

Is Hezbollah winning?

It is most likely that Bush-Blair's volte-face will further embolden Hezbollah and its supporters across the Muslim world. In view of these dramatic events, al-Qaeda's overture to Hezbollah, Bush-Blair's about face, Secretary Rice's going back to the Middle East in quest of peace and Israel's willingness to accept UN-sponsored peace process -- one cannot help but ask the question: Is Hezbollah winning?

TAJ HASHMI

AYMAN al-Zawahiri, through his latest video broadcast on July 27, appealed to global Muslims to rise up in a jihad against Israel and the West. Considering the entire world "as a battlefield open in front of us [Muslims]," al-Qaeda's second-in-command stressed: "We cannot just watch these shells as they burn our brothers in Gaza and Lebanon and stand by idly, humiliated."

This latest gimmick, full of ominous threats, is an attempt to draw global attention and support from both the Sunni and Shiite camps. This message also reflects al-Qaeda's bankruptcy and desperation. The Egyptian-born doctor-turned-terrorist also appealed the "downtrodden," Muslim and non-Muslim, to join the jihad against the "tyrannical western civilization and its leader, America."

The message is significant. It may signal some fundamental changes in the body politic of the Middle East or al-Zawahiri's Muslim world, from "Spain to Iraq" in the near future. It is significant because for the first time we hear

al-Qaeda appealing not only to Sunni and Shiite Muslims to take up arms together, fight and die for "Islam," but it is also inviting "downtrodden" non-Muslims to join its jihad. However, al-Qaeda's track record, aims and objectives are neither appealing to the main stream Sunni Muslims, nor to Shiites, let alone non-Muslims.

It seems al-Qaeda will have to perform miracles to win over the estranged Shiites. During the last days of al-Zarqawi's genocidal, indiscriminate killing of Iraqi Shiites, al-Zawahiri had advised the former against the indiscriminate killing of fellow Muslims. However, after the killing of al-Zarqawi last June, al-Zawahiri paid tribute to the slain leader in glowing terms. Neither al-Zarqawi stopped indiscriminate killing of Iraqi Shiites nor are his successors shying away from doing so. Al-Qaeda is engaged in an all out war against Shiites in Iraq, and whenever it gets an opportunity, it hits Shiites in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. Considering Shiism a heresy the fanatical al-Qaeda regards the "heretic" Shiites the main stumbling block in its way to an Islamic utopia.

This has prompted an analyst to

surmise: "The Enemy of My Enemy Is Still My Enemy," hinting at the discomfiture of al-Qaeda at the growing popularity of Hezbollah as it could not lend support to the Shiite militants. Israel being the common enemy of both Hezbollah and al-Qaeda failed uniting the two against the common enemy. Al-Qaeda till last week was in a state of panic, worried at losing out to Hezbollah, which had already won over sections of Hamas, a predominantly Sunni Palestinian organization.

Meanwhile something very dramatic, another least expected development, has taken place. This time the surprise came from the battle fields of southern Lebanon. With the failure of the more numerous and well-armed Israeli commandos, backed by heavy artillery, tanks and air cover, to dislodge Hezbollah fighters from their strongholds, Israel seems to be in a state of panic. It may not be panicking apprehending defeat, but its failure in making much headway two weeks after the invasion is turning it nervous as this setback almost amounts to a defeat. While Lebanese media and people on the street have remained defiant, still publicly supporting Hezbollah and con-

demning Israel for the killing of civilians and devastating their country, some leading Western analysts are raising the very unpalatable questions for Israel: "Is Hezbollah winning? Is Israel losing the war in Lebanon?"

It is significant that while Israeli failure to score a quick and decisive victory in Lebanon is becoming headlines in the global media, al-Qaeda is trying to fish in the troubled water. And as there is no last word in war and politics, an al-Qaeda breakthrough in winning over sections of the Lebanese population, Sunni Palestinian refugees for example, does not bode well for Israel and its allies.

