

Imperial Designs vs. Reality in Lebanon

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The war unleashed by the Israeli armed forces in July and August 2006 against Hezbollah and Lebanon as a whole was accompanied by a major offensive in the Gaza strip against Hamas, the majority party in the Palestinian Parliament. In order to better understand the significance of these events, we consulted Gilbert Achcar, political scientist and activist of Lebanese origin who teaches at the University of Paris VIII and is currently a research fellow at the Centre Marc Bloch (Berlin). His book *The Clash of Barbarisms* (second edition, 2006, Saqi, London and Paradigm Publishers, Colorado) has been translated into several languages. His book of dialogues with Noam Chomsky, *Perilous Power*, is soon to be released (Paradigm Publishers and Penguin, London).

COHEN/NICOLAIDIS: Hezbollah (or the Party of God) is a central actor in the war and now plays a key role in the Israeli-Arab conflict and in the broader Middle Eastern strategic context. Could you help us understand this organization better?

ACHCAR: Hezbollah was born in the combined context of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the situation created in Lebanon by the Israeli invasion of 1982. The Iranian revolution imparted great momentum to Islamic fundamentalism by helping it to occupy the ground left vacant by the failure of progressive nationalist currents and the radical left—that is, the terrain of struggles against Western domination and its local despotic allies. (Recall that the Iranian revolution overturned the regime of the Shah, one of the main allies of the U.S. in the Middle East).

Hezbollah was born in a process of a radicalization among Lebanese Shiites—the most receptive community to the influence of the Iranian revolution due to religious affinities. Among the Shiites there was already another community-based movement, Amal, the “Movement of the Deprived,” a non-fundamentalist organization although it was founded by a religious figure, Musa al-Sadr, who disappeared mysteriously while visiting Libya in 1978. The Israeli invasion of 1982 precipitated a radicalization within Amal and the emergence of a wing that drew inspiration from the Iranian revolution. This movement built itself, with direct aid from Tehran, in organizing the struggle against the occupation. Iranian funds, skillfully used, helped Hezbollah set up a network for social welfare and to build a mass base within the Shiite community.

Hezbollah at first waged a fierce struggle against its competitors among Lebanese Shiites. One of the forces it considered to be a dangerous rival was the Lebanese Communist Party, well implanted among the Shiites, which had initiated the anti-Israeli resistance. The struggle against the communists was not solely ideological. Hezbollah is strongly suspected of having been behind the assassination of several well-known communist figures of Shiite descent. After the first years, marked by pitiless competition, Hezbollah established a *modus vivendi* with the other organizations active among Shiites (Amal, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Syrian National Social Party, and others). When in 2000 Israel chose, under pressure, to evacuate the last portion of territory it had

occupied since 1982, Hezbollah claimed credit for the victory. This was a deserved distinction, but it also masked the significant role played in the resistance by secular or left-wing movements.

Over the years, Hezbollah has undertaken a transformation; its status as a mass party has superseded its role as an organization of armed resistance. Borrowing the concept forged by Annie Kriegel in her work on the French Communist Party, one Lebanese sociologist has described Hezbollah as a “counter-society.” Indeed, like mass workers’ parties, it has organized all manner of social services. When it began its move into institutional politics in the 1990s, it became one of the main forces on the Lebanese political scene. The party has a parliamentary group and two government ministers. It is by far the most popular force in the Shiite community, which is the largest in Lebanon; Hezbollah’s legitimacy appears unassailable.

So nothing of what I have just said contradicts the fact that the ideology out of which Hezbollah originated is fundamentalist. Islamic fundamentalism is multiple and differentiated: between a mass organization such as Hezbollah and a “substitutionist” terrorist network such as Al Qaeda, the difference is as great as that between the former Italian Communist Party and the Red Brigades, even though both claimed the banner of communism. Washington and Israel define Hezbollah as a “terrorist organization” and accuse it of having led “terrorist” operations, including operations targeting civilians in Lebanon and abroad, although this is far from being proven and Hezbollah denies it. In any case, it has been a long time since Hezbollah has been responsible for, or even accused of, any “terrorist” operations, in the sense of attacks deliberately targeting civilians.

