

Walking the tight wire

Conversations on the May 2008 Lebanese crisis



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Introduction and acknowledgments

By the editors

This dossier is a collection of conversations that took place during the events that shook Lebanon in May 2008. The whole week of most serious unrest that lasted from 7 to 15 May led many to say the country was ‘on the brink of civil war’.

Tired of getting the same copy-and-paste reports from mainstream international media, and encouraged by the many questions we got from friends, family and colleagues who were following the so-called May crisis from abroad, we set to hold the conversations you will find in these pages.

Taken individually, the conversations soon became obsolete as a piece of news, but taken as a whole, they aim at giving the reader a picture of Lebanon, in such a way that the crisis eventually becomes an excuse to understand the wider Lebanese context. We thus hope to contribute, however modestly, to give a richer vision than the often over-simplified approaches found in mainstream media.

The interviewees were approached with the same basic set of questions, which were intended to serve as a guide to spark conversation, not necessarily as something to stick to. Our intention was not to confront any argument or view, but rather to listen to what different actors had to say about a range of topics.

That is why we think of these pages as a series of conversations rather than strictly interviews. That is also why we have tried not to ‘over-edit’ the texts, nor avoid the repetitions or ticks of spoken language.

The conversations are presented in chronological order, according to the date they took place. They are followed by three annexes: a brief timeline, a glossary including some useful references to people, places and events, and some maps of the clashes created by Lebanon Support.

Our deepest thanks go to all those that spared their time and effort to talk to us: Ziad Abdel Samad, Ghassan Ghossn, Diana Moukalled, Samah Idriss, Gaby Jammal, and Leila Mazboudi. Special thanks for *i compagni* Teo, Bilal and Luca.

**A conversation with Ziad Abdel Samad
Executive Director of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)**

14 May 2008

Could you please describe the current situation in Lebanon? What would be, in your opinion, the ‘new era’ that Lebanon has entered according to the last press conference by sayyed Hassan Nasrallah?

What happens in Lebanon now is a crisis with different dimensions: national, regional, and global. Regarding the national level, it is definitely a reflection of the deeper crisis in the political system, which is not able anymore to deal with the growing political struggles and differences. It seems that the formula shaped according to the 1943 National Pact, which was reformed and developed in Taif (Saudi Arabia) in 1989, is not able to manage differences in a peaceful way. Each time we witness demographic changes, Lebanon will face a struggle for the redistribution of power accordingly. This reality recalls the need to adopt a new secular system.

In the political context, we find two very antagonistic projects. On the one hand, we have a project focused on the country’s sovereignty and independence, on building the nation state, and focused on ‘Lebanon first’. On the other, we have a project which is linking the regional conflict and the national programs. Of course, both have their arguments and their legitimacy.

For those who seek the national priority, that is, the creation of a strong nation state, Lebanon already did its job and liberated the occupied territories in 2000. So they argue that it is now the time to focus on the internal context. If we want to play our role in the regional struggle, they think, we need a strong and unified country. The other side considers that it’s impossible to build a strong state while Israel is in the neighbourhood. According to this group, a strong country needs a strong resistance. So one sector goes for the unification of institutions, including the army, while the other legitimises the independence of the resistance, that is, having a state within the state.

The alleged most immediate causes for the opposition taking its last actions have been the threat to dismantle the resistance communications network and the destitution of Mr Shuqayr as head of the airport security. In your opinion, could there be other political or other factors determining the opposition initiative?

The issue of Shuqayr’s destitution and Hizballah’s communications network is perceived by the government as a tendency to prevent the creation of a state within the state. The government says that talking about a unified country means adopting one foreign policy, one army and one security system. But the reality here is that there is a state – with its own foreign agenda – within the central state. We have two Lebanon.

So the government decisions were justified as to be an effort to unify the state. You can’t have a security system in the airport, they say, which is not coordinated with the country’s political leadership. Indeed, the cameras issue were a matter of a weeklong exchange within the security system, and the head of the airport security failed to even inform his direct chief, the commander of the Lebanese army. This means that he’s

acting independently from the political leadership, since he mainly behaves as to be accountable towards Hizballah

In the end, this is not just a matter of cameras, but a question of sovereignty and a unified state. Moreover, the government perceived this problem as a political issue in which the army has its independent power and doesn't obey the political power.

Do you think the events can also be read from a wider regional and/or global perspective? That is, how is the situation in Lebanon affected by the increasing international (and especially US) pressure on Iran? What about the murder of Imad Moghniyeh in Damascus last February, and Syrian latest public statements with regards to Israel?

When it comes to the regional context, you have to take into account many factors. For example, on the one hand you have Hizballah, Iran, Syria, Hamas and the so-called resistance in Iraq. On the other, you have the so-called moderate Arabs in alliance with the United States and the European Union. And every axis, so to call it, has different visions of the struggle.

You also have the Iranian interest in the region, which is legitimate, at least just like the one of the United States. The same goes to Turkey, which has also been historically linked to the region. Indeed, if the battle had not been won by the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, we would have become part of the Persian Empire. The problem with Iran is that it is not showing a model which is relevant for the majority of people in this region. After the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979, most people here were not for the same model of the *mullah* and so on. That's the main reason why they're resisting the Iranian interest in the region. On the other hand, many are not convinced with the models coming from the second axis, particularly with the Wahabi model of Saudi Arabia or the US bias towards Israel, together with its hegemonic agenda for the region.

We must also remember that, in fact, Hizballah has been threatening to use its power or weapons to solve the internal crisis many times for the last two years; they pretended to have 'the right to use weapons to protect their weapons'. So the relevant question is: why now? Here we can point out many regional factors. In Iraq, for example, the Mahdi Army has been devastated and sayyed Muqtada Al-Sadr is really threatened. So the Iranian move in Lebanon could be understood as a response to that situation. 'You get to us in Iraq? We'll fight back in Lebanon'.

Besides that, Syria is showing certain flexibility in its willingness to entering negotiations with Israel. This was obvious when the Turkish prime minister transmitted messages between Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad and the Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. This will lead Syria to start compromising. And the first thing to compromise here is Hizballah. So this could also be a move to interrupt this tendency. Big powers are basically playing chess.

So you would not agree with the idea that these are sectarian Sunni-Shiite clashes, as most of the mainstream Western and Arab media are portraying the crisis? Could you give us another key to interpret the latest events?

As I say, what happens on the ground is just a reflection of what reality is. Of course, the Iranian interests in the region do not want to provoke the Sunnis, but they definitely need to use their allies, and these allies are mainly Shiite. Their strategy is not based on a struggle against the Sunnis, but since their tools are Shiite – in Lebanon as well as in Iraq and in other Gulf countries, with the only exception of Hamas in Palestine –, it's difficult not to make this connection.

In this context, we can also blame the other camp, which is also using this fact as a provocation, and as a means to mobilise Sunnis to fight Shiites. This is extremely dangerous since it is leading to enhance extremist groups, such as jihadists and salafists. I condemn this approach of mobilising Sunnis to face Hizballah, because what one should actually mobilise is the nation, based on a political agenda rather than on sectarian slogans.

So the basis of the conflict is not Sunni-Shiite, but the tools are, and this can potentially create deep fractions and backfire everywhere in the region, even in the Gulf States.

On May 7 there was a call by the Lebanese General Workers Union (CGTL) for a national strike, which was eventually cancelled. Some commentators are now saying that the opposition has used the trade unions for its own political purposes. What's your own opinion?

The strike was not cancelled; it was literally run over by the opposition. It was part of its tactics.

We all struggle for social justice. I think we all can agree with that. But this is usually an aim that can only be reached through constructive negotiations. Trade unions need to negotiate because, like it or not, we are living in a liberal economy where the private sector is a major actor. So the private sector and the trade unions need to negotiate in order to reach a compromise, and the government should moderate the discussions. Before the strike, there were ongoing negotiations and a lot of proposals on the table. If you enter a negotiation with a win-win approach, it will be easier to reach a compromise.

As to this specific strike and the reasons behind it, we are undoubtedly living a global economic crisis which also affects Lebanon. The rise of food and oil prices is not caused by local reasons, so we need a collective responsibility to face and to deal with its results. Besides that, the country is not under normal conditions where economy can progress, and the situation is not favourable for the local private sector either. It is of course favourable for multinationals and big national companies, like banks or the trade sector. These giants don't have problems, because banks overcame the crisis by opening new branches in the entire Arab region, and Lebanon is not their main source of income. But most of the private sector in Lebanon is made up by small and medium enterprises – 95 per cent of companies have less than 10 employees –, and these are facing big problems. Since the opposition started its sit-in in Downtown Beirut, in December 2006, almost 75.000 employments have been lost so far.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not defending the private sector; I'm always on the side of the labour movement. But when there's a crisis, you have to analyse the situation and find a solution that can work for everyone. During this last crisis, the government proposed to raise the minimum salary from 300.000 to 500.000 Lebanese pounds, that is, from around 200 US dollars to around 330 US dollars. This represents an increase of 67 per cent. But the trade unionists demanded nearly one million, and they insisted on getting this demand or nothing. In the beginning they were flexible, but then they started rejecting compromises, and decided to take to the streets. Strike and demonstrate is their right of expression, and an essential labour tool and part of the negotiations, but these decisions also need to be approached with responsibility towards the general context.

The problem of trade unions led by the CGTL is that their priority is not the labour movement and workers rights, but being part of the wider struggle against the government. And they might be right, but it is not wise to put the labour movement as a tool in the hands of political parties. They should keep on negotiating salaries with the government and the private sector to reach a fair compromise.

Usually, when trade unions strike, you have people causing riots amongst the demonstrators. The demonstration on May 7 was supposed to go through a route following quite closely the old demarcation line. So I think that people of Al-Mustaqbal were expecting riots and they were waiting for them with a stick in their hands. (This happened once before in January 2007).

