

Interview

Israel's Dual Onslaught On Lebanon And Palestine

Sunday 16 July 2006, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#) (Date first published: 15 July 2006).

Q. Since last Wednesday, the Israeli Army has been imposing a siege on Lebanon and bombarding the country as a result of the abduction of two of its soldiers and the killing of seven others by a Lebanese Hezbollah commando unit. Israel's reaction was predictable, even in its disproportion. What are the political and strategic reasons that can be seen behind this action by Hezbollah?

Achcar: The explanations that Hezbollah has given for its action are many. The first reason invoked is to try to obtain the release of prisoners — there are several Lebanese believed to be held in Israeli custody, although only two are officially detained by Israel (in addition to close to 10,000 Palestinian prisoners) — as well as to act in solidarity with the struggle of Hamas in Palestine, which is animated by a similar inspiration to that of Hezbollah, and to react to the ongoing onslaught on Gaza. Of course, it was logical to expect this violent retaliation on Israel's part, in light of what it did to Palestine in reaction to the abduction of another soldier.

In this crisis, there are many dimensions involved: international observers have discussed the possible role of Syria and, above all, Iran in what is occurring, and what calculations there are regarding the regional balance of forces. Tehran, whose relation to Hezbollah is similar to that of Moscow to the communist parties at the time of the "international communist movement," has been engaged for some time in an anti-Israeli bidding game against rival Arab governments in order to win over Sunni Muslim opinion. Iranian President Ahmadinejad's provocative statements since his election one year ago were part of this game, which fits in with Tehran's strategy facing the USA, at a time when American pressure on the nuclear issue is in full escalation. But, whatever the case, it can be said that what Hezbollah did has prompted a test of strength that risks costing them a great deal, as it is costing the whole of Lebanon very much already.

Q. A test of strength against Israel or within Lebanon?

Achcar: The test of strength is primarily against Israel, because Israel tries through its actions, whether in Palestine or in Lebanon, to crush the resistance movements. The recent events have been seized as pretexts to crush both Hezbollah and Hamas, and the violence of the Israeli military onslaught is to be read in that context. Israel takes entire populations hostage; it has done so with the Palestinian population and is doing the same now with the Lebanese. It has bombed Beirut's airport and imposed a blockade on Lebanon: all that for an action claimed by one Lebanese group, not by the Lebanese state. In fact, Israel holds hostage an entire population in a disproportionate reaction that aims at pulling the rug from under the feet of its opponents and at pressuring local forces to act against them. But if this is indeed Israel's calculation, it could backfire, as it is possible that a military action of such a scope could lead to the exact opposite and radicalize the population more against Israel than against Hezbollah. The murderous brutality of Israel's reaction, the closure of the airport, the naval blockade, all are acts that could unite the population in a revolt against Israel.

I don't know for sure what Hezbollah's real political calculation has been, but they certainly expected a large-scale reaction on the part of Israel, which has already invaded Lebanon several times before. For this reason, it seems to me that their action entailed an important element of "adventurism," all the more that the risk they have taken involves the whole population. They have actually taken a very big risk in initiating an attack on Israel, knowing its huge military power and brutality, and the population could hold them responsible for a new war and a new invasion, the cost of which the Lebanese people will have to bear.

But having said that, it is necessary to stress that the principal responsibility for the deterioration of the whole situation falls on Israel. It has lately reached new peaks in its utterly revolting behavior, especially with regard to Gaza. After the abduction of the soldier by a Palestinian group, the Israeli army has killed dozens and dozens of Palestinian civilians. Israel can abduct and detain with impunity Palestinian civilians, but when some Palestinians kidnap one of its soldiers in order to use him for an exchange, it resorts to unrestricted violence, taking a whole population hostage, bombing the densely populated Gaza strip in the midst of general world indifference. This is the main source of destabilization in the region — this violent and arrogant behavior of Israel that is in full harmony with the equally arrogant and violent behavior the United States displayed in Iraq.

Q. What is the Lebanese government's position facing Hezbollah's action? Israel has decided to consider this action as being the responsibility of the whole government despite the Lebanese Prime Minister's denial.