Although it maintains a considerable armed wing, which we saw in action in the recent war, armed struggle—including the most legitimate sort—has become a secondary activity for Hezbollah compared to its role as a political party. After the Israeli evacuation of 2000, the party’s sporadic military operations have taken place in the context of ongoing, low-intensity warfare with Israel. But Hezbollah in 1996 had reached an accord with the Israeli government to spare civilians and it has respected the agreement better than the Israelis. The operation of July 12, which Israel seized as a pretext for launching its aggression, was aimed at soldiers and not civilians. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, stressed in a speech that his organization only began to bomb the north of Israel—with very inaccurate strikes, given the type of missiles they have—in response to Israeli strikes that deliberately targeted civilian areas.

Another specificity of Hezbollah with respect to the spectrum of Islamic fundamentalist currents has to do with the specificity of Lebanon itself: since it is a country of several religious communities in which the Shiites, despite being the largest community, do not make up a majority that could claim exclusive power, and since a significant portion of the population is not even Muslim, Hezbollah has renounced the goal of applying its fundamentalist program in a Lebanese “Islamic Republic.” It is still ideologically aligned with the Iranian model, but in Lebanon it is content to be a community-based political force, fully integrated in the dynamics of inter-community politics. Today it is playing this role through an alliance with General Michel Aoun, a main figure in the Maronite Christian community.

Like nearly all Islamic fundamentalist currents, Hezbollah does not in any way question the neoliberal socio-economic order in Lebanon. It is futile to try to paint the organization in “red” as some on the far left are tempted to do. It is not the role of progressives to support Hezbollah, but rather to oppose Israeli aggression and defend the sovereignty of Lebanon against all states who threaten that sovereignty—whether it be Israel, the U.S., or Syria, whose role in Lebanon was vigorously fought by the Lebanese left and the Palestinians in 1976. Progressives who want to support the Lebanese resistance against Israeli aggression should support progressive Lebanese forces, which are still present. The Lebanese Communist Party lost a number of its members in combat against the recent Israeli aggression. The situation is fairly classic, in fact: history has seen

many national liberation struggles led by socially conservative organizations.

What about the anti-Zionist discourse of Hezbollah, which spills over into overt anti-Semitism?

The problem is the same as with the Iranian regime and the grotesque Holocaust-denial declarations of its president. Does that prevent us from opposing any military action by the U.S. against Iran? Absolutely not. It is not a matter of identifying with any leadership when it expresses national sovereignty or national resistance at a given time, but of opposing imperial aggression—only the latter is a question of principle. For the rest, people themselves must find their own route. Two misconceptions should be avoided. The first consists of judging a political force only by its ideology. This leads to discourses like that of Bush who recently denounced “Islamofascism.” The other is seeing only Hezbollah’s role in defending national sovereignty— i.e., an anti-imperialist practice—while treating its religious character as a veneer of no importance. Hezbollah’s vision of social and gender relations is determined by its religious fundamentalism. It is firmly anchored on the right on these issues.

What effect is the conflict having on Lebanese society?

Ever since Lebanon has existed as an independent state (with or without quotation marks), it has been the site of regional and international conflicts that are beyond its control. It was one of the theaters of what Malcolm Kerr called “the Arab Cold War,” and of the Cold War itself. In 1958, the first civil war in the history of independent Lebanon resulted from a clash between, on the one hand, the impact of Nasserism and its appeal for the unification of the Arab nation, as inaugurated by the Syrian-Egyptian union, and, on the other hand, the rejection of this perspective by a portion of the Lebanese population, in particular among the Christians and their support for the Eisenhower doctrine and the Baghdad Pact—that is, the incorporation of Lebanon into the Anglo-American strategic system in the region.