But if you analyse the speech by Nasrallah on the evening before the strike, he declared war on the government, demanding the cancellation of the two decisions. At six o'clock in the morning, the opposition started burning wheels, closing roads and everyone thought it was part of the strike riots. But suddenly Hizballah entered the scene, and people with sticks saw there were weapons. In Ras an-Nabah, in Tariq Jdideh; all of a sudden, Hizballah and its allies from the opposition were everywhere. And people couldn't face them. When trade unions saw what was happening, they decided to postpone the demonstration and to keep on striking, but the opposition operation went on.

Al-Mustaqbal and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) had two options: either open fire and resist, or give up. If they went for the first option, they would eventually lose because Hizballah has a very well trained army. And the others don't have any militia nor big weapons. There was no real balance of power. So why should you fight if you know that you will lose?

A journalist that participated in the rally in solidarity with the media on May 10, in response to Future TV being targeted by the fighters, told me something I really liked. He told me that he saw Beirut as *umm as-sabbeh*, as the mother of the child, the one who will sacrifice her own life to protect her child. Beirut is the mother of the child and didn't want to enter war, because it is a resistance city. Beirut will protect the child because we don't want to destroy what we have been building in the last 15 years.

Militarily speaking, the opposition did not reach its goals except in some areas in Beirut, but not in the whole capital. They wanted to send Jumblatt the message that they could be strong in the Chouf, that they could reach Mukhtara. But the Druze started

calling each other with microphones in every town, and everyone took their own weapons and they moved hundreds. Even the followers of pro-opposition Druze leader Talal Arslan were fighting together with the PSP because, at the end of the day, the Druze are a minority and need to unify.

All the factions in Lebanon are minorities, but each one has a kind of foreign support. Christians are also a minority, but they have their supports in Europe, and in the Vatican. The Druze represent only 6 per cent of the population, and they don't have Europe or Iran or Saudi Arabia to back them. So whenever they feel threatened, they become very aggressive, as we have seen in the Chouf towns of Aley, Shweifat and Barouk. This probably has to do with the fact that Druze have historically felt that the nation state cannot protect them, so auto-protection is vital. I'm not saying that it is right; I'm just explaining how this works.

This recent experience teaches us that even if you have the power, you cannot solve the problem militarily. You can only solve it through peaceful negotiation with a win-win approach. Lebanon is a country where we have to compromise, it's our destiny.

So Hizballah did not win anything, but rather lost its credibility in the eyes of many Lebanese. The army of Hizballah was once respected; now not anymore. And even if they used weapons with a justified reason, many Lebanese now think that those weapons can be used against them.

How would you describe what Hizballah is and represents to a foreign and non-Arab audience?

Before 2000, Hizballah was something, and after that date it became something else. In the first place, let me tell you that the resistance against the Israeli occupation started before Hizballah. Hizballah was the tool to eliminate all the different diverse resistance groups and unify them under one leadership. During the 80s, Hizballah struggled and fought against all the leftist groups, against Amal, and against everybody to unify the resistance under its leadership. During the 90s, it was the only legitimate resistance movement, recognised even by the Taif Agreement (all militias were to be dismantled except Hizballah) and legitimised by international law (the April Understanding of 1996 represents a tangible step towards this legitimisation).

After 2000, Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon, on 25 May 2000, in accordance with UN Resolution 425. At that moment, two issues were raised by Hizballah: detainees in Israeli prisons (two Lebanese resistants were detained in Israel), and Shebaa Farms. A national debate started then about the legitimacy of the resistance, and whether it was worth to continue war against Israel for the Shebaa Farms or to rather make it a matter of diplomatic and political negotiations, especially because according to UN maps the area belongs to Syria and it was occupied by Israel in 1967 from the Syrian army. So you first have to correct the maps in the UN according to an explicit agreement between Syria and Lebanon confirming the Lebanese property of the farms.

That is why since 2000 a big part of the Lebanese population started contesting the weapons of Hizballah. 'Ok', many people started thinking, 'we fought, got the resolution, and now there's no legitimacy anymore for Hizballah's weapons'. After 2005, the government compromised the weapons, and Hizballah participated in the

government. But it was calling for the adoption of a national strategy for defence, including also Hizballah. The resistance refused this proposal, and the negotiation was later interrupted in July 2006 when Hizballah decided to kidnap the two Israeli soldiers and have hell on Lebanon. Those negotiations were never resumed again.

There are two factors to be taken into account in the current circumstances. First of all, efforts trying to control Hizballah's weapons were not only affecting the national level, because the resistance was also a tool used by Syria and Iran. Syria now also wants to negotiate peace with Israel, but it won't give up its tool before reaching a solution. And Iran can also use it as a negotiating tool for its nuclear weapons. So Hizballah is part of a regional play, not only a force for the liberation of Lebanese territories. The second very important matter here is the international court on the Rafik Hariri killing. A lot of pressure was and is being exerted on the government not to go further.

Before 2000, Hizballah was a legitimate organisation. After that, it became part of a regional struggle against Israel, something that Lebanon could not handle. I'm not saying that I'm a fan of the government or that I wish to destroy the resistance, but it is a pity to see how the resistance is destroying itself.

Let's now try to focus more specifically on the resistance movement within the opposition. The Western left tends to identify the struggle against the United States and its imperial project with a wider and deeper struggle against neo-liberalism as a political and economic model. Do you think the Lebanese resistance would be part of that movement or struggle?

In this sense, Hizballah is not much different from the government. The confrontation with the government is about the sovereignty issue, not about the economic model to follow in the country. Take the whole set of mind that is reflected in the clearly neo-liberal Paris III agenda. It's all unjust and unfair policies: privatisation to serve the debts, raising taxes to solve the budgetary deficit, creating a safety net instead of adopting a national strategy for social development and so on, but the problem is that the opposition does not disagree with all of that; they're not against the economic policies of the government nor privatisation in principle.

What about the guys fighting on the streets? What's the way to mobilise people? Do you think that the economic crisis plays a role here?

It's all populism. If you analyze the discourse of Nasrallah, Hariri and the rest, it's all populism. They're playing on feelings using many tools –religion, nationalism and whatever. And it's very easy to mobilise the youth by touching their feelings. You can see many of the fighters are from 16 to their early twenties. Educating people on citizenship is more difficult than mobilising them around populist slogans. Some people are paid, of course. But Hizballah can mobilise people because they're convinced about the cause they're fighting. People in Southern Lebanon, most of them Shiite, feel, on one hand, that Hizballah has been protecting them from Israel – who was repeatedly attacking their villages and towns since 1969 –, and on the other, they are not socially and economically marginalised anymore as they used to be historically, so that's why they will support it.

Shiites marginalisation explains the reasons why the left groups, including the Communist Party, were so strong in the south and amongst Shiites. So Hizballah does not only protect them from Israel, but has also succeeded in putting them in the political map. Now they're also more decisive on the political level.

On the other hand, there are people convinced that, after 2000, the resistance is not legitimate anymore. They see the strike in the Downtown Beirut, and they think they have to build their economy and the country in general, and that it's time to stop fighting for causes that are not a priority for the Lebanese. The Lebanese nation is divided in this regard. It is not only a matter of money, but also of beliefs and feelings. We have to reach a compromise and solve our problems peacefully.

What about the future?

I'm very pessimistic because I don't feel that the solution is ready yet. The compromise is not here. While I'm talking, the government is meeting, and they can decide to withdraw their decisions. In exchange, the opposition will make another move, and then the delegation of the Arab League – which is arriving today at noon – will start the negotiation to find a solution to elect a new president and agree on a new electoral law.

I personally think that even if the government takes a step back and the militia withdraws from the streets, the solution is not ready so far. The opposition wants the right to veto and the majority won't allow it. So we're in a deadlock. And all that happened this week will not help in reaching any solution. If there's no president, we won't go out of the crisis.

The political problem is not solved yet. We just solved the results of the latest riots and the military moves of Hizballah. But the main problem remains. Nothing will be solved unless something happens at the regional level, such as some serious moves between Syria and Israel, or between Iran and the United States. Something should happen to defreeze that situation.

In these circumstances, what can civil society do?

In the current situation, media play a decisive role. I think that citizens should now lobby through media, so that they do not violate professional standards or principles and provoke further confrontation.

Besides that, we should all focus on the political and national reforms. We need to reconstitute our constitutional and administrative institutions and strengthen our state. Otherwise, how can I advance in my struggle? If there's no parliament, how can I struggle for a new electoral law? If there's no judiciary, how can I struggle for transparency and the respect of human rights? So our priority should be building institutions to lobby within them. If we don't have a state, we'll get a totalitarian regime or a dictatorship, the same like the sad reality in the surrounding countries.

Civil society in Lebanon is nowadays lobbying through politicians to find an agreement and to come out from the deadlock. Civil society is now very active and plays a very important role in monitoring and advocating for civil peace and for the rejection of all kind of violence; whether in the political discourse, the media and in the streets. They

should be ready to stop escalation of violence and to prevent civil war. Civil society organisations should highlight the need to focus on civic education, national reconciliation and internal peace. They have to enhance citizenship.

The civil campaign for electoral reform is lobbying for the adoption of a new fair and just electoral law based on principles such as establishing an independent electoral commission, setting rules for media and electoral expenses, or adopting the proportional system.

Ziad Abdel Samad is the executive director of the Arab NGO Network for Development since 1999. He was recently elected as general secretary of the Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Elections. He was part of the Lebanese Negotiating Committee for the accession in the World Trade Organisation. He is a member of the Board of Directors of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, a member of the coordination committee of the Social Watch. He is also member of the CSO advisory committee to the UNDP administrator and a member of the board of directors of the UN Democracy Fund.

The Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), established in 1997, brings together 30 NGOs and nine national networks from 12 Arab countries active in the fields of social development, human rights, gender, and the environment.

<www.annd.org>

**A conversation with Ghassan Ghosn
President of the Lebanese General Workers Union (CGTL)**

16 May 2008

On May 7 there was a call by the Lebanese General Workers Union (CGTL) for a national strike, which was eventually cancelled that same day in the morning, after the opposition supporters started taking to the streets. Some commentators are now saying that the opposition has used the trade unions for its own political purposes. Could you comment on that?

