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A Lebanese fragment: two days with Hizbollah

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I had been in Beirut for two days in spring 2004, when I received an unexpected call from the international department of Hizbollah. The deputy head of the party, and its apparent political strategist, Sheikh Naim Qassem, wished to see me to talk about the "clash of civilisations". He had read something I had written on the subject, a review of Samuel Huntington's 1998 book [1] (based on his 1993 essay [2]), and wanted to discuss the matter further, in connection with a book on Hizbollah that he himself had written and was about to publish. Indeed, it was suggested, I might like to write the introduction to the English edition which was to be published in a few months time (it became *Hizbollah: the story from within* [3], Saqi, 2005).

This was not exactly what I had intended for my days in the Lebanese capital. I had come to Beirut to lecture at the American University of Beirut (AUB) on the Yemeni revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s; but for all the enlivening tapes I played of revolutionary songs about peasant uprisings and the need to arm women, the topic seemed as remote to the students there as the wars of ancient Sumer.

I also wanted to visit the Lebanese chapter of my publishers, Saqi [4]. The company had published several Arabic versions of books [5] published in English by its London counterparts. Saqi's hospitality extended to sending a driver to buy me CDs of the latest Lebanese pop songs. It was the first time I had been in Beirut since early 1971, a gap of more than thirty years that had encompassed the civil war of 1975-1990 which left an estimated 150,000 people dead (from a population of 3 million) and drove many more into exile.

Lebanon [6] may, before and even during the civil war, have been one of the most accessible of the twenty-five countries of the middle east (all but three members of the Arab League) yet it was not among those I worked on. Many other journalists and academics knew it well, whereas my own interests and priorities in those years lay elsewhere: principally Iran, Afghanistan, the Gulf states and Yemen.

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A country of ghosts

My relations with the country and its left intelligentsia were also complicated by the fact that my closest Arab friend, the Lebanese writer Fawwaz Trabulsi [10], with whom I had visited the guerrilla regions of Oman in 1970, and spent many a long evening in discussion with in London, had refused to talk to me after we differed on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

The only conversation I ever had with Fawwaz [11] on the matter, a telephone exchange on 2 August 1990, when I was in the home of the anti-Ba'athist writers Peter Sluglett [11] and Marion Sluglett, the very night of the invasion, was to be our last-ever exchange – despite the efforts of several friends, American, British and Arab to reconnect us. Much the same had happened with the prominent Arab intellectual and frequent visitor to Beirut, Edward Said [11]. Evidently my own view of the world diverged somewhat from that of my Lebanese and Palestinian associates. It was not a place where I felt I would receive a warm welcome.

Even fourteen years after the civil war had ended, Beirut was in spring 2004 not in general an easy city to be in, despite the beauties of its streets and waterfront, the delicacy of its food and the animating sensuality of its music. Every time a car with large men in leather jackets and large moustaches screeched to a halt near the café where I sat, I thought they had come for me (it was the season of kidnapping foreigners in Iraq). It remained too, as it would for months to come, a city under foreign occupation: the Syrians were encamped nearby and their tentacles were in every part, political and economic, of Lebanese life.

I decided this was not the place to spend the sabbatical year I was then approaching, and went instead to Barcelona, a city whose destruction, political murder and (for many Catalans) foreign occupation had passed some decades ago. Yet I had no inkling, as I passed the ornate

residence of former premier Rafiq Hariri [11] in the Hamra district, that in February 2005 he would be spectacularly murdered, in what in Spanish is termed a *magnicidio*, an act with regional repercussions that continue to this day.

The sense of reluctance about revisiting the city was owed not only to the terrible carnage it had witnessed, but to memories of the number of friends and acquaintances who had lost their lives there:

- Abdul Wahhab al-Kayyali, a Palestinian academic with whom I had studied in London in the late 1960s; he had used the newly-opened British archives on Palestine to write a thesis on the 1936 Palestinian revolt, then returned to the region and tried to set up his own guerrilla group only to be murdered, probably by the Syrians
- Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian novelist and spokesmen for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (whom I had interviewed at length for the *New Left Review*); he was killed in an Israeli car bomb in 1972
- Salim al-Lawzi, the Lebanese journalist who had moved his weekly *al-Hawadith* to London when the war began; he returned for his mother's funeral and was captured by the Syrians, who smashed his writing hand before they killed him
- Nasser Said, the head of the Saudi left-wing nationalist party, with whom I had lunched on the sunlit Beirut cornice; in 1979 he was kidnapped by Yasser Arafat's security forces, handed over to the Saudis and never seen again
- Malcolm Kerr, the American academic and author of some of the best books on inter-Arab politics, killed in his office at the AUB in 1983
- Leigh Douglas, one of the few fellow British academics who had worked on modern Yemen; he was killed by supporters or agents of Libya as he left a nightclub in April 1986, a few days after the United States bombing of Tripoli (for which Muammar Gaddafi blamed Margaret Thatcher as well as the Americans).