This first civil war ended in a compromise by which General Fuad Chehab assumed power and governed in a Bonapartist mode. This compromise came apart in 1967 under the impact of the Israeli-Arab war, in which Lebanon was not directly implicated, but which did have consequences for the country, since it led to the radicalization of the Palestinians. Lebanon hosts the second largest number of Palestinian refugees after Jordan, which naturally had implications and these were amplified by the radicalization of a portion of the Lebanese population, while others threw themselves once again into the arms of Washington.

This situation led in 1975 to another civil war which once again played out as a regional and international war on Lebanese soil. After having first supported the left and the PLO, Syria sent its army into Lebanon to aid the Christian right, with Washington’s blessing and a green light from Israel. But this Syrian-American entente broke up after about a year as a new set of reversed alliances took shape—a real puzzle for unfamiliar observers. The civil war concluded in 1990 with the re-establishment of the same entente. Indeed, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, 1990, Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad joined the Washington-led coalition in the war against Baghdad. This opened the way to a renewal of the Syrian-Saudi-U.S. compromise which allowed the situation to stabilize in Lebanon and took political form with the emergence in the 1990s of Rafik Hariri as the central figure on the Lebanese political scene. Hariri, a close ally of the Saudi ruling family, governed in accord with the Syrians and with the presence of the Syrian army—a presence which no one at the time objected to because the Lebanese state had to be reconstructed and a “surrogate army” was necessary for a time.

With the beginning of the second U.S.-led war in Iraq in 2003, this accord came apart again. Hafez

al-Assad's son and successor, Bashar, adopted an attitude of categorical refusal of the U.S. invasion, provoking a split with the Americans and the Saudis. Prime minister Hariri came then into conflict with the pro-Syrian president. Once the invasion of Iraq had taken place, the U.S. next turned on Syria, striving to force it out of Lebanon. This resulted in UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004). In this affair France collaborated fully with the U.S., unlike what it had done regarding Iraq. In the latter case, Paris and Washington had contradicting designs on Iraqi oil. In Lebanon in 2004, on the other hand, there was a "competitive convergence" between France and the U.S., since Paris was actively courting the Saudi monarchy, the U.S.'s "protected kingdom," which is also a major client of the French arms industry. This is reflected in the great "friendship" between Chirac and the Hariris, friends of the Saudis.

Resolution 1559 calls for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the disarming of Hezbollah. From the U.S. perspective, the idea was to break up what Washington and its Arab allies call the "Shiite crescent"—an expression made famous by the king of Jordan—that is, the regional axis whose epicenter is Tehran and that includes the Shiites in Iraq, the Syrian regime (which is not Shiite) and Hezbollah, along with Palestinian Hamas, a Sunni organization.

The retreat of Syrian troops took place in 2005—no thanks to Resolution 1559, which Syria opposed—with the support of the pro-Syrian government then in power in Beirut. The Syrian retreat was in fact precipitated by the mass mobilization following the assassination of Hariri in February 2005, which placed Damascus in an untenable position.

At the same time these events provoked new interreligious tensions in Lebanon after years of relative calm. These took the form of two giant demonstrations in March 2005: one, a broad alliance that included the main Christian forces, Sunnis and Druzes, and two, the Shiites in their great majority, along with pro-Syrian minorities in other communities.

The tension diminished, however, with the elections that followed the departure of Syrian troops and took place under the sign of a broad coalition of the anti-Syrian forces (the so-called March 14 front, after the date of their huge demonstration) with the Shiite forces, including Hezbollah. This was, of course, only a marriage of convenience for the sharing out of parliamentary seats. The only forces that remained outside the coalition were the non-Shiite pro-Syrian forces and General Aoun.

