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Lebanon

Hezbollah's Victory (2000)

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Written at the time of the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, in May 2000 in News from Within, a publication of the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem, published an interview with Gilbert Achcar which provides useful background.

Q: *Hezbollah's victory gives a broad blueprint of a comprehensive strategy (military, political) in defeating Israeli occupation. Can you evaluate the possibility of its reproduction elsewhere?*

Achcar: In order to do so, one has to separate the various elements of this "broad blueprint" as you call it. Let us start with the military aspect, since you mention it: I would say that the peculiarities of the Lebanese terrain should be as obvious to anyone in the Arab world as the peculiarities of the Iraqi terrain are now to anyone in Washington who took the 1991 Gulf War as a "broad blueprint" for further US interventions. I mean that, just as the desert is the ideal terrain for taking full advantage of the superiority in air power (as proven by the great contrast between the six weeks of carpet-bombing of the Iraqi troops in 1991 and the poor results of NATO's air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999), the mountainous and populous character of southern Lebanon should be taken into consideration before generalizing its experience into a "broad blueprint".

This being said, what should be emphasized in the first place is that the victory in southern Lebanon was not a "military" victory. The Israeli army has not been defeated militarily: it was much less exhausted than the US forces in Vietnam, and even in the latter case it would be quite improper to talk of a "military defeat." In both cases, the defeat is primarily a political defeat of the governments, against a background of an increasingly reluctant population in the invader country. In that regard, the military action finds its value in its political impact, and not primarily in its direct military impact. The guerrilla actions of the Lebanese Resistance against the occupation "which was very far, even proportionally, from matching the scale of the Vietnamese Resistance" were mainly effective through their impact on the Israeli population, just as the coffins of GI's landing back in the US were during the Vietnam War. In both cases, the population of the invader country became more and more opposed to a war effort that was clearly devoid of any moral justification.

This had already been experienced by Israel since the beginning of its full-scale invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The withdrawal from Beirut in 1982, and later on from most of the occupied Lebanese territory in 1985, were mainly motivated by the fact that the Israeli population could not endorse a situation in which Israeli soldiers were facing death every day for the sake of an occupation which could hardly be justified, even from a mainstream Zionist view. So the key issue is that of the balance between the cost and benefits of an occupation: whereas in the Golan the benefits for Israel exceed the present costs, in southern Lebanon the reverse was very obviously true.

Let us now extrapolate to the Palestinian occupied territories: during twenty years the benefits clearly exceeded the costs from the viewpoint of Israeli "security." The desperate "guerrilla" operations of the Palestinian Resistance could not counterbalance the feeling of enhanced security stemming from the extension of the border to the Jordan River. The situation began to change dramatically with the mass mobilization of the Intifada. This made the cost nearly intolerable for the morale of the Israeli army and for the reputation of Israel in its backer countries. The pressure mounted within the Israeli army, up to its highest ranks, in favor of a withdrawal of the troops from the populated areas, and their redeployment in those strategic parts of the West Bank where no Palestinians are concentrated.

It is precisely to this pressure from the military that Rabin was responding when he entered the Oslo negotiations. He tried to get the highest possible price for the implementation of this withdrawal from a PLO leadership that had been accumulating concessions and capitulations for many years. And he got what he wanted, to a degree that he could

not have even imagined when he started the talks with the Arafat leadership! Instead of building on the impetus of the Intifada, and doing everything possible to sustain it until they got the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the entire populated areas – without betraying anything of what they stood for previously and with very minimal accommodations, negotiated not by the PLO but by the leadership of the Intifada within the territories – the Arafat leadership went into what even some Zionist commentators described as an ignominious surrender, leading to the execrable situation prevailing now.

Hezbollah acted differently: they kept up the pressure uncompromisingly. And they forced the unconditional and total withdrawal of the Israeli army from the Lebanese territories occupied since 1978 (the remnant goes back to the 1967 War). A tremendous victory, indeed! And surely a feat that the Palestinian population will ponder and from which they will draw some inspiration.

Q: *To what extent is the Hezbollah victory a slap in the face for the imperialist agenda in the region? What might we expect from it in the future?*

Achcar: The Lebanese victory is certainly a defeat for the US agenda which, like that of its Israeli ally, foresaw the insertion of this withdrawal into an overall peace agreement with Syria including all sorts of conditions, concessions and guarantees obtained for Israel. Besides, Israel is the "most brilliant" proxy of the US armed forces, the one always quoted as an example to follow. And here is a withdrawal, taking the shape of a debacle, evoking irresistibly the images of the US debacle in Vietnam, in 1975 – incidentally just at the time of the 25th anniversary of the latter! This is a new vindication of the famous "dare to struggle, dare to win" that inspired so bravely the Vietnamese Resistance. And it can be expected that it will contribute to reversing the winds of defeatism that have swept through such a big part of those who once used to fight imperialist domination.

