



## The Lebanon: What Comes Next?

Rafael L. Bardají

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### The Current Context

1.- **The political crisis in the Lebanon is still unresolved and seems to be worsening:** The pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian factions are still in stand-off position, the institutional system is paralysed and sectarian-religious rivalries have done nothing but increase over the last few months. This crisis will simply become more acute between now and the presidential elections next September. The current pro-Syrian President, Emile Lahoud, will no doubt face J. Abdo, the former Head of the Lebanese Intelligence Agency, a close associate of Hariri and a man clearly entrenched within the anti-Syrian camp. It has yet to be seen whether Damascus will allow its man to lose his position as the President of the Lebanon.

2.- **Syria poses an increasingly complicated challenge both within the political panorama and with regard to the security situation.** Its first objective is to prevent the inquiry into Hariri's death from implicating persons close to the regime headed by Bashar al-Assad, if not the Syrian President himself. However, at the same time, Damascus aspires to break out of the position of international isolation to which it has been consigned in recent years and, in particular, since its forced exit from the Lebanon. These dual motives explain some of the parallel measures that Damascus is adopting with regard to the Lebanon, Israel, Iraq and Iran.

For example, the military deployment that has been taking

place over the last three months is interpreted in Tel Aviv as an offensive move, a build-up aimed at preparing for an attack on Israel. Nevertheless, everything seems to indicate that Tel Aviv and Damascus are seriously committed to talks regarding the future return of the Golan Heights. Furthermore, Syria seems to be selling the Americans the idea that it can rein in Hezbollah if it receives assurances regarding the Hariri court case, although it continues to send aid to Hezbollah militias across the border.

At the same time, the Syrian authorities are showing signs of concern at the prospect of a dialogue being established between the United States and Iran, given that they fear that one of the conditions of a possible agreement might be to pull Hezbollah beyond Syria's control and subject the organisation to Teheran's strategies and commitments. This explains the boost that Syria has given to various Palestinian factions in recent months, as well as the aid it has granted to groups linked to Al-Qaeda or that fall within Al-Qaeda's orbit, such as Fatah al-Islam.

**3.- The deterioration of security conditions is evident and, quite possibly, impossible to reverse.** Over the last month we have witnessed ever-worsening sectarian violence and terrorist attacks in the north of the country, in Beirut and now in Southern Lebanon.

We must remember, for example, that the first outbreak of violence

began with the actions of Fatah al-Islam terrorists in the Refugee Camp of Nahr al-Bared and, later on, in the Camp of Ein al-Hilweh, perpetrated by members of another group that operates within the ranks of the international jihad, Ansar al-Islam. Both Lebanese security forces and the Lebanese Army have proven incapable of eliminating the terrorists and all they have managed to do throughout a month of heavy fighting is to kill a few militants and temporarily drive away the rest.

Second, throughout the month of June, six car-bomb explosions took place in Beirut alone (the most spectacular featuring the assassination of Walid Eido).

Third, the Lebanese authorities have announced that they have already frustrated plans to launch large-scale attacks throughout the country (one of them involved a simultaneous attack on the international airport, various government centres and other targets such as the Shekka Tunnel).

Finally, Southern Lebanon has witnessed a build-up of Islamic militants linked to several acronyms of the jihad, especially members of the group known as Global Jihad, but also, according to intelligence sources, members of Fatah al-Islam.

Syria has denied being behind all of these developments, but it seems obvious that they all meet its goals of destabilising the Lebanese Government and Lebanon as a

whole. The inquiry into the attacks on Beirut clearly points to methods and elements linked to Damascus, whilst Syria's connections with terrorist groups such as Fatah al-Islam are also well known (the group's main leader, Shakir al-Absi, was under Damascus' control for two years and has now been associated with al-Zarqawi). It is known that al-Absi had two terrorist training camps in Syria before deploying his militants to the Lebanon.

**4.- Israeli Uncertainty.** On Sunday 17th June, Israel suffered a strike from two Katyusha missiles fired from Lebanese soil (specifically, from the area controlled by the UN Interim Force in the Lebanon, UNIFIL, and the Spanish contingent). The attack was condemned by Hezbollah and responsibility was assumed by a hitherto-unknown group that called itself the Jihad Badr Brigade. The Israeli authorities did not respond to this attack because they believed that any attack on their part would seriously compromise the fragile position of the government headed by Prime Minister Siniora in Beirut, which was already under attack from Hezbollah and Syria.