The latter's sudden political turnaround after the elections was a major event in this context. Aoun had earlier led a "war of liberation" against Syria, but when Damascus realigned with Washington in 1990, he was completely isolated and forced into exile in France. He did not return to Lebanon until after the departure of Syrian troops. A few months later, to everyone's surprise, he formed an alliance with pro-Syrian forces, including Hezbollah, explaining his attitude roughly as follows: "Now that its army has withdrawn, I am in favor of friendly relations with our Syrian neighbor." It is easy enough for Aoun to reject attempts at outbidding him with anti-Syrian rhetoric, because they had all collaborated with Damascus, including all the main figures of the March 14 coalition, except the Christian extreme rightist Geagea. Aoun counts on a politically winning combination between Shiites, the largest community, and his own great popularity among the Maronites, because he has presidential ambitions.

This situation has the advantage of preventing the fault lines of conflict where the two main religious communities, the Shiites and the Maronites, each form homogeneous blocs—a situation that would have favored a renewed dynamic of religiously-oriented civil war. Currently the fault line passes through the Maronite community between Aoun and Geagea's "Lebanese Forces." The Sunni community is also divided, though in more unequal proportions. The other communities—the Shiites and the Druzes—are much less internally divided.

Israeli strategists must have greatly misunderstood these reshuffle dynamics in Lebanese politics.

Israel's calculation was that it could push the Lebanese governmental majority into taking action against Hezbollah, thinking that the bombings would create the necessary political conditions for this. But the very brutality of the aggression, the bombings, the economic blockade, the taking of the entire country as a collective hostage—all this had the opposite effect of unifying the population and hushing the critics of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's popularity grew, not only among the Shiites, where it is more hegemonic than ever, but also well beyond the community, among the entire Lebanese population, although religious inter-community tensions could at some point return to the fore.

Political maneuvers have recently begun to prepare a governmental reshuffling that would allow for the participation of Aoun's movement, which has remained in the opposition until now. Hezbollah's leader, Nasrallah, who has displayed political acumen, is taking care not to exacerbate inter-community tensions. He speaks a language of national unity and keeps a relatively low profile compared to the prestige of his organization. He highly values the alliance with Aoun.

Would this attitude help to explain why Nasrallah declared, in late August, that if he had been aware in advance of the scale of the Israeli response, he would not have authorized the July 12 operation?

This declaration is in the spirit of the language he has adopted since the voting of Security Council Resolution 1701. His discourse is now much less boastful than in the early stages of Israeli operations when his triumphalist language was quite inappropriate given the scale of Israeli violence. He has moderated his tone while also, of course, drawing certain lines that are not to be crossed. Hezbollah will not willingly give up its armed wing, unless certain conditions are fulfilled: the liberation of the area known as Shebaa Farms, which Israel has occupied since 1967; the formation of a government and an army inclined to defend national sovereignty (which is not the case of the present Lebanese army, it is true). Hezbollah's attitude can be summed up as follows: "As long as these conditions are not met, we will not lay down our weapons, but neither will we give Israel any pretext to continue occupying the country. We will hide our weapons in the zone of UNIFIL (the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) south of the Litani River, but we will not surrender them."

This is also the arrangement that has been negotiated, for the moment, with the Europeans regarding UNIFIL troops. Visible weapons will be confiscated, but the UN force will not seek to disarm Hezbollah actively with house searches and the like. This compromise does not please Washington and less still Israel. Already they are trying to raise the level of post-ceasefire tension and pushing for more energetic measures. But the current governmental majority in Lebanon prefers a political solution. Given Hezbollah's degree of implantation and the strength it has recently demonstrated, any attempt to disarm its troops by force would unleash another devastating round of civil war with a high cost in human lives and no guarantee of success for any party.

What about the UN multinational force? How do you explain France's initial hesitation to play a central role in the deployment of this force?

