

BUTTERFLY EFFECT AND THE NASRALLAH FACTOR

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Flapping its wings in Honolulu, a butterfly can transform storm systems next month in Hong Kong. It's a folklore, no doubt; but this vivid story has a scientific base and a grand name, the 'butterfly effect'. Pursuing its trail, a strange branch of physics has come into view, acquiring the title of 'chaos theory'. It's the youngest, barely 40 years in age.

Here is a more plausible example of the butterfly effect. George W Bush entered the White House; within a year Iraq showered with a hail of bombs. 'Stuff happens', said the US secretary of defense; so it did in Baghdad. Soon, Lebanon would get pulverized.

The classical physics of Isaac Newton is deterministic, smooth, and predictable. Not so the science of chaos: it delves into the irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side; not just pure randomness, also an overarching geometrical structure, order masquerading as randomness. The mathematics of chaos is a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being.

The chilly period of Cold War is over. The world is now passing through a phase of turbulence and unpredictability. The legendary Middle East is groping for a fresh order.

1. *Shock and Awe*: America invaded Iraq on the plea of smashing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), then switched to the slogan of sowing the seeds of democracy across the Middle East. But, all the time, the real reason was government officials and certain pundits wanted a war. They were under the illusion that if the US used military might to 'hit someone' in Arabia, never mind exactly whom, it would 'shock and awe' Islamic radicals into giving up terrorism.

A high-ranking official-cum-pundit had predicted the American troops marching into Baghdad would be welcomed by grateful Iraqis with bouquet of flower and rose-petals. The thing turned out a bit otherwise, at the first blush. But, as it is in chaos theory, a possible pattern lurked in the background of the apparent disorder.

Saddam Hussein gone, for the first time in some 1,300 years since the inauguration of Abbasid Caliphate, an Arab country will be ruled by a predominantly shia-led government. In Arabia, shia have been second-class citizens, since AD 656, when Hussein, a grandson of Mohammad, was decapitated after a climactic battle with the sunni at Karbala. That social prejudice persisted through Mongol invasions, the Ottoman Empire, and the British occupation, until now in Iraq at least. This minority sect of Muslims (majority only in Iran, Bahrain, and Iraq) will now move to the front rank. For sunni Arabs, then, the triumph of Iraqi shia is a catastrophe.

Jordan's progressive sunni leader, King Abdullah II, had warned of a greater threat than simply a redoub-ling of sunni insurgents' efforts to disrupt and ultimately defeat the present government in Iraq. The king has raised the spectre of a single monolithic 'Shia Crescent' of political power emanating from Iran and Iraq, spreading from the Persian Gulf states to Syria and Lebanon that would upset the balance of power in Middle East. This speculation apprehends a regional conflagration between the two major Muslim sects.

2. *History Revisits:* When Israel attacked Lebanon in 1982, the agenda of then-defence minister Ariel Sharon was to eliminate the Palestine movement by destroying the PLO, to eject Syrian troops from Lebanon, and install a government in Beirut which would make peace with Israel. He got a pyrrhic victory: the PLO was obliged to evacuate on ships off to Tunis, but survived. Yasser Arafat ended up returning to his homeland and died as President of the Palestine Authority. And, above all, Hizbullah, which did not exist before the invasion, was born, midwived by Iran and Syria.

Again, Israel has attacked Lebanon with a view to destroy Hizbullah and its leadership, or at a minimum, to see it disarmed and pushed beyond missile range of Israel, with either the Lebanese army or some sort of international 'enforcement' troops taking its place in the border zone.

Hizbullah is deeply rooted in Lebanon's biggest community. In alliance with the moderate shia movement Amal, it dominates shia politics. Having been reconstructed under Syrian auspices before Syria's troop withdrawal last year, the Lebanese Army has many a shia in its ranks. If it were to be sent against Hizbullah it would fall to pieces on sectarian lines, as happened in the 1970s and 80s, raising the prospect of a civil war pitting shia against the rest.