It is not unrealistic that as the desperate al-Qaeda is making overtures to its hated enemy, the Shiite Hezbollah, to fight together against Israel, if further pushed against the wall, Hezbollah might extend its hand towards al-Qaeda as well. There is no point debating who needs whom more desperately: al-Qaeda to remain relevant in the eyes of its sympathizers or Hezbollah to sustain itself against its over-powering enemy.

We need to feel the Shiite pulse. Shiites also despise Israel. Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its primarily targeting Shiite/Hezbollah strongholds must have intensified their hatred of Israel. If al-Qaeda decides to disengage itself from the Iraqi civil war to win over Shiite support, it could be catastrophic. Despite its strong reservations about al-Qaeda's methods and philosophy, Hezbollah could be transformed into a dependable

ally of the proponents of global jihad. Confusing Hezbollah and Hamas with al-Qaeda, as President Bush insists on doing, in the long run might bring them all closer to each other.

In sum, neither America should undermine the latest al-Qaeda overtures to Hezbollah nor should it oppose all attempts for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. America should read more into the al-Qaeda overture to Hezbollah. Are the al-Zawahiri video and the vexing question over sections of the Lebanese population, Sunni Palestinian refugees for example, does not bode well for Israel and its allies. It is significant that Israel is no longer insisting on having twenty-odd miles of buffer zone between itself and Lebanon. It seems to be happy with a couple of miles of barrier, which is not enough to save the country from Hezbollah rockets.

Meanwhile two most startling developments towards ceasefire, if not a lasting peace between Israel and its adversaries, have taken place in Washington and London. The first one is the least expected decision to send Secretary Rice to the Middle East. Her going back to the region within three days after her return from the diplomatic fiasco in Rome is very meaningful. So long she had been opposing any move to bring a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, for the sake of a "lasting peace." Let us see how she finally justifies US government's volte-face to bring peace between



The significance of Ayman al-Zawahiri's video broadcast of July 27 should not be underestimated.

a sovereign state and a private militia run by Hezbollah. The second turnaround in London and Washington vis-a-vis the Lebanon crisis, as displayed in the joint Bush-Blair press show in Washington this Friday, was also very significant and comical at the same time. Both the leaders, in the most unconvincing manner, tried their best to save face and favoured a UN-sponsored peace

mission in the Middle East.

These latest developments are quite comforting for peace lovers. However, one is not sure if these overtures -- gambits and gambles -- will lead to a ceasefire under UN supervision. It is most likely that Bush-Blair's volte-face will further embolden Hezbollah and its supporters across the Muslim world. In view of these dramatic events, al-Qaeda's overture to Hezbollah,

Bush-Blair's about face, Secretary Rice's going back to the Middle East in quest of peace and Israel's willingness to accept UN-sponsored peace process -- one cannot help but ask the question: Is Hezbollah winning?

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The US immigration debate: What is at stake?

If the CIRA is enacted, it would bring in the most dramatic change in the US immigration law in eighty years. Some experts believe that it would facilitate immigration of some 100 million people to the US over the next 20 years as compared to some 19 million by the existing law. The Senate plan would also pave the way for granting of amnesty to nearly 85% of current illegal workers.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THIS summer I was in California when thousands of Latin American immigrants paraded the streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco with placards saying "We are all immigrants here except for the Native Americans" and "We are immigrants, not criminals." In a rare show of unprecedented unity, the Latin Americans staged a "hartal" or strike on May 1 when millions stayed away from work and did not send their children to school. Such spontaneous demonstrations were also held in other major US cities. The strike for a day, obviously, did not have any lasting impact on the economy but the service sector suffered immensely. The question is: Why were the Latin Americans demonstrating and what was at stake?

Well, immigration is a hot button issue in the land of immigrants this year, with the mid-term elections in November. Some say that this

issue is only next to the Iraq war in terms of public concern. A new immigration bill is currently under debate in the Congress and the fate of about 12 million "undocumented" (the new name for illegal) workers is at stake. Since eight out of twelve million of undocumented workers are Latin Americans, they took the initiative to register their concern.