Resolution 1701 (August 2006) is the revised version of an earlier Franco-American draft. For several weeks at the outset of the crisis, Washington blocked all attempts to negotiate a Security Council resolution, seeking to buy time for Israel. Only when it concluded that Israeli military strategy was not succeeding did Washington allow the UN process to advance. The goal became to prolong via international intervention the action that Israel had not succeeded in carrying out: the disarming of Hezbollah. The initial Franco-U.S. draft resolution took this idea quite far, invoking

chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows for the use of force. Hezbollah opposed this resolutely and the Lebanese government backed this position, which caused this draft to fail. Paris, which was being solicited to provide the backbone of the international force, made it known clearly that it would not go into Lebanon without political agreements with the various parties. The argument ran as follows: "Don't ask us to do the work Israel did not succeed in accomplishing." The French military hierarchy warned political authorities in Paris that they would not get involved in open conflict in Lebanon. They demanded that political agreement be reached prior to the deployment of their troops, who would not be sent into a deadly trap.

Resolution 1701 invokes chapter VI rather than chapter VII of the Charter. The idea is to set up a peacekeeping force, or interposition force, and not an enforcement force. Nonetheless, the resolution contains some ambiguous formulas that suggest the type of mission defined in chapter VII. Washington and Paris gave up trying to create a new force and accepted reinforcing the existing UNIFIL while giving it a broader mandate. The force is supposed to lend support to the Lebanese army. Paris's position is roughly: "We will support the Lebanese army if need be, but we will not act in its place." Washington and Israel continue to pressure their allies to confront Hezbollah while the French, the Lebanese government, and behind them the Saudis have no inclination to seek a test of strength for fear of losing.

It is true that Hezbollah has only a few thousand trained fighters, but its capacity to mobilize is impressive and it has shown fearsome effectiveness and determination. A few dozen fighters in Bint-Jubail held back the Israeli army for several days, despite their great disadvantage in number and means. Hezbollah's popularity is now boosted by the role it is playing in the reconstruction of devastated areas with help from Iran. It thus prevents the disaster experienced by the Shiites from being held against it. On the contrary, this generous aide has won Hezbollah much popular gratitude and heightened its prestige.

It is now well known that the Israeli intervention against Hezbollah and the whole Lebanese society had been planned for a long time. How do you explain the timing of the operation on the Israeli side?

Israel had indeed been elaborating its strategy since 2004, in consultation with Washington, as is now well-documented. The idea was to strike a decisive blow against Hezbollah while creating the conditions that would lead the Lebanese government to finish the job. To put this plan into action, a political pretext was needed, as the Israeli chief of staff has recently admitted. Hezbollah's July 12 operation gave Israel the pretext it was seeking to invoke "legitimate defense." Thus, the timing was not decided by Israel, but rather by Hezbollah.

Nasrallah, as we have seen, now admits this was a mistake. In his first speech following the beginning of combat, he revealed that Hezbollah's operation had been in preparation for several months, its objective being to take hostages in order to exchange them for Lebanese prisoners still being held in Israel. What he left unsaid was that the operation also aimed to confirm Hezbollah's national legitimacy. But it was an act of bad judgment because it was clear that Israel would seize the pretext to launch a large-scale operation. The Israelis had already seized a similar pretext to strike hard in Gaza, so what was to keep them from doing the same, and more, against Hezbollah?

What is the role of Hamas, a Sunni organization, in the "Shiite axis," which has been designated a key threat by the U.S. and its Arab allies?

The alliance with Hamas is a key element in Iranian strategy. Of course Hamas is not an Iranian "puppet," even less so than Hezbollah, but its Sunni credentials are a great advantage for Tehran in its confrontation with Arab regimes allied with Washington. All these are Sunni and they have tried

to counter the Iranian advance by stirring up sectarian prejudice and stigmatizing the Shiites. Iran counters this with Islamist outbidding. Hamas, being the most prestigious representative of Sunni fundamentalism because of its role in Palestine, is a great asset to Tehran. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the main branch of the Sunni fundamentalist matrix of which Hamas is a product, and a major popular force, are increasingly taking pro-Iranian positions. In the recent war, the attempt by Cairo, Riyadh, and Amman to discredit Hezbollah as adventurists fell totally flat with Arab public opinion, which is Sunni in its vast majority, expressing fervent support for the two organizations allied with Tehran.