There are two important things to make clear right away. The first one is that we started negotiating with the government about the minimum wage and an increase in salaries, and about the high prices in the cost of living – especially in the context of ever rising petrol and grain prices – a long time ago. The second one is that there is no control whatsoever in the country. The prime minister, the minister of Economy and all the rest share a liberal point of view and believe in the *laissez faire laissez passer* dogma. This means that they let all prices be determined by competition in the market. In practice, this means that main consumer needs, from flour to medicines, depend on a handful of companies that are always growing stronger and monopolising the market through trusts. The difference in the price of all brands of milk, for example, is less than 5 per cent.

We've had 12 years of frozen salaries, since 1996, and social benefits are going backwards. In these circumstances, which go beyond the political situation that causes tensions within the country, the CGTL must act and respond to people's needs. So we called on the government for a discussion on three main points: minimum salary increase, prices control and some other measures related to social and economic dimensions.

We held several meetings with the government, the minister of Labour, and the minister of Economy and Finance. The employers' organisation also took part in these negotiations. But we didn't reach an understanding concerning the high cost of living and the minimum wage increase, which was set at 300.000 Lebanese pounds (around 200 US dollars). We demanded the minimum salary to be raised to one million Lebanese pounds.

This demand is based on a study made by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and CGTL experts. According to the data provided by the study, the cost of living has gradually been increasing up to 60 per cent in the period 1996-2007. According to another study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the minimum wage for a family should not be less than a million Lebanese pounds.

After the first round of negotiations, the government only offered to raise the guaranteed minimum interprofessional wage up to 500.000 pounds without raising the salaries. That's when our voice grew higher, and we called for a general strike on 7 May.

We started preparing the strike throughout all sectors, private companies, and public services institutions with the help of all the CGTL members, which comprise 43 trade

unions from all over the country. We organised conferences and meetings to prepare for the strike and for a march in Beirut.

So why did the government announce those two stupid decrees on the night before the strike? By declaring their intention to destitute Mr Shuqayr as head of the airport security and to dismantle Hizballah's communication network, they just put oil on the fire, and made the country split apart, divided between the opposition and the government.

There is no doubt at all that ours was a legitimate strike. Everyone in the country, including majority member Walid Jumblatt, agreed on the fairness of our demands.

But of course, after the government took those two decisions, everyone followed the CGTL call for the strike. It's not true that the opposition asked the CGTL to organise the strike. It was the two government decrees that encouraged the opposition to follow us. The government could have waited for one or two days. Why on that very same day? Why do you put the country on a general strike and then on fire?

If the government hadn't taken these two decisions, maybe the opposition would not have responded to our call. Let's not forget that the whole story began on 8 May, when Nasrallah called for civil disobedience. He said it very clearly. He was not waiting for the CGTL to make his move. The government took an action and the opposition answered as it deemed necessary.

Let's be frank. Nasrallah and the opposition can really make it without us. If Nasrallah called for a strike, he could mobilise a million people. If the CGTL calls for a strike, we might mobilise some thousands.

So what happened to your demands? Where are they at the moment?

We must take matters according to their priority. We were close to civil war these days. But the CGTL doesn't have weapons; we only engage in peaceful activities and marches. This means that when the conflict between the government and the opposition became armed, we had no role to play in it. If there's fire, you cannot fight because the bullets' voice is higher than your demands.

Now that the Arab League has come into play and is trying to find a political solution to the conflict, the CGTL is getting ready and waiting for a new government and a new political view. Because all our governments since 1996 have adopted policies according to the neo-liberal dictates of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

This means that we have been in conflict not only with the current but also with previous governments, especially concerning their backward steps on social issues. However, we are now hoping that the Doha meeting is going to bring a political understanding between the two conflicting parties. If everything goes right – and we cross our fingers –, our field of action will be more flexible and more fruitful, both for negotiations and to push these rights to be accomplished.

So what specific steps are you planning to take in the near future as a trade union?

Our political leaders are now in Doha and they will probably spend there some days. If there's a new government, as soon as they declare it, our demands will be ready to be on the political discussions, especially regarding the minimum wage and a different perspective on the economic model. Otherwise, we are not going to start crying. We'll continue our struggle for the rights of workers.

What about the opposition? Do you think they could potentially offer a more progressive paradigm?

The opposition agenda is not anti-neoliberal, but it's definitely better than the one this government is offering, which is extremely neo-liberal. There's a study by the UNDP under the title *Poverty, Growth and Inequality in Lebanon*. After it was published, the prime minister said that we should keep it in English and not distribute it too widely.

According to this study, the situation in Lebanon is appalling. Around 50 per cent of our youth is working abroad, and 28 per cent of the Lebanese population is living under the line of poverty. The number of people looking for food in the garbage is rising to 8 per cent. The bottom low-income 20 per cent of the population consumes only 7 per cent of all consumption in the country, while the richest 20 per cent consumes 43 per cent.

This is all the result of a decline in political and economic policies fostered by this group that has been in power for a long time. While the Syrians were here, there was an understanding between the late prime minister Rafik Hariri and his group to keep the economy under their influence, and leave foreign affairs and political issues to the Syrians and other groups. So Hariri was in charge of arranging the portfolio on all economic issues, while the others were in charge of the rest, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict and other regional crisis.

Meanwhile, the economy in Lebanon has been hugely neglected, especially regarding productive sectors. In most Arabic countries, you still find at least some agriculture, something completely ignored in our country. The industrial sector, especially for small and mini enterprises, should also be more dynamic. The interest so far has only been on the banking and the land trade sectors. So when there is a world crisis and you need to import everything – even what could just grow in your land, like flowers – you have a big problem.

The new government should therefore look into things from a different perspective, and learn the lessons from the past to completely re-arrange the country. In this context, the CGTL will conduct its own struggle.

Lebanon was never in the socialist club, it has always followed a liberal trend, but it historically was more moderate than the current aggressive one. The state is now completely ignoring social affairs. Once I got a visit from World Bank representatives and they told me they agreed with the CGLT point of view, but that our government held another position. Do you understand? The Lebanese government is on the right of the World Bank!

But our objective for the next few weeks is to be there ready for the moment when there's a new government or president, and everything is re-balanced again.

Taking into account the huge debt of the country and the agenda imposed by the Paris III Conference, do you think a new government will have more space for manoeuvre than the current one?

The main issue here is that the country should try to reduce its debt without placing the biggest burden on the middle and poorest classes. The big debts should be re-arranged in such a way that everybody pays its share of it on a different scale. Not everyone can pay what the Hariris or the big banks can pay. That's why we always advocate for fair taxes, especially regarding direct taxes, since indirect taxes affect everyone. I don't understand why rich people don't pay taxes in Lebanon. And those that do, keep two accounting books— one for them and one for the Ministry of Finance. We should definitely have a criminal law to apply in cases of tax evasion fraud, just like in Europe and in the United States.

So now we should concentrate on building a country, especially after the last events we have seen. This has been a step towards civil war, and politicians should open up their eyes to the reality. In this context, reducing social problems should be a priority, since they are one of the biggest threats to civilian peace.

Ghassan Ghosn is a former worker of the TransMediterranean Airlines, and holds a master's degree in Political Science. He's been the president of the Lebanese General Workers Union since 2001.

The Lebanese General Workers Union (CGTL) was founded in 1957 and is currently made up of 43 trade unions representing all Lebanese sectors and regions. According to its own data, around two thirds of all workers in Lebanon are affiliated to the CGTL. The General Confederation is also a member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU), and keeps close links with other trade unions such as the Italian CGIL.

**A conversation with Diana Moukalled
Programme director of Future TV news**

16 May 2008

Could you please explain what is happening in Lebanon? What would be the ‘new era’ that Lebanon has entered according to the words of sayyed Hassan Nasrallah?

First of all, let me give you a brief background to current events. After the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), the Syrian regime was controlling the country, enforcing the power of Hizballah as a resistance movement, but also trying to keep its influence in the region. In 2005, former prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated, and this was followed by a series of killings and bombs against anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon.

So what we saw last week was the climax of a whole process, the explosion of something that has been underway for a long time. On 13 April 1975, the Lebanese civil war started; on 7 May 2008, there was a high risk of entering a new civil war. I hope that the current Doha talks will take us to a solution. These days many people were afraid because they saw how the militias, and not the army, controlled the country.

As for Nasrallah, he is nothing new. We know him very well. Look at the country: there’s no president, the parliament is not working, and in Downtown there’s an open sit-in. This means that the majority could not control Lebanon, and what we are now witnessing is the ‘new era’ of an armed group. First Hizballah only spoke about liberating the country, but now we are seeing how they’re directing their weapons towards the Lebanese.

So what do you think are the reasons driving the opposition’s initiative?

Nasrallah is probably right when he says that the future of Hizballah is in danger, but we have to decide what’s more important, whether the future of the whole country or the future of the militia.

The question of Hizballah’s weapons is a major issue in Lebanon, though what has just happened is also to blame on all political parties, who couldn’t figure out the potential and the danger coming from Hizballah, and let them do what they want. They managed to have their own schools, hospitals, just like real ghettos. In fact, Hizballah’s supporters have traditionally felt neglected by the state, so Hizballah took advantage of that and offered them an alternative.

Hizballah is now trying to defend its weapons, but even though they have a major armed group, it’s clear they couldn’t and cannot win. Because if Hizballah is defending its presence, we as Lebanese must defend ours and our rights. We have 18 sects in this country, and that entails a huge diversity over which they cannot impose their rule.

Would you look at the latest events also from a wider regional and/or global perspective? To what extent is Lebanon affected by developments in Iraq, Syria, Israel or the United States?

Lebanon is of course affected by regional and global developments. That is nothing new. Look at Iraq and Afghanistan, and how the different US policies in the region are affecting Lebanon. In 1969, a major agreement took place in Cairo. Arab countries, led by Abdel Nasser, agreed on a treaty that allowed the Palestinians to start launching attacks from Lebanon. The country was weak at that moment and still is.