They are apprehensive that the current congressional debate might lead to major revision of the existing policy of periodic amnesty which, in turn, could lead to expulsion of millions of "undocumented" workers, or issuance of temporary work permits instead of usual residency cards.

The Asians were conspicuous by their absence in these demonstrations and strikes although they do have important stakes on this issue. Nearly one million undocumented workers are from Asia, and if a new and strict immigration law is enacted then the authorities would be able to vigorously crack-

down on small businesses for hiring undocumented workers. In that case, the illegal workers would be deported to their home countries and this would seriously hamper all Asian restaurants, grocery stores, laundries and many other service sectors.

How does this immigration debate affect Bangladeshis? There is no exact figure of our compatriots in the US. The guess-estimate is that about 250-300 thousand Bangladeshi-origin people live in the US, mostly in the coastal areas. Some of them have acquired US citizenship and are dual citizens. The main Bangladeshi concentrations are in New York, New Jersey, Metropolitan Washington DC, California, Texas, Georgia, Florida and Michigan.

A good number of Bangladeshis living in US are professionals, with legal status. However, vast majorities are in the service sectors and some are owners of small restaurants, travel agencies, grocery

stores, etc. It is estimated that nearly one fifth of these people are "illegal" workers. They had entered the US legally but their visas have expired and they have sought residency on various existing provisions. Any curtailment of these provisions would jeopardize their applications.

The immigration debate has started now because of the growing resentment against illegal workers especially in "border states" with Mexico. The Republican law makers, who have been on the defensive on Iraq war, would like to take the initiative to woo the voters to retain their majority in the Congress. Suddenly every state has become a "border state" and the new buzz word is "border security." The problem is that America needs these workers and they can not be thrown out abruptly without seriously jeopardizing the US agriculture and service sectors. This cheap labor also gives America competitive edge vis-a-vis other industrialized powers.

The three players in the immigration bill, the president, the Senate and the House of Representative are viewing the immigration issue from divergent positions. All House members face elections this November and they do not want to jeopardize

their vote bank. In contrast, only one third of senators will be elected in November this year and naturally, they feel less pressured and would like to work out a more comprehensive program on the issue. President Bush wants to retain the Republican Congressional majority, but he would also like to leave behind a comprehensive immigration plan before handing over his presidency.

President Bush, taking cue from public resentments against illegal workers in the borders states, had initially called for tougher enforcement action against the "undocumented workers." He had also proposed that instead of granting usual general amnesty, a guest worker program should be introduced which would enable them to work on temporary work permits and then return to their countries once the work is completed.

The House of Representative, however, was in no mood to take any long term plan and they passed a tough bill which only focused on tighter immigration enforcement. The House bill HR 4437 is completely silent on legalization of current illegal workers or devising a guest worker program. Seeing the tough House reaction, Bush even suggested that new border fences would be erected

and that thousands of troops would be dispatched to the US-Mexico border.

The Senate, however, took a balanced position and by a 62-36 vote adopted a Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (CIRA, S 2611) last May. The CIRA called for tougher border security, the establishment of a guest workers program for new workers and a mechanism to allow millions of existing illegal immigrants a chance to resident status and eventual citizenship if they meet certain conditions.

If the CIRA is enacted, it would bring in the most dramatic change in the US immigration law in eighty years. Some experts believe that it would facilitate immigration of some 100 million people to the US over the next 20 years as compared to some 19 million by the existing law. The Senate plan would also pave the way for granting of amnesty to nearly 85% of current illegal workers.

