

A LAMENT OVER LEBANON

Colin Chapman

*'How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.'*
(Lamentations 1:1)

This description of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC in the book of Lamentations could easily be applied to the city of Beirut in July 2006. It has been a painful experience during the last few days to watch Lebanon being torn apart through the ferocity of Israel's attacks. As we've watched on television each day, we've been re-living the years that we spent as a family in Beirut from just after the start of the civil war in 1975 until the Israeli invasion in 1982 – with various evacuations in between.

The writer of Lamentations weeps over the devastated city, describing the humanitarian crisis which follows. But he also attempts to understand how God could have allowed this disaster to happen. He is very aware of the sins of his own people, and points the finger of blame at political and religious leaders who have led their people astray.

What follows is a personal attempt to make sense of the disaster unfolding in the Middle East before our eyes, written on 22 July, ten days after Hizbullah's attacks on Israel and Israel's attacks on Lebanon began. These, I suggest, are some of the major factors which need to be understood if we are to make any sense of what is happening and work towards 'the things that make for peace' (Luke 19:41).

Hamas

This organisation didn't come into being until 1987. It was created as an Islamic alternative to the more secular approach of Arafat and the PLO who, it was felt, had already made too many concessions to Israel. It probably won the elections early in 2006 because of widespread disillusionment with the legacy of Arafat and the corruption and inertia of the Palestinian Authority. Hamas was more in touch with the aspirations of ordinary Palestinians and offered a much more robust defence of Palestinian rights.

In recent years the leadership of Hamas has demonstrated not only its commitment to an ideology that is based squarely on a particular interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic theology and tradition, but has also shown a strong pragmatic streak which

has enabled it to be flexible in its response to changing circumstances. It is therefore unfortunate that Israel, the US and the EU refused to give Hamas the time and space to work out its own way of participating in democratic processes, and instead made immediate demands which seemed reasonable to outside observers but amounted to conditions which could hardly be met immediately.

The refusal of both Israel and America to negotiate in any way with the democratically elected Palestinian leadership has simply exposed the hypocrisy of America's passion to spread democracy in the region. It seems that they only want democracy if it throws up leaders who are likely to respond to western agendas, and that they cannot handle an elected government which expresses more faithfully the aspirations of the people. If we in Britain have over so many years watched the painful process by which the IRA has slowly renounced violence and committed itself to democratic processes, could we not believe that, given time, Hamas might be able to transform itself into a different kind of movement? The Israeli, American and European refusal to do business with Hamas and the cutting off of vital funds have made it impossible for the elected government to function, placing it in an impossible position.

All this has been going on while the world has begun to realise that Sharon's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza may not have been as generous as it was made out to be. Sharon himself made no secret of the fact that he would use the withdrawal from Gaza to strengthen his claim to hold on to most of the settlements on the West Bank. And after the Israeli withdrawal, Gaza was left as a huge, open prison, with all exits, all natural resources and the whole economy totally in the hands of Israel. Meanwhile on the West Bank Israel continued its arrests of Palestinians, its targeted assassinations and land grabbing; and the Security Barrier has been extended, separating communities from their schools, clinics, orchards and vineyards, in one case going through the middle of the playground of a school and in another town right through the middle of the main street. Should anyone be surprised that the humiliation and despair created by the occupation have led some to suicide bombing and the majority to support Hamas?

Hizbullah

This movement is supported by most (but not all) Shi'ites and by many (but not all) Sunnis in Lebanon. While Christians have recognised the role that Hizbullah played in getting Israel to withdraw from the south in 2000 and in providing for the needs of its community, few have actually supported them and many have been apprehensive about its growing power which has almost created a state within a state. Most Lebanese Christians are therefore extremely angry and resentful that Hizbullah's provocative attack on Israel, without the knowledge and approval of the government, has brought the wrath of Israel down so severely on the whole country. But their anger at Hizbullah is likely now to be overtaken and superseded by their anger against the US and its allies for allowing Israel to punish the whole country so severely for the crimes of one group within it.

This movement came into being in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its occupation of the south. Of course it has been supported at every stage –

financially, morally and materially - by Iran and therefore shares much of the ethos of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. But it's a genuinely Lebanese movement which responded to the intolerable situation of Israeli forces remaining in the country as an oppressive occupying force. It is far from being simply a 'terrorist organisation', since it has developed remarkably holistic programmes with schools, hospitals, clinics and social welfare of different kinds meeting needs which have not been met by a weak central government. Sheikh Nasrallah is an incredibly charismatic and gifted orator who can hold crowds spellbound for hours (I have often watched him on television) not only by talking politics, but by expounding the Qur'an and communicating a very genuine Shi'ite spirituality.