We are well aware that Lebanon is a small country where all regional and major powers have a say, so there won't be an isolated solution. Saudi Arabia, France, Iran, Egypt, Syria, and the United States. Every one has a say in Lebanon.

The most relevant factor in this context is that even if the state is weak, society is extremely strong. In 2006 we had a war, in Downtown there is a sit-in, there is no president and no parliament, but the country keeps running. Look at what's happening in Iraq. When the regime failed, everything failed. But the potential and diversity of our society, together with our liberties, enable all of us Lebanese citizens to advance. Unfortunately, the rest of countries in the region cannot face these challenges with the same civil strength as Lebanon.

On May 7 there was a call by the Lebanese General Workers Union for national strike, which was eventually cancelled. Some analysts are now saying that the opposition has used the trade unions as a platform for its own political purposes. Would you agree with that?

The strike was just the face of a whole strategy. The same day that the strike was supposed to take place, the labour union backed off. We know that the union is mainly controlled by the opposition, and especially by Hizballah. It's no coincidence that within three or four hours a labour movement turns out to be a militant movement. This was all planned. The attack on Future TV and Al-Mustaqbal newspaper. They cut the airport, the port, and all main streets in the city. Nasrallah and his party made a plan just as when they fight against the Israelis, but this time it was against the Lebanese people. So yes, the opposition definitely used the labour movement.

Do you think that the economic crisis that has hit the country could help explaining why fighters and/or public support are easily mobilised?

Lebanon doesn't have any oil nor big industries; we're not a wealthy country. Since the 40s, many Lebanese depend on the 10 million or so emigrants sending money from abroad. We also have a free economy and trade that is affected by the global crisis. So while it might be true that we have a severe economic situation due to a series of reasons, our main problem now is political.

Let's now focus on the media coverage these days, which probably concerns you not only as a journalist, but also as a member of a media outlet that has been directly targeted by the opposition fighters. Do you agree with the mainstream media widely shared idea that the crisis is mainly the result of a sectarian Sunni-Shiite clash?

Hizballah is a major Shiite party. Beirut is a cosmopolitan city, but Hizballah invaded what some define as Sunni strongholds. Sunni-Shiite division is actually something historical, and the sectarian feeling runs deep. We should bear in mind that even if

Lebanon has a major Shiite population, the Shiite represent a minority in the region and have always felt that their rights were underrepresented. But they're not an exception. The problem is that we don't have democratic systems in the area, and this means that all minorities (be it Berbers, Christians, Copts or Kurds) don't have the civil rights, the presence and the representation they would deserve in a democratic society.

Let's go back to the assassination of Rafik Hariri. He was a Sunni leader, and his killing was felt like an earthquake amongst the Sunni community in Lebanon, especially because he was killed when he was opposing Syria and the Sunni population was convinced that Damascus was behind it. After that, things started to escalate. For example, Hizballah started a sit-in in Downtown and blocked it for more than a year and a half. And then, on a regional level, you have the Saudis overtly facing Iran. This clearly shows how regional divisions and policies are also affecting what happens in Lebanon.

It's true that the opposition has the presence of Maronite leader Aoun, but you can't escape the fact that the main issue here is Sunni-Shiite divisions. And this is a real threat since the population is very mixed. If you go to the streets of Beirut, you'll see that people are afraid. We are talking about neighbours in the same building, in the same street, living together, and getting married amongst them. The Sunni-Shiite question is very serious, and the political situation might enhance it. Unfortunately, the hatred is here, and it's a major responsibility to contain it and try to avoid a new war amongst the Lebanese.

Of course, the latest events have their roots. When I say that Hizballah did this and that, I don't mean they're the only ones to blame. The March 14 coalition also plays sometimes on sectarian feelings. Everyone makes mistakes, but the main ones in the last few years have come from Hizballah.

So how do you currently view Hizballah? How would you explain what it is to a foreign and non-Arab audience?

Hizballah should have been disarmed a long time ago. They're a militant group that we can't afford, because we cannot fight other countries' wars. We don't want to fight. I personally don't believe in weapons and military resistance, but in civil resistance and civil rights.

We are all humans and we shouldn't make differences between human beings. Hizballah is committing a major mistake with this new turn. That doesn't mean that I like the Israelis. The way that Israel bombed and invaded Lebanon during the 70s and 80s, and how they treated the Lebanese and the Palestinians is unacceptable and not human at all. The Israeli behaviour, in fact, enhanced the strength of Hizballah.

What about Hizballah's social and economic project? Most of the left in the West identifies the struggle against the United States and its closest allies, such as Israel, with a struggle against neo-liberalism. In your view, would Hizballah be part of this international wider struggle?

I frankly think that this is quite a naïve approach. Leftist groups from all over the world should come and see what happens here. We're talking about religious and undemocratic societies that don't accept the role of women.

The fact is that we have many problems in Lebanon, and here we have a group that disguises them by fighting the Americans. It's not that I like US policies, but I don't like either the fact that because of them we are ignoring the real issues in our societies. For example, 40 per cent of Arabs are illiterate. Is this acceptable? Or take the Gaza Strip, where hard living conditions have led to an increase in the rate of so-called honour crimes. People are extremely frustrated, and in those situations the main victims are always women. But nobody cares because, 'hey, we're fighting the Israelis'.

As for the last crisis, burning the facilities of a newspaper and a TV station is something unprecedented in Lebanon. What is going to happen to freedom of speech and information? I'm actually preparing a program for tomorrow on those topics and I'm calling journalists and writers to participate, but some of them won't give any statements because they're being ordered not to. That's the kind of society we're talking about.

So what kind of social and economic model is the resistance proposing?

Hizballah has not a proposal for the whole country, even if it is – or rather was until they deserted it – represented in parliament and the government. They have their own agenda. They are rebuilding the southern suburbs of Beirut with Iranian money. Hizballah's funds are actually another major issue, since nobody knows how much they have. This is unacceptable. You can't have a state within the state that is bigger than the real one.

So what's the role the media should play in this context?

The Lebanese media are always accused of representing sects and political parties, and of launching propaganda war against each other. But there's something else. These media are a unique and vivid reflection of what is happening in the country. If you read all the newspapers published here, you'll find everyone and everything portrayed in them, including an important presence of women rights and civil rights.

This is something you cannot say about many other Arab countries, where you even have cases of journalists and writers being assassinated. That is something that hasn't happened in Lebanon since the 50s, with the likely exception of the mid-80s, when Hizballah and Amal started kidnapping foreigners in Beirut under the name of Islamic Jihad, and there was a wave of killings of Communist writers and journalists.

When people talk about Lebanon, they only talk about beautiful women and about the fact that you can sky in the morning and swim in the afternoon. But the real extraordinary thing, the one that really captivates everyone, is its extremely rich cultural and metropolitan life. You can't see this in any other Arab country.

Now we have just witnessed the closure of a media station by the force of weapons. So my most immediate concern is my freedom of expression. If we lose it, we'll lose the meaning Lebanon.

How would you describe the foreign media coverage of the events?

Foreign media have played an important role in this crisis. The other day, when the army advised us to leave the station because the fighters were nearly there, I started calling my colleagues from Al-Arabiya, the BBC, and so on. And they were all very supportive. And then LBC TV station offered us their studios so that we could continue broadcasting. Hizballah was trying to show that they were liberating Beirut from other militants, but they couldn't fool anyone. The bombing of our newspaper and the fire on our old building and archives was a great damage, but we got a big help from other international media.

What has then been the result of it all? Because, on the one hand, some say that Hizballah's image is deteriorating, but on the other, some other claim that their use of force led to the government stepping back. So who lost and who won?

The situation is critical, but much will depend on regional developments. You can't say who won or who lost. Hizballah is evidently very powerful in terms of weapons. But the first good thing that happened is that the image of this fantasy called Hizballah as freedom fighters and a noble resistance is over. Hizballah is a militia as any other. We saw militants blocking roads, and shooting against people.

At the same time, what will happen in Doha? What can Hizballah win or lose? I am afraid that even if the question of Hizballah's weapons is discussed, we won't find a solution. But at least now they will think a thousand times before using their weapons again, especially in Beirut. The image of Hizballah has been smashed.

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Pro-government and pro Al-Mustaqbal movement Future TV was founded in 1993 by late former prime minister of Lebanon Rafik Hariri.

<www.futuretvnetwork.com>

A conversation with Samah Idriss

Editor-in-chief of the cultural magazine Al-Adab, literary critic and lexicographer

19 May 2008

Can you please describe the current situation in Lebanon? The alleged most immediate causes for the opposition taking its last actions have been the threat on the resistance communications network and the destitution of Mr Shuqayr. In your opinion, could there be other political or other factors determining the opposition initiative?

The most immediate reason for the last crisis is indeed linked to the two unwise decisions adopted by the Siniora government: to deligitimize Hizbullah's communication network; and to destitute Mr Shuqayr, a close ally to Hizbullah who would be able to report to the latter on any 'suspicious' movement at the airport.

The telecommunications system is not just one part of Hizbullah's weapons; it is probably *the* most important of these all. Indeed, the Israeli Vinograd report traces Hizbullah's steadfastness in 2006 to that system, thanks to which military communications between the party's cadres and leadership cannot be intercepted or decoded. The government's decision was, therefore, rightly deemed by Nasrallah as an immediate attack against Hizbullah's weapons.

One could argue (as I do), in view of the ensuing internal conflict, that Hizbullah's recent use of light and mid-range weapons in Beirut and the mountain area to defend a much more important weapon (the telecommunication grid) was not the smartest or the least harmful tactics. Nevertheless, one should never dismiss the severity of those two decisions taken by the government, as they seem to go in line with many attempts in the past years to disarm the resistance.

Do you think the last events can also be read from a wider regional and/or global perspective? That is, how is the situation in Lebanon affected by increasing international – and especially US and Israeli – pressure on Iran?