However with regard to the US agenda in the Middle East, I think that the main change in the Israeli agenda – which will certainly be integrated in the agenda of the next US administration – is that the prospect of a peace treaty with Syria is pushed back indefinitely. The Zionist establishment is definitely not eager to relinquish the Golan for the sake of just establishing relations with Syria, relations that will never be "normal" anyhow. And they are all the less eager to do so in that the Syrian dictator Hafiz Al-Assad is on the verge of death [he died in June 2000] and the political future of the country is highly uncertain.

Q: *Why has the Lebanese victory been claimed by Hezbollah alone? Were not other forces – Palestinians, Lebanese Left – involved in the resistance movement? If not, why not?*

Achcar: The reason Hezbollah appeared as the only father of victory (as the saying goes, victory usually has several fathers, whereas defeat is an orphan) is that they did everything they could to monopolize the prestige of the resistance movement. After the 1982 Israeli invasion, you had an uneasy coexistence and competition between two tendencies in the fight against the occupier: the Lebanese National Resistance, dominated by the Lebanese Communist Party, and the Islamic Resistance, dominated by Hezbollah. The Palestinian forces had been wiped out from southern Lebanon by the invaders; those remaining in the refugee camps were not really a match for Hezbollah, especially since some Lebanese forces like the Shiite communalist militias of Amal were keen on preventing them from spreading again out of the camps. Amal are still there – they are among those who recuperated the stretch of land abandoned by Israel and its local proxy. But they were never a key force in the Resistance movement: they lost their impetus long ago to the benefit of Hezbollah, and turned into a purely conservative and patronage-based party.

Hezbollah conducted all sorts of operations to establish their monopoly over the resistance movement, up to repeated onslaughts against the Communists, murdering some of their key Shiite cadres in particular. The CP behaved in a most servile manner, not daring to retaliate and instead calling on the "brothers" in the Islamic Resistance to behave in a brotherly manner – a call which has no real chance of being heard if it is not backed by

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decisive action to show the damage that could result, precisely, from the alternative behavior! Such an attitude contributed greatly to the progressive shift in the balance of forces to the advantage of Hezbollah. Many of the most militant members of the Lebanese left among the Shiites were attracted to Hezbollah.

We should recall that at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 there was no Hezbollah and the CP was the major militant force among the Shiite population in southern Lebanon. The party started losing ground to the advantage of Amal first, and Hezbollah later after 1982. In both cases the lesson was the same: all these movements were appealing to the same constituency, i.e. the traditionally very militant Shiite population of southern Lebanon. In such a competition, the shyest is doomed to lose inevitably, all the more so when you don't even dare to put forward your own radical program and you end up tail-ending the dominant communalist forces. Here again you need to dare to struggle and dare to win!

Hezbollah have been very effective on that score. They were definitely very "daring" in their actions, inspired by their quasi-mystical views of martyrdom. And they knew also how to win the souls and minds of the population, by making a very clever use of the significant funding they got from Iran, thus organizing all kinds of social services to the benefit of the impoverished population. To be sure, they also took advantage of the ideological winds, which blew much more in their direction than in the direction of a left that became utterly demoralized by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Q: *What are the implications of the Hezbollah victory on the relation of the political forces in Lebanon? For the Palestinian refugees there? And for the entire region?*

Achcar: One thing is sure. This victory will greatly enhance the appeal of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and of the Islamic fundamentalists in the whole region. In Lebanon, Hezbollah faces an objective limitation due to the religiously very composite character of the population. Hezbollah are inherently unable to win over Christians, Druzes, or even Sunni Muslims, in any significant numbers. They are no threat to the Palestinian refugees, since their Islamic universalism make them champions of the Palestinian cause. In that sense, they are actually competitors to the Palestinian forces in Lebanon, whether Arafat loyalists or left dissidents; at best they can contribute to strengthen the Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist tendencies.

In that sense too, their victory is a bad omen to Arafat, obviously, as I have already explained. Among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas members are the only ones likely to be boosted by Hezbollah triumphalism. More generally, we can say that this victory will be precious for the whole Islamic fundamentalist movement in countering the negative impact of the recent events in Iran. Those who thought they could already bury Islamic fundamentalism (a French "Orientalist" recently produced a book heralding the terminal decline of this phenomenon) are blatantly refuted. As long as they have no real competitor for the embodiment of the aspirations of the downtrodden masses, and as long as the social effects of "globalization" are with us, the fundamentalists will also be part of the picture, with ups and downs naturally.