Even if the Israelis succeed in their aim of killing the charismatic Hizbullah chief, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, and other leaders, it may not have a functioning effect on the conflict. His predecessor, Abbas Musawi, was killed by an Israeli helicopter strike on his car on a remote road in southern Lebanon in 1992, with no discernible benefit to Israel.

Even though Hizbullah uses donkeys to move some rockets, it has more sophisticated infrastructure — radio and satellite communication facilities, fortified underground weapons caches, bunkers, command posts and tunnels — than Israel imagined.

Multinational forces can be feckless or worse. The fuse of the 1967 Six Day War was lit when Egypt's President Nasser demanded the departure from the Sinai of a UN force of 3,400. In July 1995, the worst European massacre since the Second World War occurred near the Bosnian town of Srebrenica while, down the road, UN peacekeepers loitered. Their request for NATO air support was processed too late: it had been submitted on the wrong form.

3. *An Arab Icon:* Born in 1960 in Beirut, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah grew up in the Karanteena district of eastern Beirut, a mixed neighbourhood of Christian

Armenians, Druse, Palestinians, and Shiites. His father had a small vegetable stand, but the 1975 eruption of civil war forced the family to flee to their native southern village.

Oldest of nine children and long entranced by the mosque, Hassan Nasrallah decamped for the most famous shia hawza, or seminary, in Najaf, Iraq. He fled one step ahead of Saddam Hussein's secret police, returning to Lebanon to join *Amal*, then a new shia militia. He became the Bekka Valley commander in his early 20s. He considered the Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 to be the real model for shia to end their second-class position, and moved to Hizbullah as it coalesced in the early 1980s. He studied in a seminary in Qum, Iran, briefly in 1989. In the hierarchical ranking of shia Muslim clergy, he is an ordinary hojatolislam, one step below an ayatollah, and far below being a mujtahid, or 'source of emulation' to be followed as a guide. His black turban marking him as a sayyid, a cleric who can trace his lineage back to the Prophet Mohammad, Sheik Nasrallah's genius was to train hundreds of grassroots fighters — school teachers and butchers and truck drivers — then to use religion to inspire them to fight until death, with a guaranteed spot in heaven.

Now there is Sheik Nasrallah, 46 years young Lebanese militia chieftain hiding in a bunker, combining the scripted logic of a clergyman with the steely resolve of a general to completely rewrite the rules of the Arab-Israeli land feud.

Arabia has found an icon in the Sheik. 'There is the most powerful man in the Middle East,' sighed the deputy prime minister of an Arab state, watching one of the Sheik's four televised speeches since the war began, during an off-the record meeting. 'He's the only Arab leader who actually does what he says he is going to do.'

4. *Two Scenarios:* The Hizbullah operation of 12 July 2006 was apparently launched at least partly in support of the embattled (sunni) Hamas in Gaza, perhaps at the prompting of their mutual supporter Iran. If so, the seeds of cooperation between sunni and shia radical groups are already in place, and — encouraged by Iran and Syria — they could sprout elsewhere in the region. That combination would be a combustible joint force, unprecedented in the history of Islam. The butterfly effect of Bush's adventure would ignite a wild fire in the Middle East, and possibly beyond.

Should Hizbullah come under heavy pressure in a war of attrition in Lebanon, it would be logical for Tehran to start activating more vigorously some of its assets in neighbouring Iraq. Groups with armed militia such as the Mehdi Army or Badr Brigade are strongly opposed to the US presence in Iraq. In a word, the Israeli-Hizbullah confrontation risks mutating into a double existential battle, merging the current regional arenas of conflict.

One cannot rule out the possibility of an alternative scenario. Among Muslims of the world, the sunni sect constitutes by far the overwhelming majority, leaving the largest single minority sect shia way behind. Saudi Arabia, the canonical leader of sunni, is a sworn rival of Iran. Riyadh would not relish for long the sight of incipient Hamas-Hizbullah bon homie. Another sunni radical group, *Al Qaeda*, might step into

the fray to open a third front. This second scenario would be a serious blow to the Muslims, as king Abdullah II had predicted.

Either way, the current conflict in the Middle East contains all the risks of crossing the mathematics of chaos theory to collapse into a 'black hole', conjured by Stephen Hawking in another context. ✍

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