentary election scheduled for 2009. In that sense, a major loser of this agreement is General Michel Aoun, whose foremost ambition was to become president, the reason for which he played a key role in blocking the election of Suleiman in the wake of the agreement on the latter's name between Washington and Damascus at the end of November 2007.
4. The Doha agreement was the result of intensive bargaining between Washington and Riyadh, on one side, and Damascus and Tehran, on the other. The emirate of Qatar – on the territory of which is located the principal command center of U.S. forces in the region (previously located in the Saudi kingdom) and which maintains cordial relations with the Israeli state, while maintaining equally cordial relations with Damascus, Tehran and Lebanese Hezbollah – was the perfect broker for this mediation. The revelation on the very same day when the Doha agreement was signed of ongoing negotiations between the Olmert government and the Syrian government seems to me to confirm what the May 13 interview ended with.

London, May 22, 2008