

'Whatever happens, Hizbollah has already won'

By Zaid Al-Ali,
Created 2006-08-09 23:00

In *Homage to Catalonia*, his 1938 [account](#) [1] of his experiences during the Spanish revolution at the start of the country's civil war, George Orwell asked an important question that is directly relevant to the current Israeli-Lebanese war. In light of a British foreign policy of "non-interference" which hindered the Spanish republic and helped its fascist opponents (thus paving the way for the second world war), Orwell [commented](#) [2]: "(whether) the British ruling class are wicked or merely stupid is one of the most difficult questions of our time".

In that respect, today's [war](#) [3] in Lebanon is analogous to the situation that Orwell lived through and reflected on in Spain. On 6 August 2006, Haim Ramon, the Israeli minister of justice, explained how the Tel Aviv government was intending to proceed in the coming days. He [said](#) [4] that "we have to continue fighting, continue hitting anyone we can hit in Hizbollah, and I assume that as long as that goes on, Israel's standing diplomatically and militarily, will improve".

Could it possibly be that Israel's security cabinet does not realise that the [effect](#) [5] of its current campaign may very well be the exact opposite of what it intends to achieve? Is Ramon not aware that his government has transformed Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's secretary-general, into one of the most influential, powerful and popular leaders in the middle east?

Zaid Al-Ali is an attorney at the New York Bar and specialises in international commercial arbitration. He has graduated from King's College London, the Sorbonne University in Paris and Harvard Law School. He is also the editor of www.iraqieconomy.org [6]

Among Zaid Al-Ali's articles on openDemocracy:

["Iraq: the lost generation \[6\]"](#)
(7 November 2004)

["Iraq's dangerous elections \[6\]"](#)
(23 December 2004)

["The end of secularism in Iraq \[6\]"](#) (18 May 2005)

["Lebanon's pre-election hangover \[6\]"](#)
(27 May 2005)

["Iraq: a constitution or an epitaph? \[6\]"](#)
(16 August 2005)

["Iraq: a constitution to nowhere \[6\]"](#)
(14 October 2005)

"Hizbollah's last stand? [6]"

(1 August 2006)

Israel's boomerang

The stated objective of Israel's government and military forces since the beginning of the war has varied, but they have been consistent in seeking to reoccupy a portion of Lebanese land, perhaps all the way up to the Litani river [7]. At the same time, the Israelis are intent on damaging the prestige that Hizbollah enjoys in both Lebanon and the Arab world. In this regard, the Israeli offensive has been a complete failure. The comparison [8] cries out to be made: in 1967, the Israelis conquered the joint armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and occupied enormous tracks of land in a mere six days; in 1973, the Israelis defeated these same armies, who were joined that time by Iraq, in twenty days; at the time of writing, Israel does not seem anywhere near defeating Hizbollah, a small guerrilla army of at most 5,000 fighters, although the conflict is now almost a month old.

The effect has been an enormous boost for Hizbollah [9] in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Hassan Nasrallah has made three speeches since the conflict began, and each occasion brings a significant part of the Arab world to a standstill. People throughout the middle east stand silently next to their radios, huddle attentively around their televisions, and consider his every word with both admiration and worry that he might reveal that Hizbollah has suffered a defeat.

After one such occasion, Omar, a taxi driver from Amman, Jordan, said to me: "the only thing that I ask is for the chance to fight alongside Hizbollah". I have heard this same desire expressed more than a dozen times in the past few days alone. Mahmoud, the manager of a small hotel in Syria, urged his staff to provide assistance to the flow of Lebanese refugees into their country, and declared: "Hizbollah's victory will be our victory". Ayla, an apolitical 19-year old architecture student from Beirut, best expressed the feeling that is prevalent amongst most Arabs when she said that "whatever happens now, Hizbollah has already won".

Hizbollah has indeed already won. Hizbollah has won because, despite its inferior weaponry [10], and its comparatively insignificant numbers, it has so far successfully managed to defend Lebanese territory.

The Israelis first entered Bint Jbeil [11], a small town a few kilometers north of the border, on 24 July but the Israelis are still suffering casualties in the town on an almost daily basis. The Israelis' slow progress on the ground in Lebanon, coupled with the constant barrage of missiles that have been raining down on northern Israel runs somewhat contrary to Ehud Olmert's statement on 2 August that "we have completely destroyed Hizbollah's infrastructure". The Israelis cannot bring themselves to admit that they are struggling to defeat this small group [12] of guerrillas.

