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Lebanon and Israel ■ By Margarita Mathiopoulos

The war from where I stand

I was in Beirut only five weeks — or a lifetime ago, as things are measured in the Middle East. I fell in love with a once beautiful city that was ever so slowly recreating itself out of the rubble of a long and bloody civil war and previous Palestinian and Israeli battles in its streets.

The energy and vibrancy of a reborn Lebanon seemed tailor-made as a role model on the benefits of democracy in the Arab world.

But standing one evening on the balcony of the Hotel Le Vendome, I found myself feeling a serious disconnect as I looked out on the beautiful, calm Mediterranean and the crowded promenade running alongside it, and at the same time on the ruins of the buildings destroyed by the huge bomb that murdered Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's former prime minister.

Only now did I see that the imaginative architecture, romantic boulevards and cosmopolitan people I saw in Beirut were all part of a massive confidence trick, a Potemkin village whose glittering facades hid the truth that the writ of Lebanon's democratic government never ran very far beyond the center of Beirut.

Hezbollah was always a state within a state: South Beirut, the Bekaa Valley and the lower third of Lebanon were run by Hezbollah, not by the government in Beirut. Syrian troops were gone, but the fear of Syria, the spirit of Syria, was still pervasive.

In a country that had been occupied and exploited by Damascus for decades, I was surprised to find many Lebanese — Shiite and Sunni, Druze and Christian — who were only too happy to declare that the Syrians were their big brothers, to be respected and admired.

Caught up in the rhetoric of democracy and a new beginning for Lebanon, it took me a while to understand that the Lebanese, both the government and the public, lacked the will and resources to rein in Hezbollah, let alone fulfill the disarmament provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1559.

Hezbollah's militants in Lebanon easily outgunned the country's weak and divided army. And with the group's representatives in both Parliament and the cabinet and its highly popular commitment to armed struggle against Israel, how could it be otherwise?

Hezbollah is a militant terrorist group with global reach, one deeply involved in international organ-

ized crime and with terrorist cells embedded in countries as diverse as Argentina, the United States, Sierra Leone and Thailand.

The only hope for the Lebanese was that perhaps the international community would get rid of Hezbollah for them, or at least would restrain Israel's inevitable reaction to Hezbollah's provocations. As the Lebanese look at the ruin of their country, they understand now what forlorn hopes these were.

To understand why these hopes were so misplaced, it is useful to pause and look at the world through Israeli eyes. Living on the edge of a volcano that erupts at regular intervals, routinely condemned by all and sundry, faced with opponents who not only want to defeat them in battle but destroy both their nation and people, proportionality has never been part of the Israeli vocabulary.

While Israelis have long been accustomed to hearing calls for their annihilation from a variety of terrorist groups, the statements of Iran's radical new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from his highly provocative denials of the Holocaust to his repeated calls for Israel's destruction, and his high-profile quest for nuclear weapons, struck a deep psychological chord.

Too many Westerners dismissed Ahmadinejad's statements as rhetoric, but Israelis knew that in Hezbollah and Hamas he had the tools to try and fulfill his ambitions.

With its only ally, the United States, hamstrung by a badly conceived and executed war in Iraq, with terrorist groups dedicated to its destruction in control of the territory to its north and to its south, enduring regular rocket attacks and suffering the indignity of the kidnapping of its soldiers, Israel's response was, both in character and by its lights, moderate.

While Hamas and Hezbollah sent unguided missiles against its civilians, Israel dropped leaflets to warn of its imminent attacks and bombed selected targets, not indiscriminate. For Israelis, this is a proportionate response.

Now, as Lebanon lies prostrate, what is to be done to save what is left of its democracy and economy?

The international community, and the European

Union in particular, missed a golden opportunity to disarm Hezbollah after the Hariri assassination and Syria's subsequent withdrawal from Lebanon.

We cannot drop the ball again. First there has to be a cease-fire that will hold. It must be policed not by the usual suspects of UN peacekeeping, the impoverished third-world armies who only deploy their soldiers for their per diem, but a robust peacemaking force, with NATO, Russian and other first rate combat troops, deployed not only to monitor but to fight if they have to.

Only such a force, deployed on the ground, backed by the real political will to use them, can force Hezbollah out of existence by disbanding its militia, blowing up its bunkers, destroying its arsenal and helping the Lebanese government close down its sanctuaries.

Both Syria and Iran need to be told that further meddling in Lebanon's internal affairs and attempts at proxy war through Hezbollah, Hamas, or any new terrorist group will bring international isolation and biting economic sanctions.

There is a role for Germany here. Alone among the major European powers and international organizations, it has not been compromised by overly generous support for either side. While Germany's special relationship with Israel is well known, its relationship with Muslim states throughout the region have always been close and friendly.

While ultimately it is the United States that must broker the final deal, there is room for Chancellor Angela Merkel to get her first taste of shuttle diplomacy. With clean hands and a reputation as a compassionate politician capable of building workable compromises, she can identify the trade-offs that all sides will have to make if the dying, in both Lebanon and Israel, is to finally stop. An honest broker is needed. Berlin can provide it.

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The writ of Lebanon's government never ran very far beyond Beirut.