Nevertheless, Ehud Barak's appointment as Minister for Defence, in addition to providing a boost for Olmert's unpopular government, had a very important psychological effect on the Israeli Defence Force (IDF): it served to restore its credibility, to the extent that Barak is an experienced soldier. This strengthens the belief that all

contingency plans that may be developed in the future will be viewed in a more serious light and evaluated operationally from a strategic-military perspective, as opposed to a tactical political perspective.

What is more, Olmert's weakness could, paradoxically, lead him to believe that only a "successful" war operation could compensate for his disastrous management of the last Lebanese War.

With Barak in charge of defence, the internal debate within the IDF about how best to fight and defeat Hezbollah could lead to the conclusion (which has already emerged during the course of the inquiries carried out by the Winograd Commission) that victory in the Lebanon will only be possible by achieving a victory over the real masterminds behind the whole situation, which is to say, over Syria. At the end of the day, a war against Syria would be easier for the IDF to execute because it would fall within the boundaries of conventional warfare to which the Israeli Army is accustomed.

Whatever the case may be, this does not mean that, if negotiations should be brought to a successful conclusion with Damascus on the Golan Heights, the IDF would not assume the responsibility of fighting against Hezbollah again if needed. We must remember that, in the eyes of the Israeli strategic policy-makers, the ultimate cause of last summer's war - the lack of

disarmament of the Shi'ite militia - still persists.

## Spain's Deployment

1.- Spain deployed its troops as part of UNIFIL purely as a result of considerations based on political opportunism. We might recall the Spanish Government's condemnation of Israel for what it considered to be a disproportionate response and its commitment to achieving any kind of ceasefire as soon as possible, irrespective of whether Israel had achieved its objectives or Hezbollah had been defeated.

The Socialist Government's decision was premature, offering Spain's troops before it was even known what the other Allies were prepared to contribute, what mission the troops would be given and even the terms of deployment.

The sending of the Spanish contingent was exploited politically in the usual manner, namely by presenting it as a peace deployment, contrary to the former Spanish government's participation in the Iraq War.

Nevertheless, Spain's military aspirations of playing a leading role at a command level were not duly satisfied. Spain's troops were assigned to the sector that nobody wanted and Spain was obliged to lead a veritable rag-bag of soldiers from very different cultural backgrounds.

2.- The deployment took place under the auspices of the UN, in

accordance with Resolution 1701, whose mandate clearly established two essential missions for UNIFIL: to assist the Lebanese Army in disarming the militias (Hezbollah) and to impose an arms embargo in order to prevent the militias' rearmament.

Neither of these missions has been successfully achieved. The troops have reached an understanding with the militias to the effect that both sides aim to avoid confrontation with the other. Whilst Hezbollah refrains from carrying out public actions, its infrastructure remains untouched. The vast majority of UNIFIL's activities relate to the deactivation of undetonated explosives. The UN force is also helping to rebuild the road infrastructure and to provide humanitarian aid (medical services, basically).

3.- The deployment is believed to have benefited from a benign and non-hostile environment. From a political perspective, humanitarian aid helps to win over the Shi'ite population in the region. Strategically, to the extent that Hezbollah's activities are unimpeded, this group has nothing to lose from the presence of UNIFIL's troops. Quite the contrary, in fact, since the deployment of UN troops makes another Israeli military intervention in the region more difficult.

Militarily-speaking, the attention that has been granted to Hezbollah may have led us to lose sight of the emergence of new threats not necessarily linked to this group and

its militias. In fact, UNIFIL's military authorities and the Spanish command agreed very recently that the level of alert should not be increased, because there was absolutely no need to do so. For example, contrary to the warnings issued in December by the Research Head of Israeli Military Intelligence, General Yossi Baidatz, regarding the growing presence of Fatah al-Islam militants south of the River Lithani and their intention to attack UNIFIL, the UN Force's current Italian Commander, Claudio Graciano, declared in the Jerusalem Post just three weeks ago that "we take routine precautions, but not because there is any specific threat against us".

It is possible that this incorrect reading of the threat could explain, if not justify, the absence of certain resources among Spanish troops, such as frequency inhibitors.

**4.- Whether the situation improves or worsens depends rather on factors beyond the control of UNIFIL and the Spanish contingent.** It is symptomatic that the help that the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs has requested in order to clarify last Sunday's attack has meant talking to the authorities in Teheran.

The attack, if finally linked to a group associated with al-Qaeda (which is the official version to date) means that the thin red line established by Hezbollah itself, namely that of refraining from attacking international forces, has now been crossed. However, as we

know, al-Qaeda's agenda does not necessarily coincide with that of Hezbollah, in the same way as Hezbollah's does not always coincide with that of Syria. The extent to which an Islamic jihadist element beyond Hezbollah's control has entered the equation is anybody's guess. In Northern Lebanon this certainly seems to be the case; in the South this could also be the case, although it is difficult to say for sure. However, if it is the case, then there will certainly be further attacks such as the one Spanish soldiers have suffered.

