

Middle East: Al-Qaeda takes a back seat

Bernard Haykel *The New York Times*, 26-7-06

NEW YORK Middle East at war

With Israel at war with Hezbollah, where, you might wonder, is Al Qaeda? From all appearances on the Web sites frequented by its sympathizers, which I frequently monitor, Al Qaeda is sitting, unhappily and uneasily, on the sidelines, watching a movement antithetical to its philosophy steal its thunder. That might sound like good news. But it is more likely an ominous sign. Al Qaeda's Sunni ideology regards Shiites as heretics, and it profoundly distrusts Shiite groups like Hezbollah. It was Al Qaeda that is reported to have given Sunni extremists in Iraq the green light to attack Shiite civilians and holy sites. A Qaeda recruiter I met in Yemen described the Shiites as "dogs and a thorn in the throat of Islam from the beginning of time."

But now Hezbollah has taken the lead on the most incendiary issue for Jihadis of all stripes: the fight against Israel. Many Sunnis are therefore rallying to Hezbollah's side, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan. The Saudi cleric Salman al-Awda has defied his government's anti-Hezbollah position, writing on his Web site that "this is not the time to express our differences with the Shiites because we are all confronted by our greater enemy, the criminal Jews and Zionists."

For Al Qaeda, it is a time of panic. The group's Web sites are abuzz with messages and questions about how to respond to Hezbollah's success. One sympathizer asks whether, even knowing that the Shiites are traitors and the accomplices of the infidel Americans in Iraq, it is permissible to say a prayer for Hezbollah. He is told to curse Hezbollah along with Islam's other enemies.

Several of Al Qaeda's ideologues have issued official statements explaining Hezbollah's actions and telling followers how to respond to them. The gist of their argument is that the Shiites are conspiring to destroy Islam and to resuscitate Persian imperial rule over the Middle East and ultimately the world.

The ideologues label this effort the "Sassanian- Safavid conspiracy," in reference to the Sassanians, a pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty, and to the Safavids, a Shiite dynasty that ruled Iran and parts of Iraq from 1501 till 1736. They go on to argue that thanks to the United States, Iraq has been handed over to the Shiites, who are now wantonly massacring the country's Sunnis. Syria is already led by a Shiite heretic, President Bashar al-Assad, whose policies harm the country's Sunni majority.

Hezbollah, according to these analyses, seeks to dupe ordinary Muslims into believing that the Shiites are defending Islam's holiest cause, Palestine, in order to cover for the wholesale Shiite alliance with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ultimately, this theory goes, the Shiites will fail in their efforts because the Israelis and Americans will destroy them once their role in the broader Zionist-Crusader conspiracy is accomplished. And then God will assure the success of the Sunni Muslims and the defeat of the Zionists and Crusaders. In the meantime, no Muslim should be fooled by Hezbollah, whose members have never fought the infidel on any of the real battlefronts, like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya or Kashmir. The proper attitude for Muslims to adopt is to dissociate themselves completely from the Shiites.

This analysis - conspiratorial, bizarre and unconvincing, except to the most diehard radicals - signals an important defeat for Al Qaeda's public relations campaign. The truth is that Al Qaeda has met a formidable challenge in Hezbollah and its charismatic leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, who has made canny choices that appeal to Al Qaeda's Sunni followers. Al Qaeda's improbable conspiracy theory does little to counter these advantages.

First, although Nasrallah wears the black turban and carries the title of "sayyid," both of which identify him as a Shiite descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, he preaches a nonsectarian ideology and does not highlight his group's Shiite identity. Hezbollah has even established an effective alliance with Hamas, a Sunni and Muslim Brotherhood organization. Second, Hezbollah's statements focus on the politics of resistance to occupation and invoke shared Islamic principles about the right to self-defense. Nasrallah is extremely careful to hew closely to the dictates of Islamic law in his military attacks. These include such principles as advance notice, discrimination in selecting targets and proportionality.

Finally, only Hezbollah can claim to have defeated Israel (in Lebanon in 2000) and is now taking it on again, hitting Haifa and other places with large numbers of rockets - a feat that no Arab or Muslim power has accomplished since Israel's founding in 1948.

These are already serious selling points. And Hezbollah will score a major propaganda victory in the Muslim world if it simply remains standing in Lebanon after the present bout of warfare is over, and maintains the relationships it is forging with Hamas and other Sunni Islamist organizations.

What will such a victory mean?

Perhaps Hezbollah's ascendancy among Sunnis will make it possible for Shiites and Sunnis to stop the bloodletting in Iraq - and to focus instead on their "real" enemies, namely the United States and Israel. Rumbblings against Israeli actions in Lebanon from both Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq already suggest such an outcome.

That may be good news for Iraqis, but it marks a dangerous turn for the West. And there are darker implications still. Al Qaeda, after all, is unlikely to take a loss of status lying down. Indeed, the rise of Hezbollah makes it all the more likely that Al Qaeda will soon seek to reassert itself through increased attacks on Shiites in Iraq and on Westerners all over the world - whatever it needs to do in order to regain the title of true defender of Islam.