In a recent article, you speak of the “sinking ship of U.S. imperial designs,” but at the same time you recognize, using another metaphor, that a wounded beast can still do a lot of harm. How far can the Bush administration go in the Middle East?

Keeping to these two metaphors, let me first say that the ship of U.S. imperial designs is on a disastrous course. It has not sunk, to be sure, but water is leaking in. This is true at least in the Middle East—it is wise not to generalize too much—but this region is of the highest priority for the Bush administration’s imperial offensive and clearly they’re in trouble. In Iraq the occupation is stuck in an uncontrollable quagmire. The Pentagon is finally confronted with a reality that should have been obvious from the start, namely that advanced military technology can wipe out anything one pleases, but it’s not sufficient alone for controlling populations.

The Pentagon is also facing a shortage of human resources. It is having trouble recruiting enough soldiers. Contrary to everything that’s been said, the “Vietnam syndrome” is still present and has even been aggravated by the war in Iraq. The U.S. “hyperpower” is not all-mighty. Its true Achilles heel is the U.S. population. U.S. citizens will play a determining role in defeating the empire. This cannot be done from the outside by “encirclement”—it is strictly inconceivable.

The other metaphor, the wounded beast, is equally valid. The U.S. is now losing on several fronts: the situation in Iraq is constantly degenerating; U.S. conventional deterrent credibility is greatly diminished; and in Lebanon U.S. strategy has suffered a bitter setback. Clearly Iran does not fear a U.S. invasion today because the U.S. does not have the means to sustain it. To be sure, Washington does have the military technology to destroy the entire country, but it does not have the means to occupy it since it cannot even control Iraq, a country with a much smaller population whose regime at the time of occupation, under Saddam Hussein’s rule, had a much thinner social base than the Iranian regime.

As for an attack on Syria, there are people in certain circles, in particular among neo-conservatives, who wish to see it happen, but neither the core of the Bush administration (both Rumsfeld and Rice) nor the Israelis are tempted. The Israelis worry, as well they might, that overturning the Syrian regime would create a situation that is more dangerous than useful. They make it clear that they do not want another Iraq on their border, especially on the calmest of its borders, the line of demarcation with Syria. Because there is no reliable alternative to the regime in Damascus and because the Iraqi adventure has shown that such an adventure can degenerate very fast, they are not eager to attack Syria today. The prevailing “wisdom,” as advocated by the Europeans, is instead to promote efforts to detach Syria from Iran, using both the carrot and the stick, and through dialogue.

Regarding Iran, on the other hand, I believe there is a strong risk, not of invasion but of strikes—without European participation, because I cannot see Europe lending support to such an operation, whose likely consequences terrify European leaders. To support such an action one needs a strong dose of imperial adventurism that is found only in certain members and friends of the Bush administration—the new Doctor Strangeloves. The majority of the U.S. political class may be

tempted to send the Israelis up against Iran, just as they did against Hezbollah. But they are obliged to count to 1,000 before they strike because they know that Iran has the means to respond forcefully. In Iraq in particular, all the Iranians would need to do is unleash a generalized Shiite insurrection against the U.S. in order to make the occupying power's situation, which already is very difficult, completely untenable.

Nonetheless, an aggression against Iran cannot be altogether excluded—here we see the wounded beast. The next U.S. elections (November 2006) could also become a factor. Republicans are in danger of losing control of Congress. They might be thinking that action against Iran would prove electorally profitable. Will the Bush administration embrace the irresponsible folly of military strikes against Iran? Or will it be content with sanctions, although it's clear in advance that these cannot be effective. This remains to be seen, but in any event, the Bush administration wins the prize as the clumsiest crew ever to take charge of the U.S. ship of empire.

P.S.

* This interview was conducted on August 28, 2006. Jim Cohen and Dimitri Nicolaïdis are members of Mouvements editorial board, a French-language publication. It was translated by Jim Cohen. English translation published by Zetnet Magazine.