

The Ethnic Conflict in Lebanon and the Future Status of Hizbollah

Aiman Mansour

"Other than the Shiites, there is no one who will say he loves Hizbollah." This statement was made by a Lebanese Christian woman, who was asked in a TV interview how the average Lebanese relates to Hizbollah. And indeed, this is the essence of Lebanon: the citizens' ethnic approach to every matter. In Lebanon, there is no ethnic community that is loyal to true democratic principles, and casting the internal confrontation between Hizbollah and the Junblat-Lebanese forces-*al-Mustaqbal* (the future) trend as a confrontation between a fundamentalist force and a democratic-liberal force contradicts the nature of Lebanon. The identity differences and huge conflict of interests among the communities will only worsen as a result of the current Lebanese crisis, which might lead to a violent internal crisis.

In Lebanon, a person identifies not only with his ethnic community, but also with a particular sect within that community. The interests of each sect (particularly the leader's interests) are determined by its place in the balance of power. In the past, what led sworn enemies to join forces, such as the Lebanese forces and Junblat family supporters, was an interest in weakening the other side, i.e., Hizbollah, which they felt had accumulated too much power. Unlike the other sects, Hizbollah's identity is a combination of ethnic identity and religious fervor. This combination, which is reflected in the organization's Khomeinist ideology, moves the other sectors to cooperate against it.

The outbreak of violence between Israel and Hizbollah has sharpened

the internal disputes in Lebanon. Hizbollah and its allies justify the kidnapping of the soldiers as a move that protects Lebanon and its honor within the anti-West Arab-Islamic world, whereas the other part of Lebanon sees Hizbollah's action as a challenge to the government and the sovereignty of state institutions. The prolongation of the fighting has intensified the verbal violence, and each side has threatened to settle the score with its adversary after the confrontation ends.

Hizbollah is currently waging an uncompromising fight for its very existence, and its main concern is not Israel. Its leaders believe that Israel is incapable of eradicating it, and their conviction stems from their recognition that the organization is based more on the motivation of re-

ligious ideology than on a physical infrastructure that can be destroyed. Hizbollah's fears relate to the internal arena and the external patrons of the various sects. Therefore, the organization directs much of its propaganda inward and presents itself as Lebanon's main protective force (the Lebanese flag is seen more and more in al-Manar propaganda films). Those Hizbollah spokespersons who are interviewed tend to answer each question by emphasizing the "national unity" that is necessary at such a sensitive time, and attempt to shy away from dealing with the questions involving the organization's sovereignty and the legitimacy of its existence as a trans-national organization within a national state. It should also be noted that the organization's senior members see the behavior of

their opponents as treason, but prefer to postpone the confrontation with them for a more convenient time, when Israel is no longer shelling its strongholds.

The end of the confrontation will not bring quiet to the internal arena. Even a ceasefire agreement between Israel and the Lebanese government will not lead Hizbollah to any soul-searching over the great destruction it will have wreaked on Lebanon and will not cause it to disarm voluntarily. Hizbollah will probably continue to mouth the same line, i.e., the kidnapping was intended to bring about the release of Samir Quntar, Nissim Nassar, and Yihye Skaf (who isn't even in Israeli hands and whose fate is unknown), and the Israeli attack was designed to "break the resistance" and drag Lebanon into the circle of Western influence.

The opposing side, especially Walid Junblat and the leader of the Lebanese forces, Samir Jaja, can be expected to increase its criticism of Hizbollah and its existence as an independent entity within a sovereign state. Junblat has already declared that he opposes any ceasefire that does not lead to the disarming of Hizbollah. Moreover, this camp will continue to criticize Hizbollah as an agent of the Iranians, who support it, see it as the successful manifestation of the Islamic Revolution, and consider its leader, Nasrallah, as "the successor of the burning blood of Khomeini."

However, the Lebanese groups

that want Hizbollah to disarm are in for a difficult struggle, to say the least. Hizbollah's opponents will be accused by the Shiite organization's leaders of acting against the interests of the Arab people in general, and Lebanon in particular. Hizbollah and its supporters in other communities will claim that the opposing camp consists of traitors because of their close ties with the Americans, who are continuing to support Israel. The Hizbollah opponents' claim that they are the majority in Lebanon will be countered with the argument that even if they are the majority in parliament, they are not the majority among the people. This argument is based on the fact that more than 40 percent of Lebanese are Shiites, and the vast majority of them support Hizbollah. Furthermore, besides the Shiites, Hizbollah claims support among local leaders who are not represented in parliament. The argument made by Hizbollah and its supporters will take on greater significance with the anticipated debate over voting procedures in Lebanon. According to the Shiites, the current election method prevents them from having proper representation in parliament given their percentage of the population. Conversely, the Christians constitute about 25 percent of the population but hold 50 percent of the seats in parliament.

The power of those who want Hizbollah to disarm is very limited and will remain so even if they want

to use the Lebanese army (in addition to the multinational force that may be deployed in the area). As an outgrowth of this, and despite the great damage to its power as a result of the IDF action, Hizbollah will continue to place a very difficult obstacle in the way of those who want it to cease to exist as a state within a state. Highly critical rhetoric is, therefore, what will make the headlines in Lebanon following the ceasefire. History shows that harsh rhetoric is a recipe for a head-to-head confrontation in the Middle East. The low sensitivity threshold (as was reflected in the matter involving Nasrallah's appearance on the satirical show on the Christian LBC TV channel, and the street violence it sparked) and the future conflicting interests will produce a pressure-cooker situation that might explode into violence and even another civil war.

It is impossible to foresee how long such a deterioration will last, but Lebanon's multiethnic structure and the conflicting views held by the various camps leave little chance for internal peacemaking, despite the involvement of the international community. Therefore, one must relate seriously to the possibility that the disarming of Hizbollah, even if it is done by force, will not go quickly and smoothly. Such a process, which entails difficult political and military efforts, also bears the seed of internal bloodletting that will likely spill over into Israel as well.