Newspaper reports suggest that Nasrallah had been planning some kind of attack on Israel for months, and timed the fateful capture of the two Israeli soldiers to demonstrate support for Hamas' similar attack on the borders of Gaza. While he probably expected strong retaliation from Israel, I very much doubt if he expected that it would be as fierce as it has turned out to be. Since he had succeeded on an earlier occasion in pressing Israel to release Lebanese prisoners in exchange for the release of the remains of Israeli soldiers, he no doubt hoped that he could do the same again this time. Having made the initial provocative attack and continued to launch rocket attacks on northern Israel, he feels that he cannot now lose face and gain absolutely nothing by giving in to Israeli demands that the hostages are returned and Hizbullah disarmed. However much we may condemn the initial attack which triggered this crisis, and however uncomfortable we may be with Hizbullah's rhetoric about destroying Israel, we should not lose sight of the fact that the original *raison d'être* of the movement was an understandable opposition to Israeli occupation. Perhaps here is another example of a movement which needed time and space to transform itself to take on a different role in changed circumstances.

Israel's end-game

Several observers have suspected that Israel had been planning attacks on both Hamas and Hizbullah for some time, and that the capture of the single soldier by Hamas and the two soldiers by Hizbullah simply provided Israel with the pretext for launching serious attacks. Hamas and Hizbullah may therefore have played into Israel's hands, giving it the moral justification for punishing both movements. It could perhaps be argued that by escalating their violence, Palestinians have lost the moral high ground that they once had, and have in a sense been shooting themselves in the foot.

This isn't the first time that something of this kind has happened. Before the invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 Palestinian attacks across the border had been minimal. It was the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London which gave Sharon the pretext for invading Lebanon. It almost seems, therefore, as if a pattern has repeated itself: Israel has its plans for dealing a serious blow to its enemies, and then uses the enemy's provocative attacks as a justification for a major offensive.

There are many who believe that in the early years Israel actually encouraged the growth of Hamas in order to weaken Arafat and divide the whole Palestinian movement. In recent years, however, Israel has declared its determination to weaken Hamas and its refusal ever to negotiate with a government led by them. Prime

Minister Olmert and others in his government have stated very clearly that this time they are determined to destroy Hizbullah once and for all. One might have hoped, however, that Israel might have learned from its disastrous invasion and occupation of Lebanon that it cannot crush the Palestinian movement or any other Arab movement by force. Arafat and his colleagues were able to escape from Beirut and set themselves up in Tunis. And it has been argued that Israel's failure in Lebanon led ultimately to the first Intifada in 1986, which began as a spontaneous explosion of the anger among Palestinians on the West Bank who felt that they were not prepared to live under occupation any longer.

It seems to the Palestinians that Israel has been doing its utmost in recent years to humiliate and crush them into submission, and to postpone or even prevent face to face negotiations which would tackle the crucial issues in the conflict – the final borders, the right of return and the status of East Jerusalem. Israel has illegally taken over more and more land on the West Bank in the name of security. But it has now become clear to many that their ultimate goal is *either* to prevent the creation of a viable Palestinian state *or* to ensure that any Palestinian state that might one day be created will be as small, as impotent, as divided and as meaningless as possible. If we simply look at all the facts that Israel has created on the ground on the West Bank since 1967, it's hard not to understand that this is what the Palestinians see as Israel's real end-game.

Diagnosing the nature of the problem

George W Bush and Tony Blair seem to believe that Hamas and Hizbullah are 'the root of the problem'. It's understandable, therefore, that they have effectively given Israel the green light to do its utmost to destroy both these organisations. But if Israel's present policies are having such disastrous consequences, and if, as many now believe, Israel will not be able to achieve its goal of destroying both movements, might the President and the Prime Minister ever be willing to consider another possible diagnosis of the problem?

This alternative diagnosis would suggest that the roots of the recent stages of the conflict have to be traced back to Israel's occupation of the West Bank since 1967. Most of the world still believes that the occupation, the settlements and the Security Barrier are a violation of international law. The first and second Intifadas were protests against the continuing occupation, and the suicide bombings have been an expression of the despair of Palestinians who feel that they had been badly let down by their own leaders, by Israel, by Arab states, by the United Nations and by western powers. From this perspective, Hamas and Hizbullah are not the root of the problem, but only symptoms.

