

Beyond Beirut

One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. And the cliché is nowhere so pronounced as in the continuing conflict in the Middle East. Even though Palestinians elected a Hamas-led government in reasonably free and fair elections, Israel denies it legitimacy on the spacious grounds that Hamas is a terrorist outfit. The same is true of Hizbullah, albeit this terrorist organisation too holds 11 seats in Lebanese parliament and two cabinet posts. It is not that easy to dismiss Hizbullah as a non-parliamentary political entity operating outside the law. In a sense Hizbullah's July 12 attack against Israeli military posts in the Shebaa Farms area and abduction of two Israeli soldiers was unprovoked. But the disturbing point is Lebanon is in a state of war with Israel as they have not yet signed any peace agreement. And Israel does hardly honour Lebanon's sovereignty.

Faced with a superior military force, such as Britain possessed in 1947 and Israel does today against the Palestinians and Lebanese people terror seems to be the underdog's only viable weapon. Sixty years ago, at the time of British mandate, it was Jews in Palestine who resorted to terror campaign against the Palestinians with the aim of establishing the Jewish state of Israel. And today they are being paid back by the same coin—terrorism.

As Israel retaliated by bombing south Lebanon extensively, displacing more than 50,000 people and killing and wounding an unaccounted number of citizens, the Lebanese government had no option other than to appeal to the international community to extend material help including food and medicine. Not that Hizbullah did not calculate the risk in their aggressive adventure. They did. The way Israel reacted for the release of two of its soldiers was somewhat unprecedented as they did not give diplomacy a chance. But it was not unexpected. In June Palestinian resistance fighters took one Israeli soldier hostage and Israel immediately amassed troops on the outskirts of Gaza while threatening invasion to rescue that poor soldier.

What is happening in Israeli detention centres is an altogether different matter. There are currently 300 Palestinian children (under 18's) and 100 Palestinian women being held hostages in Israeli prisons. They are among 9000 Palestinians being held, many of whom are in administrative detention i.e. without trial or charges. And Israeli leader Ehud Olmert says negotiations are not on the agenda.

Hizbullah and Hamas as also their supporters in the Middle East know how to absorb and evade Israeli shock therapy. Not that this is the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israel repeats tactical offensive they have used without much success at least five times before in Lebanon since 1968, including massive destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure and assassination of political leaders. With every Israeli attack comes mass civilian suffering and Hamas and Hizbullah get politically

strengthened because of growing anti-American, anti-Israel sentiments. One reason Hamas and Hizbullah will have an edge in the long run is ineffectiveness of Israeli aggression—they use more and more fire power with less and less impact.

Interestingly, America is a mute spectator in the current crisis as nobody is asking Washington to mediate. The sole superpower is hopelessly isolated in the ensuing conflict. What Bush and his hitmen can do is to mobilise public opinion against Iran's silent strategy to destroy Israel and America as well. And they are precisely doing that to create the Iran syndrome in the future, possibly not in the distant future.

Today it is Lebanon. Tomorrow it might be Syria. But the core issue remains. It is the Palestinian question which again demands amicable resolution of the 1948 Palestinian refugee problem.

The United States and Israel are in no mood to budge from their known anti-Palestine policies, otherwise condemned even by liberals and democrats of those countries. While Hizbullah being an excuse, Israel wants to establish a 2-km wide security zone, rather a no man's land in south Lebanon, US secretary of state Ms Condoleeza Rice whose diplomacy failed to end the latest Israeli offensive opined against any immediate cease-fire. In other words everything depends on Israel.

Meanwhile, islamist resistance groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and increasingly defiant governments in Tehran and Damascus cheer on because they have a new agenda to agitate for and appeal to Arab public opinion for unity and struggle against America and Israel. ~~████████~~

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