

Lebanon's 'Soldiers of Virtue'

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There have been a dozen prisoner exchanges between Hezbollah and Israel since the early 1990s, but Samir Kuntar was always a case apart. In 1979 Kuntar and his companions killed a policeman, kidnapped a young father, Danny Haran, and killed him in front of his 4-year-old daughter. Then Kuntar turned to the child and crushed her skull against a rock with the butt of his rifle. In the mayhem, Danny Haran's wife, Smadar, hiding in her home, accidentally smothered to death the couple's 2-year-old daughter.

Now Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has finally got his way. Last week, Israel handed over Kuntar in return for Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, captured by Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. They returned to Israel in black coffins.

This prisoner swap will serve Hezbollah's purposes in the interminable struggles within Lebanon. Trumpets and drums greeted Kuntar's release. Breathless pollsters now tell us that Nasrallah, a turbaned Shiite and a child of poverty, is the most admired hero of the "Arab street." This is so, we are told, even in Sunni Arab lands otherwise given to animus toward Shiites.

But Nasrallah had been here before. Two summers ago, he triggered a terrible war across the Lebanon-Israel frontier, with a toll of 1,200 Lebanese deaths (160 Israelis also perished in that senseless summer) and no less than \$5 billion in damages to Lebanon's economy. That war was sold to the gullible as a "divine victory" -- the first Arab victory against Israel's might.

Some expected that Hezbollah would lay down its arms and that the Lebanese, free of Syrian captivity, would return their country to a modicum of order and normalcy. Those hopes were in vain. In the last two years, Hezbollah brought the political life of Lebanon to a standstill. Its formidable militia made a mockery of the incumbent government. Nasrallah sent his followers into Beirut's commercial center, and for seven long months he thwarted the attempts to elect a new president.

The "Cedar Revolution" of 2005, so full of promise, was no match for Nasrallah's "soldiers of virtue." A proxy struggle played out in Lebanon, with the United States, France and Saudi Arabia on the side of the incumbent government, and Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, on the other. There was no escaping the sectarianism: A determined Sunni-Shiite struggle had come to Lebanon.

In its heady days, the Cedar Revolution movement was "hip" and seemed like a fight between the "beautiful people" and the Shiite hicks. The Shiites had a cruel, rural past and they still had self-doubt -- believing that the Sunni merchant classes of West Beirut continued to see them as squatters in the city. The clerics and laymen who dominate Hezbollah were quite skilled at exploiting this Shiite sense of unease.

There was a built-in flaw in the Cedar Revolution that Hezbollah preyed upon. Intended or not, that broad, spontaneous eruption following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri had come to rest on an alliance of the Druse, the Sunni Muslims and the bulk of the country's Christian population. The vast Shiite community, the country's largest, had stood uncertain amid the tumult that followed Syria's withdrawal. The Shiites had an uneasy alliance with the Syrian occupiers, and the Shiite mainstream was enthusiastic about Lebanese liberty. Hezbollah had the guns and the money. It had as well the status of a "liberation movement," and few in Lebanon dared question this claim.

The impasse between a sovereign Beirut government and an armed militia doing the bidding of the Iranian theocrats could not last. A small war broke out last May when the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora wanted to dismantle an illegal fiber-optic network that Hezbollah had installed, a vast communication system that stretched for more than 200 miles and reached to the Syrian border. In retaliation, Hezbollah struck into the Sunni neighborhoods of West Beirut and the Druse stronghold in the Shouf Mountains.

The Sunnis were easily overwhelmed. The Druse had put up a measure of resistance, but they, too, could not stand up to Hezbollah. It's no small irony that Kuntar, a man of the Druse Mountains, is now returned home courtesy of Hezbollah. But the deep antagonism between the Druse and Hezbollah can't be wished away by Kuntar's release.

More than ever, Hezbollah is a Shiite party, shorn of its exalted status as a national resistance movement. Behind Hezbollah's deeds is the fine hand of Iran. Nasrallah had tried to obscure the difference between Lebanon's needs and those of his paymasters in Iran. In a widely scrutinized speech the cleric gave in late May, on the eighth anniversary of

Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Nasrallah claimed that he was at once a devoted believer in Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution and a son of Lebanon who believed in its "specificity" and pluralism.

There would be distinct roles for the Lebanese state and for his "resistance movement." The first would assume the burden of order and governing, while his movement would carry the banner of the armed struggle against Israel. This kind of contradiction can't be papered over. Nasrallah and his lieutenants must fully grasp their precarious position: They feed off mayhem and strife, while the country yearns for a break from its feuds.

It is doubtful that the Shiites will always follow Nasrallah to the barricades, and those who do so will expect material sustenance from Hezbollah. There are estimates that Hezbollah provides employment for 40,000 of its wards and schooling for 100,000 children. This is no small burden, even for a movement sustained by Iranian subsidies. Nor is it the case that the majority of the Shiites want the strictures and the rigor of Qom and Tehran dominating their world. True, the underclass and the newly urbanized in the Shiite suburbs may have taken to the dress codes and style and religious ritual of the Iranian theocracy. But the majority must wish a break from all that.

Hezbollah will not be able to run away with Lebanon. Already the Sunnis have been stirred up by Hezbollah's power. Sunni jihadists have made their presence felt in the northern town of Tripoli, and in the dozen or so Palestinian refugee camps on the outskirts of the principal cities.

It would be reasonable to assume that the weight of Sunni sentiment would shift toward the jihadists, were they to conclude that the mild-mannered Sunni politicians can't win a test of wills, and arms, against Hezbollah. Nor do the Christians want Hezbollah's utopia. The Christians have been weakened by emigration, but they, too, will fight for their place in the country if forced to do so. Furthermore, should there be any accommodation between America and Iran, the Persian power is sure to cast Hezbollah adrift.

"We lived in a world where we believed that our enemy was exactly like us," Ofer Regev said in a eulogy for his fallen brother. "We thought we could speak to people who also wanted to raise a child, grow a flower, love a girl, exactly like us. But the enemy proved that it is not exactly like us. And still, we will not stop trying."

Across the Lebanon border, Israelis may have once found a culture not so distant from their own, with mercy, decorum and "rules of engagement" even in times of conflict. The Lebanese will have to retrieve that older world if they are to find their way out of the grip of bigotry and terror. A decent country would be under no moral or political obligation to celebrate a murderer as a heroic son returning from a long captivity.

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