All these, and in addition the lengthy but miraculously ended ordeal of my good friend, the journalist Charles Glass, who managed to escape from his imprisonment by *Shi'a* militia in Beirut's southern suburbs.

A journey to the south

The trip with a Hizbollah driver to the *Shi'a* heartland of Haret Hriek in southern Beirut was in one sense familiar, given prolific television footage of the war and of the kidnap locations of western hostages in that district. The first impression was paradoxical: huge posters of bearded Lebanese and Iranian radical clerics rose by the roadside, beneath which many of the young women who passed by wore no headscarves. At the Hizbollah headquarters – one of the buildings destroyed by Israeli planes in the bombing of July 2006 – I was ushered through various security checks into the office of Sheikh ("clergyman" in the Lebanese context) Naim Qassem, who sat in a leather armchair under portraits of Iranian spiritual leaders Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [12].

Sheikh Naim Qassem [13] and his associates were in confident mood: the party had just won considerable success in the Lebanese local elections, and international attention was focused on the fresh revelations about torture and abuse by American forces in Iraq at Abu Ghraib prison [13]. Hizbollah's decision in 1992 to participate in national political life meant that the group now had seats in the Lebanese parliament, it was about to commit itself to accepting ministerial seats in the Lebanese cabinet.

This growing presence in Lebanese politics had led to increased international recognition: Hizbollah, through Sheikh Qassem and the international department of the party, had for some

time been meeting European diplomats based in Beirut, and the European Union was trying to persuade the US to do the same.

Sheikh Qassem, born in 1953, acquired degrees in religious studies and chemistry; he taught the latter subject for many years. In 1991 he had become deputy secretary-general of Hizbollah [14] under its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah [15].

Both men had studied in Iran, and (like many Hizbollah personnel I met) Sheikh Qassem spoke good Persian and was happy to converse in the language. Indeed he made a point of stressing not only the close relationship which Hizbollah had with the Islamic Republic; these were evident enough in the two portraits hanging above him, but are also embodied in the centuries-old ties between centres of *Shi'a* teaching and religious training in Lebanon and Iran. The dramatic political events of the late 1970s and early 1980s – including the Iranian revolution and the Israeli invasions of Lebanon – had both created the environment in which Hizbollah emerged and nurtured a relationship that had deep, cultural and religious as well as political, roots.

The Hizbollah worldview

The discussion with Sheikh Naim Qassem was in some ways different from many other interviews I had conducted with middle-eastern political figures over the past years. The sheikh remained calm and succinct throughout the conversation, and avoided long historical excursions of the kind most radical politicians in this region (as elsewhere) regularly indulge in. The British were not blamed for too much.

We began by discussing the history of Hizbollah [16]. In the interview and at much greater length in his book, Sheikh Naim Qassem described the situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s: on the one hand, the "disappearance" and apparent murder of the then *Shi'a* leader Imam Musa Sadr [17], while on a visit to Libya, presumably because he had objected to the Libyan attempt to hegemonise the *Shi'a* community in Lebanon.

With the first Israeli military intervention in 1978 and then with the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran in early 1979, a number of radical *Shi'a* groups [18] were formed, with the aim of promoting the place of the *Shi'a* in Lebanon, a country where they had been the least favoured religious group – despised by Christians and *Sunni* Muslims, but abused also by the Palestinians who tried to take over southern Lebanon in the 1970s, creating their own "Fatahland" near the Israeli frontier. At the same time these radicals were inspired by the Iranian revolution's call for an "Islamic government", along the lines propounded by Khomeini, and sought initially to replicate this in Lebanon.

By the early 1980s, and with the full Israeli invasion of 1982, Hizbollah was formed as a coherent military and political group, aiming above all to drive the invaders out of their country and in so doing to lend support to their goal of representing the *Shi'a* community and promoting an Islamic government in Lebanon.

Hizbollah played the leading role in fighting Israeli forces and those of their Lebanese Christian allies, the South Lebanese Army, based along the frontier in the south. The final Israeli pullout in May 2000 came as much of a surprise to Hizbollah as to anyone else, but was widely perceived in Lebanon and the Arab world as a whole as the group's (and Iran's) victory: within days of the Israeli pullout, the Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati embarked on a triumphal tour of southern Lebanon.

On the matter of political relations with Iran [19], the sheikh was absolutely clear. Hizbollah regards the Iranian spiritual leader, in this case Khamenei, as its ultimate authority; all major

political decisions regarding Hizbollah are referred to – when not actually taken in – Iran. He gave the example of the decision taken in 1992 to enter Lebanese national politics: Hizbollah set up a commission, which prepared a report, with various options; this report was sent to Iran; it was Ayatollah Khamenei himself who took the final decision, in favour of participation.

