

History Will Judge Us All On Our Actions

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Michel Aoun- Wall Street Journal

RABIEH, Lebanon -- While aircraft, sea-craft, and artillery pound our beloved Lebanon, we Lebanese are left, as usual, to watch helplessly and pay a heavy price for a war foisted upon us due to circumstances beyond our control.

Considering that this crisis could have been avoided, and considering that there is -- and has been -- a solution almost begging to be made, one cannot but conclude that all of this death, destruction and human agony will, in retrospect, be adjudged as having been in vain.

No matter how much longer this fight goes on, the truth of the matter is that political negotiations will be the endgame. The solution that will present itself a week, a month or a year from now will be, in essence, the same solution as the one available today, and which, tragically, was available before a single shot was fired or a single child killed. Given this reality, a more concerted effort is required sooner rather than later to stop the death and destruction on both sides of the border.

From the outset, this dispute has been viewed through the differing prisms of differing worldviews. As one who led my people during a time when they defended themselves against aggression, I recognize, personally, that other countries have the right to defend themselves, just as Lebanon does; this is an inalienable right possessed by all countries and peoples.

For some, analysis as to this conflict's sources and resolutions begins and ends with the right to self-defense; for others, Israel's claimed self-defensive actions are perceived as barbaric and offensive acts aimed at destroying a country and liquidating a people. Likewise, some view Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers as fair military game to pressure Israel to return Lebanese prisoners; yet others perceive it as a terrorist act aimed at undermining Israel's sovereignty and security.

These divergences, and the world's failure to adopt different paradigms by which Middle East problems can be fairly analyzed and solved, have produced, and will continue to produce, a vicious cycle of continuing conflict. If the approach remains the same in the current conflict, I anticipate that the result will be the same. This, therefore, is a mandate to change the basis upon which problems are judged and measured from the present dead-end cycle to one which is based on universal, unarguable principles and which has at least a fighting chance to produce a lasting positive result.

My own personal belief is that all human life is equal and priceless -- I look upon Israeli life as the same as Lebanese life. This belief stems not from my Catholic religion, but rather, from basic human values which have their historic home in Lebanon. It is no coincidence that a leading figure in the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was Charles Malek, a Lebanese citizen.

I ask, will other Arab countries and leaders have the courage to acknowledge that Israeli life is equal to Arab life? Will Israel have the courage as well to acknowledge that Lebanese life is equal to Israeli life, and that all life is priceless? I believe that most Israeli and Arab citizens would answer in the affirmative. Can we get their governments and their leaders to do the same?

Acknowledgement of equality between the value of the Lebanese and the Israeli people can be a starting point and a catalyst. The universal, unarguable concept of the equality of peoples and of human life should be the basis upon which we measure and judge events, and should provide the common human prism through which the current conflict, and old seemingly everlasting conflicts, are viewed and resolved. This is the only way to peace, prosperity and security, which is, after all, what all human beings desire, regardless of their origin.

The ideological, political and religious differences between the party that I lead, the Free Patriotic Movement, and Hezbollah, could have been addressed either through confrontation, or through internal dialogue. Recognizing the value of human life, the obvious choice was the second option. We sat down with Hezbollah to discuss our differences.

After many months of extensive negotiations, we came up with an understanding that included 10 key items which laid down a roadmap to resolve 10 of the most contentious points of disagreement. For example, Hezbollah agreed for the first time that Lebanese who collaborated with Israel during Israel's occupation of south Lebanon should return peacefully to Lebanon without fear of retribution. We also agreed to work together to achieve a civil society to replace the present confessional system which distributes power on the basis of religious affiliation. Additionally, Hezbollah, which is accused of being staunchly pro-Syrian, agreed for the first time that the border between Lebanon and Syria should be finally delineated, and that diplomatic relations between the two countries should be established.

We also agreed that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon should be disarmed, that security and political decision-making should be centralized with the Lebanese government, and that all

Lebanese political groups should disengage themselves from regional conflicts and influences.

Last but not least, our extensive negotiations with Hezbollah resulted in an articulation of the three main roadblocks regarding resolution of the Hezbollah arms issue: First, the return of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli prisons. Second, the return of the Shebaa farms, a tiny piece of Lebanese territory still occupied by Israel. And third, the formulation of a comprehensive strategy to provide for Lebanon's defense, centered upon a strong national army and central state decision-making authority in which all political groups are assured a fair opportunity to participate.

This structure, if joined together with international guarantees which forbid the nationalization of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and which protect Lebanon from Israeli incursions, and if tied on the internal level to a new, fair and uniform electoral law, is the best hope for peacefully resolving the Hezbollah weapons issue.

This is the essence of the comprehensive solution we seek. Because it embodies a shift from a policy based on military force to one founded upon human values and reconciling the rights of parties, it would stand the test of time. If rights are respected, and if parties are treated with the deference that they implicitly deserve as human beings, then the long-term result will be not only physical disarmament, but also a disarmament of minds on both sides.

Our party presented this solution internally to all Lebanese political groups, the Lebanese government, and the international community -- including the U.S. administration -- repeatedly, for an entire year before this crisis began.

Rather than help us to resolve the weapons issue peacefully and avoid the current agony our country is now enduring, the international community and Lebanese government flatly ignored the proposed solution. Many of Lebanon's main political players cast us aside as "pro-Syrian" "allies" of Hezbollah. No matter. These are the same individuals who -- only a year before -- branded me a "Zionist agent" and brought treason charges against me when I dared to testify before a Congressional subcommittee that Syria should end its occupation of my country.

You see, after Lebanon was liberated from Syrian occupation, the international community (apparently enamored by the quixotic images of the Cedar Revolution) demanded that the Lebanese elections take place immediately and "on time"; it brushed off our grave concerns about the electoral law in force, which had been carefully crafted by Syria and imposed upon Lebanon in the year 2000 to ensure re-election of Syria's favorite legislators.

This flawed electoral law -- initially imposed upon us by Syria and then reimposed upon us by the international community -- has had disastrous results. It brought to power a Lebanese government with absolute two-thirds majority powers, but which was elected by only one-third of the populace. With a legislative and executive majority on one side, and a popular majority on the other side, the result was absolute gridlock. Currently in Lebanon, there is no confluence of popular will with government will, and therefore the government cannot deal effectively with this or any other problem.

History will judge us all on our actions, and especially on the unnecessary death and destruction that we leave behind. The destruction currently being wrought upon Lebanon is in no way measured or proportional -- ambulances, milk factories, power stations, television crews and stations, U.N. observers and civilian infrastructure have been destroyed.

Let us proceed from the standpoint that all human life is equal, and that if there is a chance to save lives and to achieve the same ultimate result as may be achieved without the senseless killings, then let us by all means take that chance.

Mr. Aoun, the former prime minister of Lebanon and commander of its armed forces, is currently a deputy in the Lebanese parliament.

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