The recent events are indeed part of a wider conflict between the American-West European-Israeli axis on the one hand, and the Syrian-Iranian axis on the other. However, local aspirations and resistances in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon should not be dismissed; any attempt at reducing the conflicts in these countries to a global or even regional dispute avoids the root of the problem, which is foreign occupation (Israeli in Lebanon and Palestine, and American in Iraq). Regional aid, whether from Syria or Iran, or both, helps those resistances achieve their goals (as witnessed by the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000), albeit at the expense of some measure of independence. Only a popular, intelligent, and devoted local leadership would be able to balance the positive and negative aspects of any regional intervention. But that is a different subject altogether.

The United States has been trying hard to disarm Hizbullah for at least four years. They first tried to do that through UN Resolution 1559 (2004), but the Lebanese opposition at the time – now in the government – was too weak to enforce that resolution politically

and through legislation. Later, Israel and the United States decided to impose it militarily through the July 2006 war, but they failed too. When these attempts failed, they tried to push pro-government forces in Lebanon to de-legitimise Hizballah's heavy weapons by, first, de-legitimising the telecommunication network. Once this is done, pro-government forces would then proceed to de-legitimise the other weapons, such as rockets. This is, in my view, the context in which we ought to understand the two decisions taken by the government.

On May 7 there was a call by the CGTL for a national strike, which was eventually cancelled. Some commentators are now saying that the opposition has used the trade unions for its own political purposes. Could you comment on that?

There is an acute economic crisis in Lebanon. The CGTL asked for an increase in minimum wages from 450,000 (300USD) to 900,000 Lebanese pounds, but the government only offered 500,000 Lebanese pounds —a ridiculous increase indeed. Having said that, one ought to admit that the opposition did exploit the trade unions' economic demands and the CGTL itself to the detriment of the workers' movement as a whole. What the opposition did recently in my opinion was an act of highjacking, in line with its old-time lack of interest in any socio-economic program. With the gradual weakening of the Lebanese left (not part of the current opposition), and the containment of CGTL by some sectarian movements within the opposition, workers demands, which should be the cornerstone of any substantial change in Lebanon, were marginalized.

Most of the mainstream Western media is presenting the latest events as a sectarian clash between Muslim Sunnis and Muslim Shiites. Could you give us another key to interpret the last crisis?

The mainstream media, not only in the West but also in the Arab world, have indeed focused on the sectarian aspect of the recent events in Lebanon. Closely associated with the ruling classes, the official Arab media needed to de-legitimise Hizballah, which commands high popularity within the Arab masses, by portraying it as a Shiite existential threat to the Sunnis; such an attempt, however, seems to have failed.

It is true that Hizballah is a sectarian party; its agenda and constituency are both religious and sectarian by and large. Nevertheless, there is more to Hizballah than mere sectarianism. It is also a resistance movement, that is smart, well-trained, and dedicated. Contrary to all the other resistance movements in the Arab world, Hizballah was able to achieve concrete victories: driving the Israeli Army out of Lebanon in May 2000, liberating thousands of Arab prisoners, and resisting a devastating Israeli invasion in 2006. Hizballah's weakest point is its sectarian aspect; and this is what all its opponents, both in Lebanon and abroad, try to exploit.

How would you describe what Hizballah is and represents to a foreign and non-Arab audience?

The Western mainstream media outlets try to portray Hizballah as a fundamentalist terrorist group. As with any other movement that is *not* allied with the Western powers, those outlets have created of Hizballah a monster that threatens 'Western values' (democracy, equality, peace). They intentionally erase all differences between Hizballah and Al-Qaida in order to justify Western intervention and continuous aid to Israel and

Arab allies. Very little is mentioned in these outlets about the popularity of Hizballah and Hamas, about the social services they offer, and about the Israeli history of aggression that brought them into existence in the first place. Meanwhile, those outlets keep silent about fundamentalist regimes like the Saudi autocracy, which are socially no less reactionary than Hizballah or Hamas, but are politically supportive of US plans in the region.

So what do you think could be the role played by civil society in the current context?

The challenge to those of us who are neither sectarian nor neo-liberal is to help transform the resistance movements into national liberation movements. To do that, one should emphasize the other aspects of national liberation that do not necessarily exist in the current resistance movements, such as the values of citizenship and secularism. Furthermore, the notion of resistance itself needs to be widened to incorporate other tools of national liberation, such as boycott, divestment, and the call for a wider representation of youth and women

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A conversation with Gaby Jammal
Free-lance writer, political analyst and film maker

21 May 2008

Can you please describe the current situation in Lebanon?

Lebanon has never lived in one era since 1840. Looking at the country's history and structure of the last 150 years, Lebanon has had fights or wars every 15 or 20 years. So now we are in a new era which began with the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005. Some, like the 14 March coalition, say this has launched a new era for independence; others ask themselves 'independence from what?'. Some sectors want to prioritise the country's relationship with Western powers, whereas some others want to fight Israel and liberate the rest of the Lebanese territory.

In my opinion, the opposition 8 March coalition, headed by Hizballah, has its own and specific projects for Lebanon. After the Israeli and Syrian withdrawals from the country, in 2000 and 2005, respectively, Hizballah wants to hold on to control Lebanon, not directly, but coordinating with alliances on the other sides (Druze, Sunni), and control the new attitudes emerging in Lebanon. This is mainly due to the fact that they believe the resistance has lost protection. While the Syrians were here, all Lebanon was behind the project of attacking Israel and in support of the resistance.

So Hizballah believes that since Hariri died there is a political chance to change the country, and to shape a different Lebanon. But its political project clashes with the one sought by the 14 March coalition. In this sense, I don't think the blood of Hariri is enough to build a political program for a party or coalition. That's precisely their main weakness. They only gave people banners and called for the revenge of the Hariri killing. But people need more than that.

Lebanon has never had a state as an institution, it is built around sects. The country was built for the Christians, who took as their weak partner the Sunnis, in 1943. At that time, for every six Christian deputies, there were five Muslims (Shiite and Sunni). After some time, the Sunni felt weak, so they lead a revolution in 1958. Their objective was to modify the agreement with the Christians, and they indeed managed to change the constitution.

With the Taif Agreement of 1989, the distribution of power became favourable to the Sunnis. They took the authority off the president and gave it to the primer minister. This is actually one of the points over which Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, has been protesting.

Today, the different Christian groups represent around 35 per cent of the population; the Shiite also approximately 35 per cent and the Sunni around the same. That's why now Hizballah wants to split power amongst the three of them. They don't declare it openly, but that's the real aim. They also need to protect their back, because fighting Israel is not enough.

Lebanon as we used to know it will never be the same. Misapplying the Taif Agreement has led to what is happening now, since the agreement included putting an end to the sectarian system, which never happened.

The alleged most immediate causes for the opposition taking its last actions have been the threat on the resistance communications network and the destitution of Mr Shuqair. In your opinion, could there be other political or other factors determining the opposition initiative?

In my opinion, the two decisions were a mere excuse to unleash clashes with Hizballah. Hizballah also took them as an excuse to escalate the situation, since the political conflict has been going on, ever higher, for three years. We all knew that the big bang was coming before it exploded, even the government.

But the government did something stupid, since it should never take a decision if it cannot apply it on the ground. Suddenly, with no previous investigation, the government denounced the presence of cameras in the airport area and decided to destitute Shuqair. He's certainly pro-Amal, but he's been in his position for 12 years. So why now? The government was even suggesting putting the airport under the international custody of the Unifil, which is absurd. There are around a thousand balconies near the airport. You can sit and count the planes, and see who comes and who goes from them, so there's no real need to have all those cameras.

As to the second decision, Hizballah thought that the discussion about the legitimacy of the resistance's weapons was postponed. For them, the communications network is an essential part of their arsenal, so the government crossed a red line here.

Of course, Hizballah was ready for any scenario. What happened in Beirut is not the result of an improvised action; Hizballah was studying different options, and the last possible choice became the first. The spirit of the fighters of Hizballah was full, and the spirit of the Sunni militias was empty. As I said, Hariri's blood is not enough to mobilise people. And even if Saad Hariri is now denying them having militias, the Al-Mustaqbal movement has used, amongst other, a private security firm called Secure Plus, which they have been funding and building for a long time, to fight the opposition. I met these 'private fighters' who were surrounded by Hizballah in the Beirut neighbourhood of Ras an-Nabah, and I can tell you that they needed the job and the money, but they didn't want to fight. They were mostly coming from the north.

There are clearly other factors to take into account. Hizballah is very good at reading politics. They were fully aware of the United States influence in the area. All powers are building on Lebanon because every Lebanese sector is seeking protection from an external power, be it France, Iran, or Saudi Arabia.

So for Hizballah the struggle is here, in Gaza, in Iraq and Iran. Three months ago, many of us feared that a war is coming. We already saw what happened in Gaza last February and in the Iraqi town of Basra last April. So May was the turn for Lebanon. Bush was fighting against Iran in Iraq, and Iran responded here. Iran, Syria, and Hizballah know that the Bush administration is packing to leave the White House soon, and that the next president will be something different. So I think that Iran, Syria, and Hizballah didn't

want to take this action, and had rather the idea to keep Lebanon with no president until there was a new one in Washington. So they were basically buying time.

Beirut in the hands of Hizballah is a defeat for the other bloc. Hizballah managed to convince the army to stay away from the clashes, and surrounded every relevant rival leader of the country in their houses. So they found this is as a chance to strike, and hit hard, but Hizballah doesn't want to control the government or the situation; just to modify the attitude of the 14 March coalition and put them in the corner.

On May 7 there was a call by the GLC for a national strike, which was eventually cancelled. Part of the press is saying that the opposition has used the trade unions for its own political purposes. Could you comment on that?

The Lebanese labour unions came to an end in 1973. Then the civil war broke out, and after that everybody in the government was using the trade unions. Especially after the Taif Agreement, and especially by Rafik Hariri. The governments ruled by Hariri divided, destroyed and finally controlled what was left of the labour movement. We had 483 unions in the country, and the most active labour syndicate in the Arab world, but the Amal movement and Hariri created their own trade unions, which divided the whole movement.

During the Hariri years, if you went to strike, they'd try to punish you and prevent it. Who was ruling Lebanon until 2005? It was Hariri. He never gave people a raise in their salaries, which have been frozen since 1996. At present, all trade unions are politicised, and ruled by politicians, so workers don't trust those who are supposed to be their leaders.