Israel argues that Lebanon has not complied with UN Security Council Resolution 1559 which called for the disarming of Hizbullah, and that Israel is simply trying to do what the Lebanese government hasn't had the courage or the power to do. But if Israel itself had complied with the famous UN Security Council Resolution 442 in 1967 calling for 'withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories of recent conflict', we wouldn't be in the situation that we face today. It is Israel's continuing,

illegal occupation of the West Bank that has created the context in which both Hamas and Hizbullah came into being.

Since Israel's present policy of attempting to crush both Hamas and Hizbullah has led to more and more suffering for millions and probably doesn't have a chance of solving the problem, perhaps we should be urging our governments to consider this other diagnosis. If it's more realistic and actually addresses the root of the problem, it might in the long run lead to a resolution of the conflict and bring some kind of peace with justice. If Condoleezza Rice doesn't want to return to the status quo ante and really wants to work for a new Middle East, perhaps this is where she might need to begin.

Self-defence and proportionate response

No one disputes Israel's right to defend itself against attack. What is much more questionable, however, is whether Israel has a right to punish and destroy a whole country in order to defend itself against attacks launched by one group within that country. Localised attacks on missile sites inside the Lebanese border might have been regarded as legitimate and proportionate. But devastating attacks on the international airport, fuel tanks, power stations, bridges and roads all over the country – and even on the new lighthouse on Beirut's sea-front – is increasingly being regarded as totally disproportionate. This is not 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (Leviticus 24:20) - a principle which in its original context was intended to set limits to revenge - but a return to pre-Mosaic, unlimited revenge and retaliation.

In recent days many will have read at least one account of a convoy of cars leaving villages in the south of Lebanon in response to Israeli calls to evacuate, and then being attacked by jets with many casualties, including children. If and when the dust settles, will there be any way of calling Israel to account for these attacks on innocent civilians? It seems that in this war Israel is acting as if it is above the law. It alone is allowed to determine what is a proportionate response. Meanwhile the leaders of the US and Britain not only refuse to call for a ceasefire, but cannot even bring themselves to say that Israel's response has been excessive.

The war on terror

The US responded to 9/11 by launching its war on terror. The Taliban and al-Qa'ida were the first target, and then the focus turned to Iraq in the war of 2003. Ariel Sharon cleverly aligned himself more closely with the US, arguing that Palestinian terrorists were no different from the suicide bombers of 9/11.

What has happened therefore is that both George W Bush and Tony Blair have tended to see their whole foreign policy in relation to this region in terms of 'the war on terror'. This has become the lens through which they see every conflict – whether it is Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq or Israel/Palestine. This simplistic outlook which reduces all the different conflicts into one major conflict inevitably distorts vision and makes it impossible to understand each conflict in its own terms and respond in appropriate ways.

If the West had responded to 9/11 first of all by trying to understand the anger of Muslims and asking whether there might be good reasons for their anger, they would have realised (as Tony Blair seems to have done at certain stages) that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at, or very near, the top of the list of grievances against the West. They might have done more to adopt a more even-handed approach to the conflict which would force both Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table. Instead the continuing, one-sided support of Israel – political, economic and moral – and the refusal to deal with the roots of the problem have simply fuelled the anger of Arabs and Muslims.

Over this issue, therefore, the West – and particularly the US as the one superpower – is faced with a clear choice between two options. The first is to continue as they are doing at present and allow Olmert to remain in the driving seat and unilaterally impose a settlement on the Palestinians. The second option is to force both sides to negotiate face to face on the basis of international law. What seems to prevent the US and Britain from even considering this option is the fact that the agendas of the Jewish lobby, the neo-cons and the Christian Right have converged over this issue. And the West has allowed the conflict to drag on year after year without resolution, with the result that so many facts have been created on the ground that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to see how to unscramble the egg.

These, I suggest, are some of the areas in which we in the West have to do the hard soul-searching reflected in the book of Lamentations: ‘Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord...’ (3:40). What kept me sane and enabled me to hold onto my faith during the dark days of the civil war in Lebanon and through all that has happened in the Middle East since then has been the writings of the biblical prophets. There we find a world-view which sees all history in the hands of a holy and loving God who is at work both in judgement and in mercy, in and through all the terrible events that we witness.

*‘The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness’
(Lamentations 3:19-23)*

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