Irrespective of this, if Hezbollah feels that Syria and Israel may be close to reaching some kind of agreement regarding the Golan Heights that involves the terrorist group's disarmament or exclusion, it could attempt to anticipate developments and frustrate the agreement by renewing its medium-range missile attacks on Israeli soil. The majority of these missiles would have to be fired from the UNIFIL area of operations and from civilian facilities (schools or houses). If Israel responds, our troops will have become caught in the crossfire, at the very heart of the battle zone. If Israel's response manages to miss the UN Forces, depending on the result, Hezbollah's militias could turn against UNIFIL in an attempt to make the conflict international and reach a new ceasefire as soon as possible.

**5.- Without a change in their rules of engagement, Spanish troops are left highly exposed, given that they can only respond to enemy fire, not**

**anticipate it.** It is obvious that the right of self-protection must be interpreted very differently in benign and in hostile environments. Thus, for example, frequency inhibitors could have frustrated the attack on Spanish troops and it is deplorable that Spanish soldiers do not have the necessary resources available to them in order to ensure their protection. However, whatever the case may be, we must always be aware that in a hostile environment, total safety and security can never be guaranteed for any person at any time. There is no technical device that cannot be countered by some other device or tactic if the terrorists should make every effort to do so. In this respect, it is the procedures and rules of engagement that provide the key to guaranteeing the dissuasive force that our UN troops lack today.

### **The Next Step**

1.- If there is no reaction from our troops, the Spanish contingent in UNIFIL will be seen as a target that can be attacked without any risk at all. **Inaction, in this case, simply increases their vulnerability.**

2.- As we have stated above, passive defence **measures will never be sufficient** in order to ensure complete protection within a theatre of war in which we do not exercise total control.

3.- Nevertheless, **we must resist the temptation of withdrawing our troops from the Lebanon.** A decision of this kind would throw away the little international

credibility that Spain has left abroad. It would also be a selfish measure vis-à-vis the rest of the UN forces, would damage the UN and, even worse, it would cause the enemy to believe that they have scored a valuable victory. Now is the moment to grin and bear it.

4.- **However, it is the Government's responsibility to now explain not only the conditions based on which this mission is being carried out, but why we have been targeted by this attack.** It is essential to clarify who is responsible for the attack. However, if we maintain the thesis that has been offered so far, namely that Hezbollah had nothing to do with the attack and that it was perpetrated by elements linked to the jihad and al-Qaeda, the Government must provide us with a reason as to why we have been subjected to this new atrocity. Iraq and Aznar's pro-American stance can no longer be used as easy explanations.

5.- **The Government must explain why the death of these six soldiers prevents us from strengthening our mission in Afghanistan,** given that this matter simply corresponds to a political decision. To paralyse our mission to train the Afghan security forces and Afghan Army as a result of a fear of rising threats to our troops simply reflects the current Government's indifference regarding the objectives of our mission in this theatre of operations, as well as its fear of being found out by a new atrocity, in the sense that the climate in this country is not as

benign as the Government has led us to believe.

**6.- Attempts to heap responsibility for the deaths on the military chiefs on the ground are nothing short of pathetic.** If the Armed Forces do not have better material at their disposal in the operations they undertake, this is due to the view that Rodríguez Zapatero holds regarding the Army and its missions and his particular aversion to anything that has to do with war or the use of force.

### **Conclusion**

**1.- The Socialist Government has not had any compunction in using our soldiers for the purposes of political convenience.** The deployment of Spanish troops in the Lebanon is based on the same unscrupulous logic. Spain's deployment of troops in this country can be explained by all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with the actual situation on the ground.

**2.- The risk to our troops will tend to increase** as the situation in the Lebanon worsens and the regional situation becomes more problematic. They will not have any procedures available to them in

order to protect themselves.

**3.- The Government has placed our troops in an impossible situation,** which can be summarised as follows: they must grin and bear it as part of a mission of doubtful strategic value or withdraw and lose all credibility.

**4.- The Government should become fully aware of the fact that its model for deploying its forces abroad has become outdated in the new strategic environment in which our troops are required to operate.** To offer our troops as a contingent in a UN force, an organisation that has never enjoyed any success over and above observation tasks in conflictive or hostile environments, is quite frankly suicidal; the typical contingent based on BMR light armoured vehicles, which are virtually unprotected and incorporate no advanced technological equipment, depending as they do on the intensive human input of parachutists, legionnaires and marines, has also ended. To continue with this model means condemning our forces to unnecessary risk.