Achcar: Israel's policy consists exactly in holding entire populations hostage, as I said. It has done so with the Palestinians; in the Lebanese case, it is even more evident because, while it is true that Hezbollah is part of the government, its participation is minimal and it stands actually in the opposition. The Lebanese government is dominated by a majority that is allied with the United States, and they can now take the full measure of the Bush administration's hypocrisy that claims to be very much concerned by the fate of the Lebanese people only when it is a matter of opposing Syria. To hold the present Lebanese government responsible for Hezbollah's action, even after this government has officially taken its distance from that action, is a demonstration of Israel's diktat policy on the one hand, and on the other hand the indication of Israel's determination to compel the Lebanese to enter into a state of civil war, as it tries to do with the Palestinians. In each case, Israel wants to compel one part of the local society — Fatah in Palestine and the governmental majority in Lebanon — to crush Israel's main enemies, Hamas and Hezbollah, or else they be crushed themselves.

Q. What relates the Hezbollah and Hamas movements?

Achcar: They have similar ideologies and a radical opposition to Israel. Hamas are Sunni Muslims, while Hezbollah are Shiite Muslims, but both of them are allied to Syria and Iran. It is a sort of regional alliance against Israel. Hezbollah was born after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and Hamas at the time of the first Intifada in 1987-88. The fundamental reason for the existence of both is opposition to Israel, the national struggle against the occupier of their territories, the struggle against a common enemy identified as Israel, as well as the United States behind it.

The division between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq is due to domestic factors peculiar to the country, but is not otherwise important in the whole region. This division appeared also in Lebanon this last year, though in a much less virulent fashion, when the majority of the Sunni community, led by Hariri who is allied with the Saudis and the U.S., found itself in opposition to the majority of Shiites led by Hezbollah allied with Syria. But this division could hardly become an important factor in countries where the two communities, Shiites and Sunnis, are not both present, as they are in Iraq and Lebanon. In Palestine, there are hardly any Shiites.

The relation of solidarity that Hezbollah has with Hamas it did not have either with the PLO or the Palestinian Authority when the latter was led by Arafat. Hezbollah never had any sympathy for Arafat and even less so for Mahmoud Abbas, in whom they don't recognize the same radical opposition to Israel that they see in Hamas, when they don't accuse them of betraying the Palestinian cause. The rise of Hamas's clout in Palestine has been perceived by Hezbollah and by Iran as a victory, and Iran was the first state to offer compensatory funding to the Palestinians when Western funds were cut from them.

Q. How will the Lebanese population react to what is happening? Will Hezbollah get their solidarity or will it be held responsible for their suffering?

Achcar: The popular base of Hezbollah is Shiite, of course (Shiites are the largest minority among Lebanon's communities, none of which constitutes a majority). But certainly many among the Sunni minority approve its action as a gesture of solidarity with Hamas and the Palestinians, whereas the brutality of Israel's reaction increases this solidarity. On the other hand, it is probable that the enmity to Hezbollah among major parts of the Lebanese minorities other than the Shiites — the Christian Maronites, the Sunnis, the Druzes, etc. — will be reinforced because they feel to have been put at risk by Hezbollah's unilateral choice and consider that they will be made to pay the cost of this choice. The risk, obviously, is that the sectarian divisions deepen within Lebanon and that this leads eventually to a new civil war. The decisive question is whether the Lebanese governmental majority will yield to the Israeli diktat at the cost of a new civil war, or decide that the priority is to oppose the Israeli aggression and preserve the country's unity. For the time being, this second option seems to be prevailing. One can only hope that it will remain so. The international protest against the dual Israeli onslaught can contribute strongly to the reinforcement of the option of common resistance.

P.S.

* This interview was conducted by Paola Mirenda on July 15, 2006, for the Italian daily "Liberazione", the newspaper of the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC).

* Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at the University of Paris-VIII. His most recent works are "Eastern Cauldron" (2004), "The Israeli Dilemma" (2006) and "The Clash of Barbarisms" (2d ed. 2006); a book of his dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, "Perilous Power", is forthcoming from Paradigm Publishers.