There probably is also an economic dimension to what is happening in the country. Prices are on the rise and salaries have been stuck for years. Do you think that the economic situation could be a reason to mobilise (on all sides) fighters and/or public support?

The minimum salary in Lebanon is around 200 dollars, while to rent a house – at last in Beirut – you'll need around 400. According to trade unions, for people to live in dignity, the minimum wage should be around 700 dollars.

After the July war, prices began to go higher. Faced with the workers' demands, the government only said that it couldn't give any money. The policies of Hariri during the civil war brought the country to bankruptcy. Before the war, our international debt was estimated at 2 million dollars; when it ended, it was 2 *billion* dollars. Now it must be at around 45 billion dollar. Taking into account that Lebanon has a GDP of 16 billion dollars, this means that our debt is about 300 per cent higher than our GDP. That's more than a disaster for any country.

When the war ended, it was estimated that it would take 10-15 billion dollars to rebuild the country. The country leaders then fostered political and sectarian problems, so that people would be busy fighting each other. If you spend your whole day working like a dog, then you won't have the time or the energy to think about politics.

So yes, the market plays a crucial role, because people need money. If someone gives you a gun for 300-400 dollars a month, you'll take it. Let's not forget that the civil war started because of principles, but it ended with mercenaries. Those fighting were the ones that needed it most, and fighting was like any other job. Economic needs will thus definitely push people, even if you can always find some people that truly believe in the cause they defend.

Most of the mainstream Western and Arab media is presenting the latest events as a sectarian clash, especially as a confrontation between Sunni and Shiite. Could you give as another key to interpret the latest events?

This is not a Sunni-Shiite conflict. There was indeed a Sunni-Shiite clash happening in Iraq, but then they managed to control it. We have to take into account that all the Arab countries are inter-related and inspire each other. What we have been witnessing is a political rise up by the Shiite, which actually started in 1979 with Khomeini and the Iranian revolution. They're a minority in Arab countries, and minorities always come together.

For example, yesterday there were elections in Kuwait. Shiites represent around one third of the population, but they were only allowed 5 out of 50 seats. In Saudi Arabia, there are 5 million Shiites, and yet they don't have a single seat. Even if they live on the richest area in Saudi Arabia, which is full of petrol, they live in terrible conditions. They're not even allowed to work in the government. In Bahrain, the Shiite population is a majority, around 60 per cent, but again, there is a Sunni government

After the stupid Bush administration wiped out all enemies for Iran, in Afghanistan and Iraq, Teheran is much stronger. 150 thousand soldiers are held hostage of Ahmadinejad in Iraq. There, the new constitution gives more power to the Shiite, and this inspires the Shiite everywhere else, though we have to note that Hizballah is supported also by Sunni groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which is very strong in Egypt and Jordan, and Hamas. Besides this, after the July 2006 war, Nasrallah became a hero for the populations of the whole Arab world.

The United States, of course, is pushing for a Sunni-Shiite fight. Bush wants to convince the Sunni Arab world that the enemy is not Israel anymore, but Iran. Saudi Arabia is also afraid of the Iranian influence, and that's why they're sponsoring the Sunnis in Lebanon. Other countries also fear the Shiites in Lebanon can inspire the rest of the community elsewhere, in Qatar, in Yemen, or in Bahrain.

But the local picture in Lebanon is not sectarian. Both sides, Sunni and Shiite, have supports from other sides, be it Druze, Christian, or other. The whole city of Saida (Sidon), for example, where Rafik Hariri was born and the Hariri family has traditionally exerted its influence, supports now Hizballah. The same happens in other important cities, such as Sur (Tyre) or Trablus (Tripoli), where Hizballah has the support of strong Sunni leaders.

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**A conversation with Leila Mazboudi
Chief editor and political analyst of Al-Manar TV**

22 May 2008

How would you describe the current situation in Lebanon? What would be, in your opinion, the ‘new era’ that Lebanon has entered according to the last press conference held two weeks ago by sayyed Hassan Nasrallah?

The current crisis is related to the resistance’s weapons. Since 2005, and due to US influence, the legitimacy of those weapons and the structure that allows us to keep the resistance against Israel are being questioned.

But we cannot ignore Israel nor forget that, since 1948, we have been the target of continuous aggressions by the Israelis, allied in Lebanon with the Phalanges and the Lebanese Forces.

So at least for half the Lebanese population, the resistance’s defensive weapons are essential, as they proved to be with during the July 2006 invasion. Amongst those weapons, the wire communications network (*silakh al-ishara*) plays a crucial role.

During his latest press conference, Nasrallah declared that the resistance had spent a whole year explaining the government the relevance of keeping such a network. Despite this, the government took the decision to act against it. The government probably thought that Hizballah was not going to react, just as it had not reacted in the many demonstrations organised by the opposition in the last two years.

For example, in January 2008, seven young men belonging to the opposition were killed in the Mar Mikhael area, in Beirut, in still unclear circumstances. Even in that case, Hizballah requested an official investigation; it did not resort to violence. So prime minister, Siniora, and Progressive Socialist Party leader Jumblatt thought that these decisions would entail a first step towards the dismantling of Hizballah. But this time around Hizballah did not remain still. That’s what Nasrallah meant when he referred to the ‘new era’.

In this context, what are your conclusions regarding the negotiations that are now taking place in Doha?

There is an obvious relationship between the latest events and the Doha talks. During the last two years, we have been living through a crisis with several aspects. On the one hand, we had the governmental crisis, which resulted from the inability to create a national unity government. The opposition, made up, amongst other, by Amal, Aoun’s supporters and Hizballah, has been denied everything. Secondly, we also had the presidential empty seat and, finally, the electoral law dispute.

The current talks represent a victory for the opposition, which has long been trying to be involved in the government, for the rest of parties, and for all the Lebanese people. For example, something extremely important is that, right after the last events, the US

ambassador to Lebanon has visited two opposition leaders, Karami and Arslan, after two years with no official meetings.

Do you think the last events can also be read from a wider regional and/or global perspective? That is, how does the situation in Lebanon is affected by increasing international (and especially US) pressure on Iran? What about the murder of Imad Moghniyeh in Damascus, and Syrian latest public statements with regards to Israel?

There is no doubt that there have been and still are forces of regional influence: Syria, Saudi Arabia, France, the United States, Iran. But in this sense, I'd like to highlight that these last days have shown that the United States cannot interfere in Lebanese matters.

For the last two years, the whole region has been put under enormous pressure. Now the Americans think that the situation in Iraq has improved. It's quite likely that ahead of the presidential elections, Bush wants to present this fact as a success story to boost McCain's campaign. Bush, beyond needing to present an improved situation in the whole Middle East, cannot embark on a new adventure without certainties. Nevertheless, and despite the difficult situation they face in the area, Americans don't rule out an attack against Iran, a possibility they have been talking about for three years now.

Today there has been an official announcement about new negotiations between Syria and Israel. What do you think about it?

We don't take those negotiations seriously. Two thirds of the Israeli population oppose giving back the Golan Heights, so it's not easy at all for prime minister Olmert to take such an unpopular step. Obviously, there is an alliance between Syria and Iran that Israel doesn't like and wishes to break. But we don't think that Tel Aviv has any intention of giving back that piece of land nor the Shebaa Farms. They could have done it in 2000, when the Israeli army withdrew from southern Lebanon, but they didn't. On the other hand, Syria has never been closed to negotiations as long as they are given back the Golan Heights.

This is a proposal coming from Israel, and Syria's position is in accordance with UN resolutions. During the last talks between the two countries, Lake Tiberias was on the table, but the Israelis refused to give back those waters, since they are fully aware of their relevance. That is exactly why Israel has occupied the areas that are richest in water in the West Bank.

All steps taken by Israel are part of a long process: creating a state against all populations in the region, seizing their wealth, denying them their history and territories, and denying them even their citizenship. It is an extermination just like the one against the indigenous populations in America.

The people that has most suffered with the Palestinians is the Lebanese. After 18 years of occupation and crimes, we have not asked for any compensation. Nobody has hold Israel accountable for what it has destroyed and the people it has killed. In this conflict, we have the feeling that Israel has a free hand and can get away with anything. In spite of this, the Jewish are still demanding compensations from the Germans.

There probably is also an economic dimension to what is happening in the country. Prices are on the rise and salaries have been stuck for years. Do you think that the economic situation could be a reason to mobilise fighters and/or public support?

A political impasse always takes its toll on the economic and security situation. With the Doha agreement, the economic wheel will start working properly again.

It is obvious that everyone wishes to improve his or her economic and social rights. We are suffering from a wild liberalism. But most of all we are suffering from a crisis in our political identity – especially since Hariri was killed in 2005 and Syria left the country – , which we are trying to rebuild.

So after Doha, all Lebanese want to concentrate on building this political identity, a process which was interrupted for the last two years, when one sector self-assumed the right to represent the whole of the people, excluding the other half. The government refers to ‘we, the Lebanese people’, as if those not supporting it were not part of that same people. In Doha, we have recovered a vision that takes into account every Lebanese.

Most of the mainstream Western and Arab media is presenting the latest events as a sectarian clash, especially as a confrontation between Sunni and Shiite. Could you give as another key to interpret the latest events?

It is just a weapon, not a reality, used by the majority, especially by Al-Mustaqbal, to blackmail the opposition, which is also made up – let’s not forget it – by many Sunni forces. It is obvious that there are community sensitivities, but according to recent polls, the second community most supportive of the resistance is the Sunni, followed by the Maronite. There is a consensus regarding this question, and it is worth reminding to those using such simplistic arguments that the Shebaa Farms, for which the resistance has always fought, is a mainly Sunni territory.

How would you describe what Hizballah is and represents to a foreign and non-Arab audience?

Hizballah is a resistance movement which was born in the 80s as a result of the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon. Israel started entering into Lebanon in 1968, and it slowly advanced until it got to Beirut in 1982. In 1983, Israel withdrew to the south of the country, where it remained for 18 years with the help and collusion of the Southern Lebanon Army, which operated under the command of general Antoine Lahad, who now lives in Israel and runs a falafel stall.