The sheikh obviously believed in the political role of clergy; there was no trace in his rhetoric of the fine old Arabic radical term *kahnutia* (clericalism), so often denounced in the speeches of the Yemeni revolution I had played the previous day at the university.

Sheikh Qassem did not, however, wish to imitate the Iranian Islamic model in Lebanon too closely. Hizbollah itself accepted that Lebanon was a multi-confessional society and that what was appropriate for Iran was not suitable for Lebanon. Qassem had indeed developed relations with leaders of the Maronite [20] Christian community in the country and saw the future as one in which each party and group sought to preserve this pluralistic model.

This was all the more rational in that for a *Shi'a* group like Hizbollah, the most immediate enemies within its own society were not Christians, but radical *Sunnis* of the kind inspired by Saudi Arabia, for whom *Shi'a* are apostates and polytheists who (as in Iraq, Pakistan and formerly in Afghanistan) can be attacked and killed without compunction. Hence Hizbollah's hostility to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida, including their adoption of the theory of the "clash of civilisations".

This tone of tolerance and flexibility did not, however, extend to the discussion of Israel or of Jews in general. The military struggle of Hizbollah against Israel was officially confined to their expulsion from Lebanon and was incomplete only because of Israel's continued occupation of a small part of southern Lebanon, the Shebaa farms [21], near the Syrian frontier. Sheikh Qassem, and military commanders of Hizbollah I later met, confirmed that they were helping Hamas and Islamic Jihad inside Israel and Palestine; but they appeared to want to limit their own (at that time sporadic) armed activities to the Shebaa issue.

However, there was no margin of doubt in the sheikh's view that Israel was an illegitimate state and that it should be abolished. This position was bolstered, as evident in his book [22], by the deployment of quotes from the Qu'ran denouncing Jews and calling for a struggle against them.

I put it to the sheikh that this use of the Islamic tradition, in a context of modern political conflict, was racist, a point he evidently did not accept. An alternative, open and respectful, attitude to Jews can also be derived from other parts of the Islamic tradition, but this, like the racist reading, depends on contemporary political choice.

A long struggle

The discussion with Sheikh Qassem concluded, and I made clear that my lack of credibility in the study of Lebanon meant it was probably not appropriate for me to write the introduction to his book. I was then ushered by Ibrahim Mousavi, the head of the Hizbollah international department, to nearby al-Manar TV studios (another building targeted by recent Israeli attacks, though the attempt to stop the station from broadcasting has not been successful).

There I took part in a one-hour discussion of the Abu Ghraib tortures [23], centred on the interesting question of *why* it was that members of the United States armed forces were torturing Iraqis in this way. Against the view of the other discussants that this treatment reflected particular hostility to Muslims, I argued that it reflected a more general contempt among armed forces in the west for people of colour, and indeed for any subaltern or subjugated people (in Vietnam as much as in Iraq).

The next day I was taken on an intense field-trip by one of the Hizbollah military commanders to the key installations and battlesites of the Lebanese south. Beyond a certain stage, there was no sign of the Lebanese army or police, only Hizbollah roadblocks with the yellow flag of the organisation fluttering above. The Hizbollah flag was also much in evidence at Chateau Beaufort, the Crusader castle long occupied by the Israelis, as it was at Khiam [24], the abandoned prison used by the South Lebanese Army to detain Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners in terrible conditions. Khiam was abandoned in Israel's final departure in May 2000, with several thousand SLA taking refuge with their families in Israel.

Amid all these sites of killing and heroism, and the massed heaps of detonated Israeli military fortifications that dot the south, there was at first sight an air of near-normality, even optimism: in Marjayoun, the Christian district from which many SLA had come, shops and hairdressers were open and people strolled easily in the streets; some of the Hizbollah people were building homes near the frontier. We lunched in an outdoor country cafe by a river, within a short distance of the Israeli lines. "They will never dare to return here", was the refrain of my militant guide.

Towards the end of the day, my guides took me a hill overlooking the Israeli frontier, and the town of Metulla. There, I sensed that another perspective, and another future, was equally contained within these seemingly peaceful hills.

From one roadside vantage-point, they had pointed to the still unresolved Shebaa area to the southeast. As we looked over to this Israeli town, with people clearly visible walking in the streets, the chief guide turned to me with an unambiguous message: "It took us twenty-two years to drive them out of here [Lebanon]", and it may take us up to forty years to drive them out of there [occupied Palestine]".

I long ago decided, in dealing with revolutionaries and with their enemies, in the middle east and elsewhere, to question their motives and sense of reality, but to take seriously what they stated to be their true intentions. Those words, spoken on the hill overlooking Metulla in 2004, were sincerely meant, and carried within them a long history of fighting, sacrifice and killing. In light of recent events, it would be prudent to assume that much more is to come.

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