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A Hizbullah "Victory?"

Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 5 August 2006

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Judging from Sayyid Nasrallah's speeches it is clear that Hizbullah is not fighting Israel as much as the generalized Arab and Muslim feeling of defeat, humiliation and genuine incompetence. Pay attention, for example, to the way in which Sayyid Nasrallah has defined victory in his typically low-key style, which contrasts sharply with the old-style and bombastic claims of Arab leaders such as Gamal Abdul-Nasser and Saddam Hussein. Sayyid Nasrallah is very clear and precise that Israel cannot be defeated militarily. Hizbullah, he says, "cannot shoot down Israel's F-16 fighter jets," but what it can do is bleed Israel's military forces, harm its economy and extract political concessions, any of which constitutes a victory. Victory, in other words, is a new psychological state for Arabs and Muslims, as well as for the "defeated" Israelis, and bears no relationship to the actual physical or material costs of war. This victory cannot be quantified or calculated and no amount of destruction and killing in Lebanon, or elsewhere in the Middle East, can outweigh its positive value and outcome. It is this psychological aspect to the present war that has so many Arabs and Muslims rallying to Hizbullah's side—they finally see Arabs who are putting up a real fight against a formidable adversary who had acquired supernatural power in their collective imagination. But does Hizbullah's resistance really count as a victory or is it merely illusory especially in the long term? Does it constitute anything more than al-Qaeda's "victory" on 11 September 2001? How will the political map of the Middle East change if Hizbullah is seen to have won this round with Israel? And finally which forces in the United States are benefiting most from this engagement?

Before answering these questions let us acknowledge some of Hizbullah's apparent political successes. The first is undoubtedly the complete confusion of al-Qaeda's ideology and political project, as reflected in Ayman al-Zawahiri's latest speech in which he called for participation in the fight against Israel but remained unclear about the status and actions of Hizbullah. Second, the Salafi movement appears to have been divided and therefore weakened by Hizbullah's war, with one group supporting the Shiite organization and another refusing to do so. Third,

Hizbullah has forged robust links with, and received strong support from, the Muslim Brotherhood. Its murshid, Mahdi `Akif, in Egypt and Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradhawi in Qatar as well as Hamas' leadership in Palestine and Syria have vowed unconditional support for Hizbullah.

It is evident that through its military actions against Israel as well as its non-sectarian rhetoric Hizbullah has successfully downplayed its Shiite identity. Few in the Muslim and Arab worlds seem concerned that Hizbullah is committed to Ayatollah Khomeini's teaching on wilayat al-faqih, according to which the supreme leader is the one who decides matters of war and peace and that he is considered the marji` who is to be obeyed completely by all the believers. The present Wali al-Faqih is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran who incidentally is the first to have translated the works of Sayyid Qutb into the Farsi language and has strong Muslim Brotherhood affinities. Iran's role behind Hizbullah and its increasing influence in the Middle East are carefully hidden.

Iran therefore might finally see some of the long-awaited fruits of the 1979 Islamic revolution and project its power throughout the Middle East. Until now, Hizbullah in Lebanon was its only success. But because of American incompetence and failure in Iraq, Iran might dominate this one time arch-rival, and now because of Hizbullah in Lebanon also determine the terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The political losers in this projected scenario are clearly very numerous and include the leaderships of the Arab Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan among others. In addition, the Middle East is likely to see the marginalization of Saudi Arabia as the religious leader of the Muslim world and sectarian conflicts, between Shiites and Sunnis, are bound to increase, as witnessed sadly everyday in Iraq.

In the United States the neo-conservatives have been given a new lease on life because of Hizbullah's actions and now feel that they have a new enemy with whom to terrify and galvanize the American public for further sacrifice in blood and treasure. One can sense their influence palpably in the White House's refusal to accept a cease-fire in Lebanon. The neo-conservatives want a war between Hizbullah and Israel so as to expand their policy of "creative destabilization" beyond the confines of Iraq to include Syria and Iran. For the neo-conservatives a "victory" through regime change in Syria and Iran justifies any amount of destruction and death in the Middle East. They simply do not care if thousands or tens of thousands of Arabs are killed and all their countries' infrastructure is destroyed. If anything, this provides business opportunities for western companies to win reconstruction contracts.

So what of Hizbullah's psychological victory and is it merely illusory? The experience of much more powerful nations than the Arab ones, like Germany and Japan, indicate that this "victory" will amount to nothing stronger than a spider's web. The only real victory for any people in the modern world is to educate themselves and to compete with other nations not on the field of battle but in the spheres of industry, ideas and innovation. We must ask ourselves how many of the most brilliant and accomplished Arab minds will leave Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East to work in the West as a result of this conflict? With each emigrant, the Arab and Muslim worlds are losing a battle to the West. And the legacy for the Arabs and Muslims will be destruction and heart-rending loss of innocent life.