Historically, there have been internal and external forces that have tried to deny us the right to resist, describing it as terrorism. Hizballah is also usually accused of being responsible for the wave of foreigners’ kidnaps in the mid-80s in Lebanon, but these are false accusations. In those years, anarchy prevailed. Hizballah was not yet a centralised body.

Another factor that is characteristic of the movement is its social and charitable dimensions. Before Hizballah was funded, southern Lebanon was a forgotten place,

with practically no services. But as the resistance rose, we also witnessed the rise of the whole Shiite community, the most poor and marginalised socially, politically, and educationally. This rise takes place not only through Hizballah, but also through the Amal movement.

For the last two years, Hizballah has sought, together with Amal and its partners in the opposition, to get a fair share in power, not taking control of it. In this sense, it must be noted that the Lebanese democracy is a conciliatory and community-based democracy. The Taif Agreement in 1989 actually established a representative distribution of power amongst all communities in the country.

But the Siniora government, under US instigation, has not allowed that representation to happen. That's the reason for the political crisis and the opposition camp established in Downtown Beirut.

Let's now focus more specifically on the resistance movement within the opposition. What kind of social and economic model is the resistance proposing, if any?

Besides the resistance, there are social foundations for the families of martyrs, those fallen for the cause. There are schools, hospitals and other institutions such as Jihad al-Binaa, who is responsible for construction and rehabilitations activities, especially in rural areas.

We could say that Hizballah and the Shiite community are inextricably linked, but this self-organisation system is not an exclusively Shiite phenomenon. Lebanon is not a centralised state; every sect has its own model and every community creates its own institutions.

But do you think the Lebanese resistance would be part of that international movement or struggle against neo-liberalism?

Hizballah clearly fits in that project. There are no official positions regarding this, but we very much identify ourselves with the alter-globalisation movement. As far as economy is concerned, we believe in the role of social security and the state to defend social and economic rights of citizens. We are against the effects of unbridled privatisation. For those in the West, the struggle has a more economic component, whereas for us, it is more political. We are still, since the beginning of the 19th century, under the yoke of foreign policy games by alien powers.

We accept a certain international participation, but without impositions. Foreign powers don't have the right to decide what do the Lebanese want nor to take positions in favour of one side and against the other. Those powers have put in question the concept of nationality, the participatory role of communities and our demands.

For us, imperialism works by exerting influence on certain groups and acting through them. But who is Welch, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, to say what is best for the Lebanese people?

We are usually accused of being puppets in the hands of Iran and Syria to cast doubt on our demands and put an end to our political activities, but these are only false accusations to create fear. What's particularly Iranian or Syrian about our demands? They're just ours. Of course we have the support of Iran and Syria, but alliance does not equal submission.

Finally, is there any other question that you'd like to highlight?

All problems in the region are related to the Palestinian conflict. Israelis have an important influence in Europe, and because of that influence in media, political circles and decision-making centres, they distort our action. They call us terrorists, pro-Syrian, pro-Iranian. We don't have that influence; *lobbies* are not part of our culture. But some alter-globalisation movements should be wary of certain arguments and distance themselves from Israeli propaganda.

The Israeli population is afraid. After 60 years, they know that they are in an environment that doesn't accept them. They cannot live forever in a state of war.

So the best solution for Palestine is one state. Not a puppet state nor a concentration camp, but a secular state, with a democratic regime, based on co-existence and conciliation. It is fundamental for the alter-globalisation movement to adopt this thesis. Otherwise, the conflict in the region will never end.

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Al-Manar TV is a Lebanese television station founded in 1990 and closely linked to the Hizballah movement.

<almanar.com.lb/NewsSite/News.aspx?language=en>

May crisis timeline

The crisis that shook Lebanon in May 2008 was the result of a growing tension that originated to a great extent on 14 February 2005, the day former prime minister Rafik Hariri was killed by a car bomb in Beirut. The assassination triggered a series of mass demonstrations that culminated with the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005, and subsequent elections that same year. In November 2006, six ministers quit the cabinet of prime minister Fuad Siniora. Shortly after, the opposition declared the government to be illegal and launched a tent protest in Downtown Beirut demanding the government resignation. On 23 November 2007, the mandate of president Emile Lahoud expires without the parliament agreeing on a successor to replace him. By May 2008, the Parliament had not met for over 18 months and the country had no president for six months.

May 3: Government leaders accuse Hizballah of having hidden cameras in a container park that overlooks the main road leading to Beirut's international airport.

May 6: The tension between the government and the opposition grows, as the cabinet declares that Hizballah's private communications network is an assault on the country's sovereignty and should be dismantled. The government also declares its intention of dismissing Wafiq Shuqeir, the head of security at Beirut's airport, on allegations of failing to deal with alleged secret cameras.

May 7: The Lebanese General Workers Union (CGTL) had called for a national strike to demand an increase in the minimum wage. What is supposed to be a march of workers through the streets of Beirut quickly turns into an opposition-led protest which effectively paralyses and isolates the capital, as many major roads and highways, including the one leading to the airport, are blocked.

Clashes between pro-government and opposition groups spread around the city, especially in central and mixed Sunni-Shiite neighbourhoods, such as Corniche Al-Mazra' and Mar Elias.

May 8: Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's secretary general, holds a press conference and announces that the government led by Siniora has declared a war against the resistance. "After the decisions taken by the ruling party on that dark night, a completely new era has begun in Lebanon", says Nasrallah. "He who declares war against us and begins a war with us, be he a father or brother, it is our right to face them with defending our rights and arms and resistance and existence".

Nasrallah explains that the telecommunications network is an essential element of the resistance against Israel, and also gives the government the way out of the crisis: to suspend the decisions taken by what the opposition considers an unconstitutional government, and to answer to parliament's spokesman Nabih Berri call for a national dialogue. "The battle today is a battle between the American project and the battle of honour. You have crossed the red lines", added Nasrallah addressing the government, "and we don't have any more red lines to cross".

Minutes after Nasrallah's speech, heavy street battles break out in Beirut, leaving several dead and many wounded. More barricades are set up, closing many roads and major highways. The army does not intervene in the clashes for fear of breaking up along sectarian lines. The fighting lasts throughout the whole night.

May 9: West Beirut wakes up controlled by opposition armed forces, who take strategic positions to immediately hand them over to the army, which remains 'neutral'. The headquarters of pro-government Future TV and its newspaper are ransacked, forcing the station off the air. Al-Mustaqbal leader Saad Hariri's residence is besieged and hit by a rocket propelled grenade. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt is also besieged in his Beirut residence at Clemenceau. Heavy fights start erupting in the north of the country, in the regions of Tripoli and Akkar. Sporadic clashes erupt in Saida, in the Bekaa Valley and in the east-of-Beirut town of Aley, leaving several wounded and dead.

May 10: Unrest and sporadic clashes continue around the country. Fuad Siniora, Lebanon's prime minister, declares that the government will reinstate Beirut airport's head of security, and will handle the issue of the Hizbullah's communication network to the army.

The army says that all measures taken by the government are frozen, and urges all armed militants to withdraw from the streets. Hizbullah and other groups allied to the opposition (such as Amal and the Syrian Social National Party) begin to pull their forces from Beirut, and the army takes over in a neutral security role. However, the opposition announces that the civil disobedience campaign will continue until their demands are fulfilled.

May 11: All areas seized by the opposition in Beirut are under the control of the Lebanese army. The opposition maintains its civil disobedience campaign, and many roads, including the one to the airport, remain closed. Tripoli's neighborhoods of Jabel Mohsen and Bab al-Tebbaneh, as well as the northern city of Al-Minie, register several heavy clashes that will expand to the Chouf area, where the Druze militia of Walid Jumblatt confronts Hizbullah's advancing fighters.

May 14: Lebanese factions reach a deal to revoke the two decisions that sparked the fighting, and an Arab League delegation lands at the Beirut international airport.

May 15: The civil disobedience campaign comes to an end. According to official records, 80 people have been killed and more than 200 wounded during the clashes.

May 16: Representatives from all Lebanese factions meet in Doha, Qatar, for talks sponsored by the Arab League, aiming to find a political solution to the crisis.

May 21: Government and opposition representatives reach an agreement after five days of talks in Qatar. The opposition wins a greater share of seats in the cabinet, giving it an effective veto over any decisions reached by the executive.

May 25: Michel Suleiman, the head of the Lebanese army, is elected new president.

May 28: Suleiman re-appointed Siniora as prime minister at the head of a new unity government.

June: Despite the agreement reached, sporadic clashes and minor incidents continue to erupt between supporters of the opposing factions. Delays in the formation of a national unity government, as established by the Doha accord, raise fears of a further deterioration in the security situation.

11 July: Lebanon announces a 30-member national unity government with the task, amongst other, to adopt a new election law before parliamentary elections take place in May 2009.

Glossary: people, places and events

Amal movement: The Amal movement was founded in 1975 as the militia wing of the Movement of the Deprived, a Shiite political movement founded by Musa Al-Sadr. It currently belongs to the opposition March 8 coalition.

April Understanding: The April Understanding was an informal written agreement between Israel and Hizballah that put an end to Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996.

Berri, Nabih: (born 1938) Nabih Berri is the leader of the Amal movement, and speaker of the Lebanese Parliament.

Al-Mustaqbal movement: The Al-Mustaqbal or Future movement is a mostly Sunni political movement led by Saad Hariri, the son of late ex prime minister Rafik Hariri. It is the largest member of the March 14 coalition, which won a majority of seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections.

Aoun, Michel (general): (born 1935) Michel Aoun is the leader of the Christian party Free Patriotic Movement.

Arslan, Talal: (born 1963) Talal Arslan is the leader of the mostly Druze Lebanese Democratic Party, which currently belongs to the opposition bloc.

