

Opinion: Lebanon has shown its desire for peace



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Published: Sunday, 07/23/06

Throughout the last three decades, the people who live along Lebanon's border with Israel have suffered repeated shelling, terrorist attacks and occupation. In contrast, Israel's borders with Egypt, Jordan and Syria have remained largely quiet. Since the recent abduction of two Israeli servicemen by the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, however, international attention has returned to this extremely troubled region.

Sean Foley

It is easy to forget that Israel's border with Lebanon was once among the quietest in the Middle East. Between 1949 and 1967, the Israeli-Lebanese border was far less violent than Israel's borders with Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Of the armistice agreements Israel reached with its four neighbors in 1949, the only one still fully operative when the 1967 Arab-Israeli war broke out was with Lebanon.

The border was so secure that in 1963, Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir reported to President John F. Kennedy that "cows occasionally wander over the border from Lebanon and are sent back. Girls in the Israeli Army may get lost and wander across the Lebanese border, but they are very politely returned."

Lebanon's pro-Western government agreed that the border with Israel was secure, but the government was far too weak domestically and internationally to formalize its peaceful relationship with Israel without the support of other Arab countries. Nevertheless, the Lebanese looked forward to the day when they could do so. Lebanon would not be the first Arab country to make peace with Israel, the Lebanese told Westerners, but it would surely be the second.

Though Lebanon did not participate in the 1967 Arab-Israel war, the events of that conflict created the conditions which shattered the peace along the Israeli-Lebanese border. Galvanized by Israel's victory, Palestinians turned Lebanon into a base from which to attack Israel. Paralyzed by civil war, the Lebanese government could not stop the attacks. Maronite Christians, who had long dominated Lebanon politically, refused to share power with Druze and Muslim Lebanese, who then constituted the majority of

Lebanon's population. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, expelled the Palestinian fighters and occupied the southern portion of the country in order to prevent future attacks.

During the Israeli occupation, Hezbollah emerged as the key benefactor of Lebanon's Shiite Muslims. Not only did the organization use its international contacts to deliver social services to Lebanon's long-neglected Shiites, its militant wing inflicted heavy losses on the Israeli army. Hezbollah also secured the release of Arabs held in Israeli prisons by abducting Israelis and using them as bargaining chips.

In 2004, Israel freed 430 Arab prisoners in exchange for the release of an Israeli businessman and the remains of three Israeli soldiers seized in northern Israel. Many Lebanese also credit Hezbollah with compelling Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000. For them, Hezbollah is not a terrorist organization but a shining beacon of hope — an organization which seems to be accomplishing something in a situation in which everyone else seems utterly incapacitated.

Decades after the 1949 armistice agreement between Lebanon and Israel became ineffective, the armistice may once again play a role in securing peace between the two nations. In his televised address July 15, Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad Siniora called for a ceasefire and for the extension of his government's "sovereignty in all Lebanese territory."

Importantly, Siniora urged that the extension of Lebanese sovereignty should be conducted in cooperation with the United Nations and should adhere to the "Truce Agreement signed in 1949 and the Taif Accord."

By making such a proclamation, he made an implicit offer: If Israel agrees to a ceasefire, Siniora's government would work to control Lebanon's southern regions and re-establish the peaceful conditions along the Lebanese-Israel border that existed in the years before the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Unfortunately, Siniora's proposal made no provision for how his government would extend its authority into all of Lebanon — a seemingly impossible task even before Israel destroyed much of the nation's infrastructure and army bases.

How to reconcile the weakness of the Lebanese central government, Hezbollah's military and political power and Israel's determination to crush Hezbollah remains the critical question for those seeking to resolve the current round of violence.

Still, Siniora's offer suggests that there may yet be hope for peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Lebanese despite the bloodshed and violence of recent days. •

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