The House Republicans, however, have been unable to reach a compromise with the Senate on this hot issue and there is growing rift between them and the Republican senators. They also tried to distance themselves from the Senate bill by calling it a "Democratic Party" bill; but the Democrats pointed out that

Republican Senator McCain (a strong Republican presidential candidate for 2008) was the co-author of the bill along with Senator Kennedy, and that the bill was originally called "Kennedy-McCain" bill. President Bush supports the comprehensive Senate bill and has been urging the House to come up with a compromise deal.

There is a new move to reach a compromise to prevent any further erosion among the Republican lawmakers. Two ranking Republican lawmakers Senators Kay Hutchison (Texas) and Mike Pence (Indiana) have submitted a new plan that would allow most of the illegal immigrants to work legally but only after the government certifies that the US borders have been sufficiently secured. In that case, the illegal immigrants would be urged to leave for their home countries within two years of enactment of the new law and could apply for a new type of visa to return to their jobs. Once they are on a regular work visa, they would be eligible for US citizenship in 17 years. The co-sponsors of the bill believe they can bridge the divide but others feel that it would be a hard sale, and that in the final analysis, both sides might decide that "no deal" might be "best politics" before the November elections.

Do immigrants take away jobs from locals and does it have any effect on local wages? According to a recent study conducted by David Card of UC Berkeley, wages and unemployment of low-skilled workers were largely unaffected by the sudden influx of about 45,000 boat people in Miami. The Pew Hispanic Center has also proven that immigrant labour force has much higher work participation than locals and they constituted more than half of the labour force in the last decade.

The professional immigrants pick up the job for which there are no qualified locals. However, other immigrants go for the job which the locals won't perform. In fact, the immigrants, as the Americans say, are the "last to be hired and the first to be fired." So for their survival, they have to be innovative to create new jobs or do unwanted jobs. The burgeoning Asian restaurants, halal meat and grocery shops, and publication of ethnic news papers clearly indicate how the immigrants have been breaking into newer areas for their survival. Hard work and innovativeness of the immigrants keeps them afloat and sustain the engine of growth in this land of immigrants.

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What about the militants?

The secular forces could not properly make the people realise that religion is a subject to be exercised in personal and private life and can never bring welfare if it is mixed with politics. The secular forces could not even innovate a developed or attractive politics in comparison to that of the Islamic forces. The people could not be inspired by them, as they see their politics as past-oriented.

BIBHU RANJAN SARKER

THE issue of Islamic militancy in the country seems to be less important at present. It is true, there has been no new bomb-attack since the arrest of the extremist kingpins. But there are enough reasons to believe that a huge number of Islamic militants are still out there and fresh bomb attacks may be carried out at any time. Some even suspect that the government may use the arrested militant leaders for its own political interest. The reason behind the suspicion is understandable.

The government has patronized the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and the militants were able to consolidate their strength due to the liberal attitude of the government towards them. The aims and objectives of the Islamic militants synchronise with

those of some partners of the 4-party alliance government. There is evidence that even some ministers from BNP are the patrons of Islamic militancy.

So it is not very hard to understand that the issue of Islamic militancy will remain unsolved as long as the BNP-Jamaat government is in power. However, it is also true that the journey of Islamic militancy started during the last Awami League regime, and organised bomb-attacks began to occur during the same period. So the present government should not alone be condemned for the rise of Islamic militancy. Awami League should also shoulder some blame for it.

National consensus on any issue has become a far cry. Even those who talk about national unity on militancy issue cannot show an effective way to reach consensus. One camp of the division upholds that the

militancy issue can be resolved only by overthrowing the alliance government from power. The leaders of the other camp claim that they are doing their best to eliminate militancy but could not fight it out due to non-cooperation from the opposition.

Nevertheless, we may go for a broad-based discussion on the issue. We can very much see that the JMB members of the suicide squads who took part in the bomb-attacks mostly are madrasa students and they are all from a poor family background. The arrested militants have also confessed that they got money from outside the country and they have links with international terrorist groups. These facts suggest that voting out the government alone is not going to solve the problem.

