

Eleven Questions for Toni Nissi: A Lebanese Fighter Against Terrorism

Contributed by W. Thomas Smith, Jr.
Wednesday, 14 November 2007

W. Thomas Smith, Jr.

Toni Nissi is a fighter: Not in the sense of an armed combatant in a pitched battle; but certainly in the sense of a 21st-Century fighter battling terrorism on one of its myriad asymmetrical fronts. And as the general coordinator of the International Lebanese Committee for U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, a pro-democracy United Nations-affiliated nongovernmental organization (NGO), Nissi may well be one of the most important combatant commanders on the ground in Lebanon. He juggles his time spent as leader of a political cause — that of fighting to establish a free and sovereign Lebanon — with running a business and taking care of his a family. It's not easy, but as he says, "I am a father and a son and it is my duty to protect my family and provide a safe haven for them."

I spent a lot of time with Nissi in Lebanon over the past several weeks. Before returning to the states, I sat down with him for a brief Q&A.

W. THOMAS SMITH JR.: What is it that the American people may not understand about Lebanon that they must?

TONI NISSI: First, they have to understand that Lebanon is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, pluralistic country trying to restore democracy, and we are trying to do so after the Syrians have lorded over us for the last 30 years. And by stripping us of our sovereignty, Syria has turned Lebanon into a breeding ground for terrorism.

Second, America must know who the terrorists are in Lebanon: Hezbollah and its allies such al Qaeda, Hamas, and the various Palestinian Jihadist terrorists. Global terrorism strikes from them. And let's not forget that Ziad Jarrah, one the September 11th hijackers, was born, spent much of his life, and was recruited in Lebanon.

Lebanon is a major front in the ongoing war between the free world and the Jihadists. And if this front here in Lebanon were to collapse, the terrorism that is here could easily spread to all the world. Therefore, it is in the best interest of America and the free world to involve itself in this war and help the Lebanese, who alone cannot beat the terrorists.

SMITH: What must Americans do to help?

NISSI: On March 14, 2005, 1.5-million Lebanese took to the streets demanding freedom and pure democracy without waiting for the weak government in Beirut to ask for help. It was from this demonstration that the 14th of March movement was born, and in the spirit of that, the Americans went to the United Nations to produce what would become U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559. But the U.N. must put 1559 under Chapter 7, which means putting Lebanon under direct U.N. supervision — as in East Timor and Kosovo — to enable the Lebanese people to reform the entire country including the government institutions and the armed forces.

There also needs to be support for NGOs inside Lebanon that work to promote Lebanese sovereignty, independence, and democracy; because the terrorist organizations in Lebanon have infiltrated all of the government institutions from one end to the next. Consequently, all money sent by the United States to help the Lebanese government ends up in the hands of those terrorist organizations. Of course, the Lebanese government is unable to control this for many reasons.

The U.S. must also support the Lebanese army and the Interior Security Forces [ISF] in order to thwart and control the terrorists after forcing out the key officers who were previously put in positions of authority by Syria. This can be done by simply implementing UNSCR 1680 under Chapter 7.

SMITH: Lebanon has been unable to elect a president for a variety of reasons, and it doesn't look like it will be able to before the November 24th deadline when sitting President Emile Lahoud steps down. What are the biggest obstacles to Lebanon's electing a president right now?

NISSI: The first obstacle would be the Syrian-Iranian attacks against the Cedars Revolution at the hand of the Hezbollah terrorists and their allies in Lebanon. This reality is far different than what is currently being portrayed in the media as a battle between the majority (those wanting a free, democratic, and sovereign Lebanon) and the opposition (those in league with — or who are supported by — Hezbollah and their Syrian-Iranian masters).

The second obstacle is that the pro-democracy 14th of March politicians are all under threat of assassination as this was the trend until now. This threat alone might make it impossible for us to elect a president. It's also a fact that the pro-democracy supporters lack political experience, because Syria has been calling the shots in Lebanon for the last 30 years. That is why pro-democracy people here in Lebanon did not initially know how to ally with the international community and ask for its help to defeat terrorism in this country.

The third obstacle is that the government of Lebanon by itself has not been able to — and if freely elected, will never be able to — disarm Hezbollah. That is a real problem for this country.

SMITH: Is Lebanon heading for war?

NISSI: Lebanon is already at war with terror. Lebanon fought its war against Syrian occupation with the help of the international community after 1559 was issued and now is enduring an internal war on terror with the equilibrium shifting to the benefit of the terrorists. This is a result of the weakness of the Lebanese, though certainly not a lack of will. Mind you, a coup d'état launched by Hezbollah on behalf of Syria and Iran might lead to an uprising from the Lebanese people.

