

The Daily Times

Friday, July 14, 2006

FROM THE FRONTLINES: A day in Hezbollah territory

By Fatima Bhutto

If there is to be another war between Lebanon and Israel, the rules of engagement will be reminiscent of what is happening in Iraq today

On Wednesday, Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers in retaliation for the arrest of one of its men earlier this week.

Air strikes have already started over Southern Lebanon and another Israeli invasion has been threatened. If there is to be another war, because that's what it will be, between Lebanon and Israel the rules of engagement will be reminiscent of what is happening in Iraq today. The Lebanese army will not be able to fight Israel. The Syrians have left and can't be there like they were in 1982. This time, should it come to that, it will be a people's resistance that faces the onslaught of an Israeli incursion. It's impossible to understand the immensity of this possibility without understanding the unique position Hezbollah occupies in the realm of Lebanese life. Not Lebanese politics, but the everyday life of its citizens.

Early last Saturday morning, in a taxi driven by an ex-Iraqi Baathist, my family and I, along with a college friend of mine from Greece, drove from the sleepy northern city of Tripoli to the liberated South of Lebanon. We spent the afternoon in Sidon and Tyre, both formerly the sites of mass Israeli bombing until the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) withdrew from the South in 2000, and now restored to the beautiful seaside towns they have been for hundreds of years. But perhaps not for much longer.

In Tyre we stopped for lunch at the beach — there were no resorts, no fancy imported hotels standing guard over God's sand and sun, just the open space. We walked onto the stand and sat down. This wasn't Beirut where an afternoon in the open costs an arm and a leg, this was the Hezbollah-controlled South and it was free. There were women with hijabs playing with their children in the water and women in rather adventurous swimsuits tanning by the water. There were the yellow and green flags of the "Party of God" hung from streetlights and also the flags of Italy and France who were set to fight for the World Cup the following day. There were posters of the Shaheeds of the town, martyred resisting the Israeli occupation of their lands, and also billboards advertising Triumph lingerie and Acuvue

contacts ("My eyes need Moist!" they read). This was not what I had imagined when I was told I would be in Hezbollah territory. Not at all.

We later drove further South, passing by Qana, the site of Israel's Grapes of Wrath operation in 1996. Over 150 people were killed in the operation; after warnings of an aerial assault many people left their homes and took shelter in a UN camp which was bombarded by Israeli planes. A memorial maintained by the townspeople and their political representatives marked the site of the massacre. The memorial housed photographs of those killed, heart-wrenching and yet also an exhibition space where local artists had captured the grief of their town. There was a collage of words and images that asked in red "where are u arabs?" and another six-foot long painting that was inescapably Picasso's Guernica done in blue. A statue for the Fijian UN peacekeepers who had died under the attack was erected in granite near the memorial. The site where a church had been burned to the ground, leaving the 54 inside it dead, was preserved. The equanimity of the remembrance was striking.

The situation that day was tense; an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, had been captured days before in the Occupied Territories and Israel had commenced a series of air strikes and bombings on Gaza that has killed more than 75 civilians to date. Israel is calling this operation "Summer Rain" — one wonders who comes up with all these sentimental, poetic operation names for the IDF, and where he was when Operation Enduring Freedom was thought up.

We drove on, reaching the border between Lebanon and Israel. It was the first time I had seen Israel, albeit through the barbed wire that was supposed to represent a border. It was also as close as I'd probably get — my Pakistani passport does not allow me to enter Israel. There was a Hezbollah gift store facing the border. There were huge flags waving out towards the settlements and blaring music strung together with the soundbites from the Party's speeches. It was certainly ballsy. We were looking around at the key chains, T-shirts and tapes in the store when we heard Mustafa, our former Baathist cab driver, calling us from the balcony above the store. I climbed the stairs with my friend, Sophia, while my family sat downstairs having a cup of coffee. There were several men standing on the balcony, we were told they were mukhabarat, Lebanese intelligence. They were there because a Hezbollah man had been captured in Israel that day — an event that would spark the capture of two more Israeli soldiers and the talk of another possible Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The mukhabarat men pointed out a group of soldiers, gathered behind a row of cement columns. They were nothing like what I expected them to be. They were boys. They were as young as Sophia and I, maybe younger. It's the young that die on both sides. I hadn't processed Israel into this equation before; I hadn't imagined them as victims in this way, too. When Sophia asked Mustafa if she could turn on her camcorder, he nervously yelped that it would not be wise to. One of the mukhabarat men leaned forward and said, "Yalla, just do it quickly." Mustafa nodded and told us to duck down if we heard "pop-pop!" We weren't encouraged by Mustafa's miming

of us being shot in the head and so the camcorder was put away and we got back into the car and continued our journey.