Cedar Revolution: The Cedar Revolution was a series of demonstrations held in Lebanon, especially in Beirut, triggered by the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, on 14 February 2005, with the goal, amongst other, of achieving the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory, the establishment of an international commission to investigate the assassination of Hariri, and the organization of free parliamentary elections.

Chouf (or Shuf): The Chouf district is located in Mount Lebanon and, though a religiously diverse region, it is the heartland of the Lebanese Druze community.

Free Patriotic Movement: The Free Patriotic Movement is a Christian political party led by Michel Aoun. It currently belongs to the opposition March 8 coalition.

Geagea, Samir: (born 1952) Samir Geagea is the leader of the right wing Lebanese Forces political party. He is currently one of the leaders of the March 14 coalition.

Gemayel, Amin: (born 1942) Amin Gemayel is the leader of the Kataeb or Phalanges Party, and former president of Lebanon (1982-88).

Golan Heights: The term Golan Heights usually refers to an area (around 1,200 sq km) in southern Lebanon which Israel seized during the 1967 Six-Day War and has occupied since.

Hariri, Rafik: (1944-2005) Rafik Hariri was a businessman who served as prime minister of Lebanon from 1992 to 1998, and from 2000 until his resignation, in October

2004. He was killed on 14 February 2005 by a bomb, and the investigation into his assassination still continues.

Hariri, Saad: (born 1970) Saad Hariri is the second son of Rafik Hariri and the leader of the Al-Mustaqbal movement.

Hizballah: Hizballah is a Shiite political and resistance movement that emerged as a response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It is the largest member of the March 8 coalition.

Jumblatt, Walid: (born 1949) Walid Jumblatt is the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party and a prominent leader of the Druze community in Lebanon. He is currently allied with the March 14 coalition.

Lahad, Antoine: (born 1927) Antoine Lahad was the leader of the South Lebanon Army, a group allied with Tel Aviv, from 1984 until 2000, when Israel withdrew its troops from southern Lebanon.

Lebanese Forces: The Lebanese Forces is a Christian political party and former militia led by Samir Geagea since 1986 and part of the March 14 coalition.

Lebanese Phalanges: The Kataeb or Phalanges Party is a mainly Christian Maronite party lead by Amin Gemayel. It is now part of the March 14 coalition.

Mar Mikhael: The Mar Mikhael area is located in the Beirut mostly Shiite neighbourhood of Chiah, but stands as border with the Christian area of Ain al-Rummeneh, the place of the Palestinian massacre that sparked the civil war.

March 8 coalition: The March 8 coalition is a political alliance made of Hizballah (Hassan Nasrallah), Amal movement (Nabih Berri), Free Patriotic Movement (Michel Aoun), Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and other smaller parties. The alliance, considered to be pro-Syrian, forms the opposition against the government of the March 14 coalition.

March 14 coalition: The March 14 coalition, named after the date of the Cedar Revolution, is a political alliance made of Al-Mustaqbal (Saad Hariri), Progressive Socialist Party (Walid Jumblatt), Lebanese Forces (Samir Geagea), Phalanges or Kataeb (Amin Gemayel), and other smaller parties.

Mukhtara: Mukhtara is a town in the Chouf district that is the home and traditional stronghold of the Druze Jumblatt family.

Nasrallah, Hassan (sayyed): (born 1960) Hassan Nasrallah is the secretary general of the Hizballah party.

National Pact (1943): The National Pact is an unwritten agreement that laid the foundation of Lebanon as a multi-confessional and independent state. This pact includes some key points, such as: the Maronites accept Lebanon as an Arab country and the Muslims do not seek unification with Syria, the president of the Republic must always be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, the speaker of the Parliament a Shiite, and

the Parliament members must be in a ratio of 6:5 in favour of Christians to Muslims. The 1989 Taif Agreement that put an end to the civil war changed the ratio of Parliament to 50:50.

Paris III: The Paris III international donor conference took place in January 2007. Donors pledged over \$7.5 billion to Lebanon, conditioned on the progress of a reform program with a strong privatisation component.

Progressive Socialist Party: The Progressive Socialist Party is a Druze party led by Walid Jumblatt.

Ras an-Nabah: Ras an-Nabah or Ras Al-Nabah is a mixed Sunni and Shiite neighbourhood in Beirut.

Siniora, Fuad: (born 1943) Fuad Siniora is the Lebanese prime minister since July 2005 (until 25 May 2008 and then re-nominated on 28 May 2008 as acting prime minister).

Shebaa Farms: The Shebaa Farms is an area of land in southern Lebanon occupied by Israel, together with the Golan Heights, during the Six Day War in 1967.

Shuqeir, Wafiq (brigadier general): Wafiq Shuqeir is the Beirut airport security chief.

South Lebanon Army: The South Lebanon Army was a Lebanese Christian militia during the civil war, which was later allied with and funded by Tel Aviv during the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon (1982-2000).

Taif Agreement (1989): The Taif Agreement, also known as the National Reconciliation Accord, provided the basis for the end of the Lebanese civil war. It was also conceived to accommodate politically the demographic change to a Muslim majority, assert Lebanese authority in the then Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon, and legitimise the Syrian presence in the country.

Tariq Jdideh: Tariq Jdideh is a mostly Sunni neighbourhood in Beirut.

Unifil: The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon was created by the United Nations, with the adoption of UNSCR 425 and 426, on March 1978, to confirm Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, restore international peace and security, and help the Lebanese Government restore its authority in the area. Its mandate was been extended until the end of August 2008.

UNSCR 425: The United Nations Security Council Resolution 425 was adopted on March 1978 and called on Israel to immediately withdraw its forces from Lebanon.

UNSCR 1559: The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 was adopted on September 2004 and it called upon all foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon and cease intervening in the country's internal politics. It was sponsored by France and the United States.

Maps of the clashes

By courtesy of Lebanon Support, <www.lebanon-support.org>

For a better resolution, <lebsecurity.blogspot.com/>

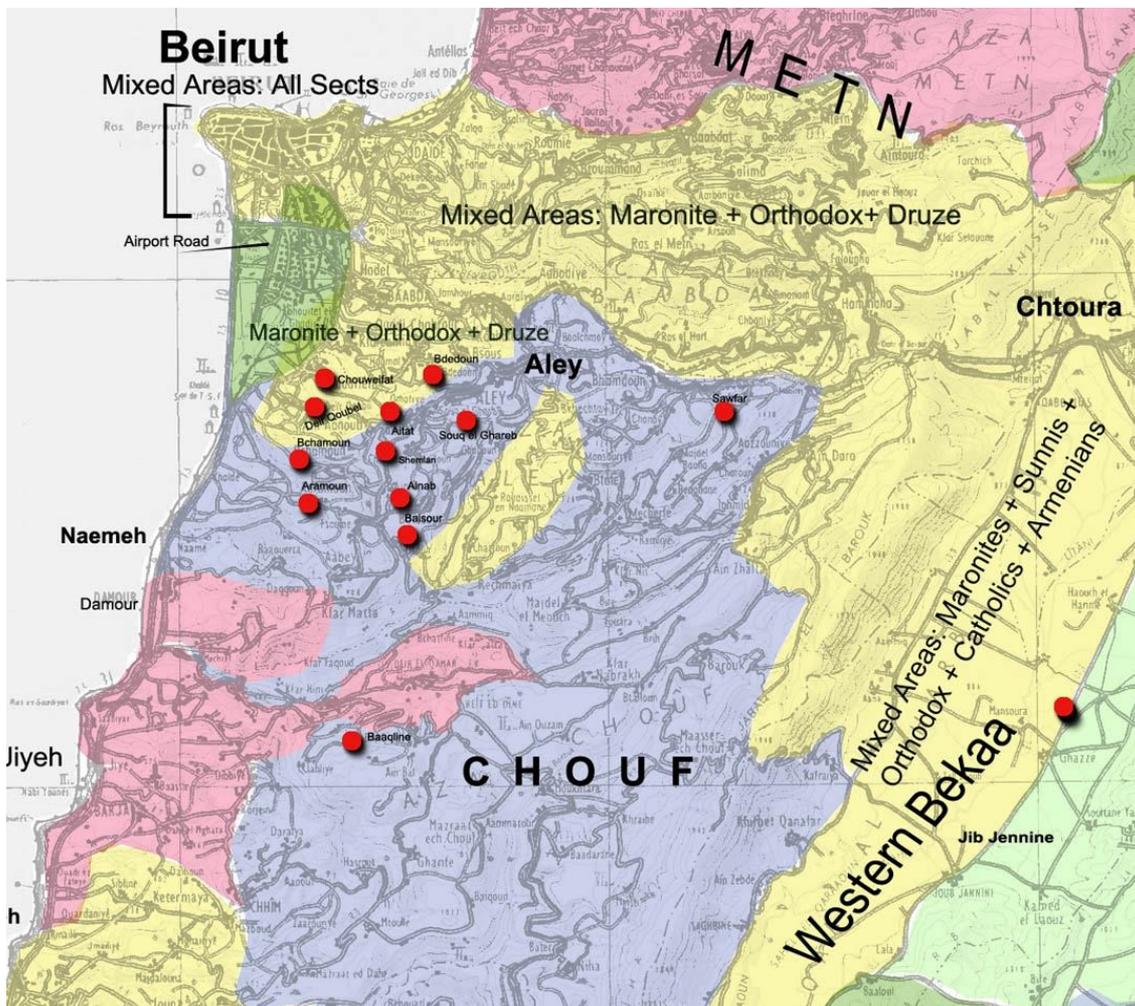
Map 1: Clashes in Beirut on 8 May 2008



Map 2: Clashes in Beirut on 9 May 2008



Map 3: Clashes around the Beirut area on 11 May 2008



Recommended websites

To keep posted on the events in Lebanon, the editors recommend:

Electronic Lebanon, a project of the Electronic Intifada,
<www.electronicintifada.net/lebanon>

Robert Fisk's page on *The Independent*,
<www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk>

Tadamon!,
<www.tadamon.resist.ca/index.php/post/category/lebanon>

Middle East press photographer Ferran Quevedo,
<www.ferranquevedo.com>

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(c) Picture by Ferran Quevedo