SMITH: Is Hezbollah stronger today than it was before the 2006 war with Israel?

NISSI: Of course. Hezbollah is definitely stronger today than it was in 2006. Actually it is getting stronger day by day. The Syrian-Lebanese border is still open without control. Hezbollah is controlling more than 50% of Lebanese territory. Hezbollah and Syria are united geographically. Therefore, Hezbollah can only grow stronger.

Only a few months ago, their own leaders said, Hezbollah's arsenal has grown from 12,000 missiles to 30,000 missiles. They have recruited thousands of new terrorists from all around the Muslim and Arab world. They are politically strong: physically surrounding the Lebanese government and parliament, impeding all government decision-making, abusing the presidential election and threatening the Lebanese people daily in all their media.

SMITH: What are some of the personal issues you and members of the 1559 committee are dealing with?

NISSI: Because members of the 1559 committee are fighting the terrorists here, we are being labeled by the terrorist-controlled media as traitors. Our personal businesses have been attacked. Our communications and our moves are constantly monitored. Some of us have been physically attacked, and directly and indirectly threatened by Hezbollah and its ally the Social Syrian National Party. We are followed when we are in cars all the time. They come after our families when we are on business trips or at work. We have been informed lately that some of us are on "hit lists" and we have been "advised" to leave the country.

SMITH: What are the strengths and weakness of the army and the ISF in your opinion?

NISSI: During the Syrian occupation, the Lebanese Army and the ISF were purposely neglected. This resulted in none of the laws relating to the armed forces being upgraded or modified — not since the 1960s, in fact -- to match the natural progress of the all armies of the world.

Officers were trained in Syria and were brainwashed into believing that Syria is the brother of Lebanon, Hezbollah is the legitimate resistance, and everybody else is the enemy.

The army's weaponry has not been adequately upgraded for 25 years. This was reflected during the fight at Nahr al-Bared against Fatah al-Islam. The same thing with the ISF.

The strength of the military lies with the young generation of officers and soldiers, still ready to die for Lebanon and to fight Lebanon's real enemies.

SMITH: Where do you see Lebanon in five years?

NISSI: Lebanon will either be a new Afghanistan exporting terror to the rest of the free world or an independent, pluralistic sovereign country recovering under the supervision of the U.N.

SMITH: Why do you do what you do involving yourself so heavily in the cause?

NISSI: Because I consider myself a free citizen of this world. And I consider it my duty to fight terrorism along with the citizens and the governments of the free world. It is my duty as a Lebanese, who loves his country, to involve himself in his country's greatest cause: that of freedom. Also, I have more experience than others in fighting terrorists in Lebanon, for I — and others like me — have been the pioneers in fighting terrorism for the last 38 years.

I am also involved because I am a Christian entrusted with the Christian Aramaic heritage. I am a father and a son and it is my duty to protect my family and provide a safe haven for them. And finally, out of loyalty to all the blood that was shed for the sake of Lebanon: be it by Lebanese or by the friends and allies of Lebanon.

SMITH: Are you ever afraid?

NISSI: Occasionally. The only fear I have is to die like my two very best friends, MP Pierre Gemayel and MP Gebran Tueini, before finishing my mission – which is getting Lebanon to a safe shore.

SMITH: What is next on the agenda for the 1559 Committee?

NISSI: We are working on putting the 1559 under Chapter 7 because of all the reasons we've just discussed. And we must see our way to electing a president, because we believe that this presidential election is a turning point in the life of the Cedars Revolution and one battle to be won in the international war on terrorism.

#

FamilySecurityMatters.org contributing editor W. Thomas Smith Jr. is director of the Counterterrorism Research Center of the Family Security Foundation and a Contributing Editor to FamilySecurityMatters.org. A former U.S. Marine infantry leader and shipboard counterterrorism instructor, Smith writes about military/defense issues and has covered conflict in the Balkans and on the West Bank. He is the author of six books, and his articles have appeared in USA Today, George, U.S. News & World Report, BusinessWeek, National Review Online, CBS News, The Washington Times, and others. [read full author bio here](#)

If you are a reporter or producer who is interested in receiving more information about this writer or this article, please email your request to pr@familysecuritymatters.org.

Note -- The opinions expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions, views, and/or philosophy of The Family Security Foundation, Inc.