

The Other Lebanon

Posted by

Wednesday, 09 March 2005 10:03 - Last Updated Wednesday, 09 March 2005 10:03

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It was a warning. They came in their tens of thousands, Lebanese Shia Muslim families with babies in arms and children in front, walking past my Beirut home. They reminded me of the tens of thousands of Iraqi Shia Muslims who walked with their families to the polls in Iraq, despite the gunfire and the suicide bombers. **-RF**

Another Species of Cedar

[A Half Million Lebanese March for Syria](#)

By ROBERT FISK

March 9, 2005

And now they came from southern Lebanon and the Bekaa to say they rejected America's plans in Lebanon, and wanted - so they claimed - to know who killed Rafiq Hariri, the former prime minister murdered on 14 February, and to reject UN Security Council Resolution 1559 which demands a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarmament of the Hizbollah guerrilla movement, and to express their "thanks" to Syria. This was a tall order in Lebanon.

But only 100 yards from the Lebanese opposition protests, the half-million - for that was an approachable figure, given Hizbollah's extraordinary organisational abilities - stood for an hour with Lebanese flags, and posed a challenge to President George Bush's project in the Middle East. "America is the source of terrorism", one poster proclaimed. "All our disasters come from America".

Many of those tens of thousands were Hizbollah families who had fought the Israelis during their occupation of southern Lebanon, been arrested by the Israelis, imprisoned by the Israelis and feared that American support for Lebanon meant not "democracy" but an imposed Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty.

There were Syrians in the crowds - indeed, I saw buses with Syrian registration plates that had brought families from Damascus - but almost all the half million were Lebanese Shias and they

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wanted to reject 1559 because it called for Hizbollah to be disarmed. They were perfectly happy to see the Syrians leave (who now remembers the Syrian massacre of Hizbollah members in Beirut in 1987?) but, bearing in mind Syria's transit of weapons from Iran to Lebanon, Hizbollah wanted to be regarded as a resistance movement, not a "militia" to be disarmed. What the Shia were saying was that they were a power, just as they said when they voted in Iraq. In Lebanon, Shia Muslims are the largest religious community.

Syria is run by a clique of Alawis - who are Shia - and Iraq is now dominated by Shia Muslims who voted themselves into power, and Iran is a Shia nation. So when President Bush said "the Lebanese people have the right to determine their future free from domination of a foreign power", the power the Shias were thinking of was not Syria but the United States and Israel.

And 100 yards away, the demonstrators who have bravely protested against the murder of Rafik Hariri have become factionalised, courtesy of the Syrians. At night, the opposition protesters are largely Christian. Yesterday's Hizbollah rally, while it contained the usual pro-Syrian Christians, was essentially Shia. And their message was not one of thanks to President Bush.

"The fleets came in the past and were defeated; and they will be defeated again," Hizbollah's leader, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, said in reference to the Americans. Ironically, President Bush was to refer within hours to the killing of 241 US Marines in Beirut in October 1982, as if their deaths were the responsibility of al-Qa'ida. To the Israelis, Nasrallah said: "Let go of your dreams for Lebanon. To the enemy entrenched on our border, occupying our country and imprisoning our people, 'There is no place for you here and there is no life for you among us: Death to Israel'."

Nasrallah's take on the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war was predictable. The crowds were meeting on the front lines that had separated the Lebanese during the civil war; indeed, on the very location of the Christian-Muslim trenches of that conflict. "We meet today to remind the world and our partners in the country," Nasrallah said, "that this arena that joins us, or the other one in Martyrs' Square, was destroyed by Israel and civil war and was united by Syria and the blood of its soldiers and officers."

This was an inventive piece of history. Israel certainly killed many thousands of Lebanese - more than the Syrians, although their soldiers took the lives of many hundreds - but the half million roared their approval.

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So what did all this prove? That there was another voice in Lebanon. That if the Lebanese "opposition" - pro-Hariri and increasingly Christian - claim to speak for Lebanon and enjoy the support of President Bush, there is a pro-Syrian, nationalist voice which does not go along with their anti-Syrian demands but which has identified what it believes is the true reason for Washington's support for Lebanon: Israel's plans for the Middle East.

The Beirut demonstration yesterday was handled in the usual Hizbollah way: maximum security, lots of young men in black shirts with two-way radios, and frightening discipline. No one was allowed to carry a gun or a Hizbollah flag. There was no violence. When one man brandished a Syrian flag, it was immediately taken from him. Law and order, not "terrorism", was what Hizbollah wished. Syria had spoken. President Bashar Assad's sarcastic remark about the Hariri protesters needing a "zoom lens" to show their numbers had been answered by a demonstration of Shia power which needed no "zoom".

And in the mountains above Beirut, still frozen under their winter snows, few Syrians moved. There were Syrian military trucks on the international highway to Damascus but no withdrawal, no retreat, no redeployment. The Taif agreement of 1989 stipulated that the Syrians should withdraw to the Mdeirej heights above Beirut, which they have now agreed to do, 14 years later than they should have done.

The official document released by the Lebanese-Syrian military delegation in Damascus suggests this is a new redeployment and that in April the Syrian forces, along with their military intelligence personnel, will withdraw to the Lebanese-Syrian border.

But the question remains: will they retreat to the Syrian side of the frontier, or sit in the Lebanese-Armenian town of Aanjar, on the Lebanese side, where Brigadier General Rustum Gazale, the head of Syrian military intelligence, still maintains his white-painted villa?

Either way, Lebanon can no longer be taken for granted. The "cedar" revolution now has a larger dimension, one that does not necessarily favour America's plans. If the Shia of Iraq can be painted as defenders of democracy, the Shias of Lebanon cannot be portrayed as the defenders of "terrorism". So what does Washington make of yesterday's extraordinary events in Beirut?

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Robert Fisk is a reporter for The Independent and author of Pity the Nation. He is also a contributor to CounterPunch's hot new book, The Politics of Anti-Semitism.