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Ending the Lebanese tragedy

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AFTER two weeks, Al-Qaeda broke its silence to comment on Israel's massive and disproportionate offensive in Lebanon. In a 27 July taped message broadcast on the Qatar-based Arab television al-Jazeera, Al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, called on Muslims to fight what he called the "Zionist-Crusader war" against Muslim nations. He said Al-Qaeda would not stand by while "these [Israeli] shells burn our brothers". Al-Zawahiri called on Muslims everywhere "to fight and become martyrs in the war against the Zionists and the Crusaders". Why has Al-Qaeda decided to intervene and what will be the consequences of this action?

An obligation and not alliance

In war, you have to assume nothing. Two weeks ago, one would have assumed Al-Qaeda would not have responded positively to a war in Lebanon. This was based on confusing al-Zarqawi's attacks on the Shi'as as an Al-Qaeda's strategy. This was never the case. Al-Qaeda's leaders were always more pragmatic with regards to Sunni-Shi'a conflicts. Reacting any differently to the crisis would have hurt Al-Qaeda politically and further isolate it from the wider Muslim community.

Al-Qaeda broke its silence for two reasons: Firstly, because it considers itself the Muslim vanguard, it cannot afford to remain silent while the Lebanese are crying out for help and protection from anyone against Israeli attacks. Hence, it is the duty of Al-Qaeda to engage itself in this conflict. Secondly, Hizbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah are gradually winning the hearts and minds of the Muslim community. Nasrallah has successfully portrayed himself as a guerrilla standing honourably against the Israelis' high-tech weaponry. Al-Qaeda cannot afford to keep quiet and let Nasrallah and his followers steal the show and be elevated to this prestigious position.

Nasrallah managed to portray the war as against Lebanon and not against him. And for this matter, it is very difficult for Muslim scholars and even other militants not to support him, at least verbally, identifying themselves with Nasrallah. However, Al-Qaeda's support is not whole-hearted. While talking about the war on Lebanon, al-Zawahiri did not name Hizbollah or Nasrallah. It is interesting to note that it was the Al-Qaeda number two, and not the leader, Osama bin Laden, who made the first statement. This suggests that while Lebanon has become a very important crisis for Al-Qaeda, it has yet to reach the stage of requiring a dramatic appearance by Osama. It also sends the signal that it is supporting the Lebanese and not Nasrallah in the conflict.

Al-Qaeda's move represents the caution within the wider Muslim community over supporting Nasrallah and his forces in the current conflict. But there does seem to be an emerging shift towards partial acceptance of Nasrallah, at least for his success in fighting Israel. Several scholars and policy makers are giving voice to this view and for the wider need for Muslim unity during this crisis. Salman al-Awda, a leading Sunni Salafi Saudi scholar, said the current developments in the Muslim world require all to postpone their internal differences and for them to realize that "our enemy is the Zionist who did not differentiate between children and fighters". Egyptian-born Sheikh al-Qaradawi calls for a support for the Palestinians and Lebanese and criticized any attempt to cause rifts among Muslims along the traditional Shi'a-Sunni divide.

Why is this happening?

To understand why it took a while for Al-Qaeda to emerge to comment on the war on Lebanon and why certain Muslim scholars and policy makers have decided to speak out, three issues should be understood:

First: Muslim governments, and above all Arab governments, did not take seriously actions to firmly impose a ceasefire. Regardless of the unclear relations between Hizbollah and Iran and Syria, Arab countries were hoping to end the war as soon as possible through international bodies. Indeed, the Israeli response was unexpected and seems to go beyond the normal response. In addition to this, the relatively short time it took to escalate threw many off course as they did not anticipate that it will go this far so soon.

Secondly, while the international community has denounced the war on Lebanon, it has been extremely slow, if not incapable of imposing a ceasefire. While it calls for humanitarian help, it fails miserably to adequately address the contentious issue highlighted by the conflict. Despite the recent UN Security Council resolution calling for a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hizbollah, a huge gap remains between the United Nations, United States and the rest of the world on how to fundamentally resolve the conflict.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Nasrallah is gradually emerging as a hero capable of challenging a state. He managed to create terrible anger within Israeli society, and cause Israel to appear to be divided and uncertain as to its objectives. He also turned the war from a personal clash between Israel and him, into a war against Lebanon, This has also forced Muslim public opinion to support him, albeit grudgingly for some. The images of suffering in Lebanon makes it almost impossible to denounce Nasrallah and his position.

More blood

On Sunday 30 July this year, an Israeli air strike killed more than 54 Lebanese civilians, among them 34 children, in the village of Qana. Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, said: "There is no place on this sad morning for any discussion other than an immediate and unconditional ceasefire as well as an international investigation into the Israeli massacres in Lebanon now." Hizbollah, threatening a harsh response, said "this horrific massacre [at Qana] will not go without a response". American secretary state Condoleezza Rice said she was "deeply saddened by the terrible loss of innocent life".

At this stage, as history taught us, diplomacy will have the last word. A ceasefire will be resumed, but at what cost? Could this war not be avoided?

In the Lebanon crisis, everyone has proven and has to varying degrees proven their point. The Israeli government proved that it can do what it likes and how it likes. Nasrallah has also proven a point; Israel can destroy houses and kill people but it cannot demolish Hizbollah. Al-Qaeda has also shown that it is capable of changing tactics when the time calls.

Conclusion

This war enforced the position of the militant groups and portrayed them as capable of handling war, and has created temporary alliances that could change the strategic picture of the war on terror. It has helped to undermine Muslim governments as it can further widen the gap between the public and the state. More importantly it has undermined American efforts to sell an improved public image to the Arab and Muslim public. While contested, there is a widespread view that the United States is responsible for the tragedy in the Middle East. Having said that, not all is lost, the US still has a chance to improve its standing provided it moves fast to prevent further loss of innocent lives.

What should be done then? In this case, wise people are needed to speak up and bring an end to the conflict. If not, we all shall be responsible when the sky over Lebanon rains blood.

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