Poverty and the madrasa education are two root causes of militancy. So if we want to fight

out militancy we will need to alleviate poverty, establish control over madrasas, and reshuffle their curriculum. Simultaneously, the international connection of the militants should be cut off also. These are not easy tasks.

It is learnt from the reports of newspapers that in many cases the militants conducted their operations centering round madrasa. In some cases the madrasas have been used as training grounds for the militants. However, madrasas are very sensitive for Awami League politics. Awami League has been facing an awkward situation owing to continuous propaganda from its opposition that it is an anti-religion or pro-Hindu party. So it wants to avoid any controversy on madrasa. Awami League had been in power for five years. Did the Awami League government take any step to reform the madrasa education then? No, they did not.

On the contrary, the leaders built up new madrasas in their own locality. The fact is, Awami League could not take up any practical effective measures to stop communal propaganda for fear of criticism that they are

against freedom of religion. How can one believe that the party will not repeat its past if voted to power again?

Qaumi madrasa is a much talked-about issue in the country. But no one can know their curriculum or the source of their funds. Information from different sources tell us that the Qaumi madrasas are the manufacturers of Islamic militants. Even if they do not teach the students fundamentalism, it can safely be said that no student of this kind of institution can grow up as a true-educated person.

Extensive reform of Qaumi madrasa is now a demand of the day. But the patrons of such madrasas are opposing this demand. The Islamic scholars are self-contradictory on the issue. They talk against the militants, condemn the killing, and say that such killings are anti-Islamic, but at the same time they oppose police intervention in those Qaumi madrasas that are alleged to be training grounds for Islamic militants. They also oppose arrest of those madrasa students who have been identified as militant or JMB members. They even warn the administration, saying they would launch

jihad if it goes too far against Qaumi madrasa.

This country became a fertile land for culturing fundamentalism after the fall of Awami League regime in 1975. Our pride in defeating the communal politics in 1971 is now merely a myth. Many of us even are not ready to accept the phenomenon. The hard reality is that the defeated pro-Pakistani communal force is now in a very strong position in the country and the victorious secular force of our liberation war is a weaker section of the society. One camp is united, the other is divided.

Communalism perhaps is now at a worse state than that of Pakistani era. There has been long, consistent and instigating propaganda against secularism in the country, and the secular forces could not counter that propaganda effectively. As a result, the situation has changed a lot. A single individual, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, launched an enormous propaganda for communalism in the name of waz-mahfil that created religious intensity among many. Could anyone from the so-called progressive camp come forward with the secular message to

counteract him?

The leftists took a firm stand against communalism at the very beginning of the formation of the Pakistani state. The educated middle-class and the students-youths were inspired by this ideology. The language movement of 1952 was a remarkable event and was characterized by secularism.

After the great victory in our liberation war, it seemed obvious that communalism would no longer exist in the society. The people would abandon communalism and have a secular outlook as the constitution of the country took it as one of the basic principles. But it was not properly understood that there has been a huge amount of propaganda against secularism. Nobody even felt it necessary to refute this propaganda by logical counter-statements.

The secular forces could not properly make the people realise that religion is a subject to be exercised in personal and private life and can never bring welfare if it is mixed with politics. The secular forces could not even innovate a developed or attractive politics in comparison to that of the Islamic forces. The people could

not be inspired by them, as they see their politics as past-oriented.

The Islamic parties and groups took advantage. They became stronger. Now it is very difficult to abolish these forces only by rhetoric in public meetings or even by voting out the present government. No doubt, this evil force will receive a big blow if the present government could be toppled, but their roots will be there on the ground.

There has to be a continuous ideological struggle and huge awareness programs in the society if we want to uproot the evil force. The movements should be carried out concurrently against both the present government and all sorts of communal politics. Any ideological struggle needs prolonged time effort for victory.

People of the country want to be certain that the current opposition has the commitment and preparation for the struggle. There is no short-cut way of defeating the Islamic militancy or fundamentalism, a force that is vicious in nature and efficient in organisation.

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