Our last stop that day was to be the Al-Khiam prison, used by the South Lebanese Army (SLA) and later Israel during the Lebanese civil war. It is now run as a museum by Hezbollah. The prison was built in 1933 by France as barracks for their men and was turned into a Lebanese-Israeli detention centre in 1985. The prison which held 5,000 people, including 400 women, was liberated in 2000. The prison guards and major domos left in their Mercedes accompanied by tanks without releasing any of the prisoners. It was the townspeople that stormed Al Khiam and broke free the men and women who had been jailed during the civil war for their resistance. When you enter the gates of Al Khiam you notice how well it has been preserved. And the Hezbollah are not without a sense of humour either; near the prison's gates there is a room that bears two signs — the first reads "Previously: dormitories of the traitors and collaborators and their bosses" and the second reads "Now: Men's Bathroom". There are signs in English and Arabic explaining each and every room and nothing has been altered — the single bulbs that lit both the corridors and the dank cells are still hanging from the ceilings, no other form of electricity guides you around the place. The cells don't feel empty at Al Khiam. There are toothbrushes in the bathrooms and pillows and sheets still left on the beds. The solitary confinement cells — which were not much larger than the 8ft by 3ft cells that used to house up to four men at a time before the Red Cross inspected the site in the mid-90s — were so small I couldn't stretch out my arms. As we walked through the camp, led by a former prisoner, Ahmed al-Amin, I noticed my feet still had sand on them from the beach at Tyre.

Hezbollah, for all its use of violence and religion, is no Taliban. As we left Al Khiam we found ourselves hopelessly lost. Mustafa had no clue how to get us back to Tripoli. We stopped an elderly man on the roads to ask for directions and he offered to show us how to get back to Sidon if we followed him. As part of our newly formed friendship with him, Mustafa asked him if he had been at Al Khiam. He replied that he had. "How long were you jailed for?" we asked. "Jailed?" he responded indignantly. "I was with the Jews. I was a guard there." He didn't whisper, he didn't lower his eyes. He had been a collaborator and he told us so right there in the middle of the road. He had nothing to fear, not from the Hezbollah. They were ruthless, yes, but only to those that had killed. They understood that people did what they had to survive and left them to their homes and their communities after the war. This kind of reconciliatory attitude is not exactly prevalent in the Middle East, nor in all honesty has it ever been.

I am not one who preaches the politics of religion; I find the very notion antithetical to everything I believe in. However, what makes it possible to tolerate an organisation like Hezbollah is in fact its tolerance. While it would be more inclusive if it operated outside the parameters of religion, the Hezbollah's tolerance seems to be sincere. During the negotiations to release prisoners from Israeli jails in 2000 they not only fought to release those belonging to their party, but also to free prisoners

belonging to the Communist party, among others. Rather, in a country whose politics are founded on religion — Sunni, Maronite Christian, Druze and Shiites, each lobbying for their own — Hezbollah is anxious to speak of Lebanon. Of Lebanon's foreign policy, of its place in the Middle East, of its people and the rights guaranteed to them. Hezbollah has always insisted that it is not merely built to defend Islam but rather to defend its country, its soil.

Hezbollah's strength may not lie in its politics or rhetoric, but in its complexities. It has waged wars and killed, but those who collaborated against the group were often forgiven. A strictly Islamist outfit, it has also allowed women the freedom to dress and act as they please. As we drove out of Tyre and the surrounding towns, down winding roads covered from both sides by the shade of pine trees, there stood a huge billboard that read "The Liberated Territories: Please enter Peacefully and Safely" and underneath it was stamped the Hezbollah flag.