This highlights another new development that the Israelis have brought upon themselves: amongst the citizens of the middle east, Israeli statements and news relating to the progress of the war are dismissed outright as lies, whereas everything that Nasrallah says is considered to be unspoiled truth. Merwan, an employee in a music store in Beirut, told me that "when the Israelis want to find out what is going on, they watch al-Manar [Hizbollah's television station]". "The Israelis lied about their boat not having been hit, they lied about Qana, they lie about everything", says Dany, an employee in an insurance firm in Beirut.

What is striking is that this skyrocketing in support for Hizbollah in the Arab world has occurred despite widespread ignorance about what the movement stands for and who it represents. Mohammed, an Egyptian employee of a foreign embassy in Cairo, professed the view that

Hassan Nasrallah is the only real leader that the Arab world has produced since Jamal Abdel Nasser, then asked me: "please tell me something. Do the *hi'a* pray? Do they fast during Ramadan? Are they Muslims?" Waleed, an Algerian law student, asked: "is it true that they don't read the Qur'an?"

After the battle

But the reaction in the Arab world [13] has not been universally in favour of Hizbollah. In Iraq, the current civil war between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* in Baghdad permeates everything, including attitudes towards Hizbollah and its *Shi'a* leadership. Abdullah, a wealthy *Sunni* merchant who now lives in Amman, spoke for everyone at a dinner table when he declared to me one week ago that "we don't want either party to win because they are both our enemies. We want for both sides to continue fighting until they eliminate each other".

Samir, a former army helicopter pilot in the Iraqi army, echoes this feeling: "I have no sympathy for Nasrallah. He has never said anything in support of the Iraqi resistance against the occupation. This means that he isn't a real resistance leader, and that he is just an Iranian puppet". It is difficult to find anyone amongst Iraq's *Sunni* population who supports Hizbollah. There are even – unsubstantiated – rumours that Hizbollah trains *Shi'a* death squads in Baghdad in support of their struggle to control the Iraqi capital. The feeling is completely the opposite amongst Iraq's *Shi'a* population. A series of large demonstrations were held in Baghdad in support of Hizbollah, much to the annoyance of the American military.

More importantly however, and perhaps more worryingly too, is that opinion remains divided within Lebanon itself about Hizbollah's share of responsibility for starting the current crisis. Rouba, a political-science graduate and employee of an international organisation, expressed a common complaint in relation to the guerrilla [14] group: "all they are doing is designed to help them satisfy their internal Lebanese agenda". Rumours have been circulating in Beirut that some *Shi'a* refugees, having snubbed aid from a charity on the basis that its *Sunni* patrons are pro-American, were driven out of the neighbourhood in which they were seeking refuge. Whether or not the story is true hardly matters, as it reflects the mood amongst certain Beirut residents.

In that sense, Israel has had some success in increasing antagonism between Lebanon's different communities [15] through its policy of collective punishment. In the end, that may prove to be enough to bring the roof down on Hizbollah's head. The group has proven that it can resist an Israeli invasion and that it can cause significant Israeli losses in the process. But can it resist the pressure - that will no doubt follow [16] the war - from all Lebanon's communities, to disarm once and for all?

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/hizbollah_victory_3809.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780141187372,00.html>
target=_blank

[2] http://www.orwell.ru/library/novels/Homage_to_Catalonia/english/e_htc target=_blank

[3] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/middle_east/2001/israel_and_the_palestinians/default.stm target=_blank

[4] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/746632.html> target=_blank

[5] <http://www.saveleb.org/home.html> target=_blank

[6] <http://www.iraqieconomy.org> target=_blank

[7] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/748019.html> target=_blank

- [8] <http://www.mideastweb.org/timeline.htm> target=_blank
[9] <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero073106.html> target=_blank
[10] <http://www.sundayherald.com/57113> target=_blank
[11] <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/805/re81.htm> target=_blank
[12] <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9155/> target=_blank
[13] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/07/28/news/hezbollah.php> target=_blank
[14] http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HH11Ak03.html target=_blank
[15] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-europe_islam/article_2367.jsp target=_blank
[16] <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=4282> target=_blank



Copyright © Zaid Al-Ali, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.