

Both Israel and Hezbollah Imagined a Horrid Black Hole and Stopped...

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There are rare moments in history, when even the most determined enemies can suddenly recognize the futility of battle. Sometimes, just for a moment or two. Sometimes, for longer. Such moments of sanity may save thousands, even millions of human lives. And, such moments are not expressions of weakness or cowardice; on the contrary; they are embodiments of courage.

I want to believe that what happened at the Lebanese – Israeli border in August 2019, was precisely one of those such rare moments of sanity.

It changes nothing in terms of the big, geopolitical picture: Israel is a Western outpost in the Middle East. It is tormenting the Palestinian people, illegally occupying the Golan Heights, bombing Syria, and antagonizing Iran.

But an important point was established: there are limits! Israel will not go ‘all the way’, risking self-annihilation, and the annihilation of the entire region. This fact alone gives a fragile, but at least some hope, for a better future of this long-suffering territory.

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What prompts me to write the above?

At the end of August, it appeared that Israel had lost its mind. It attacked, without warning, four countries simultaneously, within just 24 hours: Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. It used drones full of explosives, as well as fighter jets.

Palestine and Syria have been attacked, regularly, for years and decades. Iraq, still de facto under US occupation, was quite a different story. There, a group of outraged lawmakers, ‘exploded’, demanding the immediate withdrawal of the US, and calling the Israeli attack a ‘declaration of war’.

Lebanon, too, did not remain silent. Israeli drones damaged the media center of Hezbollah in Beirut. They also attacked a communist Palestinian faction in the Beqaa Valley. For years, the Israeli air force has been violating Lebanese airspace, during the bombing raids of Syria. But this time it was different.

Even the Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, an enemy of Hezbollah, and a man who holds double citizenship (Saudi and Lebanese), protested, asking the United States and France for protection. The President of Lebanon called it out rightly, a declaration of war.

The leader of Hezbollah, **Hassan Nasrallah**, went live on television, and in a chilling

statement promised a 'measured response'.

At that point, it became clear that the entire region could soon be consumed by flames.

During coverage of the event, on both Press TV and RT, I warned against the enormous danger: Israel was attacking every armed Shi'a group in the region, and was only stopping short of attacking Iran itself. A few more assaults like these, and the entire region could explode, dragging into the conflict countries like Saudi Arabia, on the side of Israel, and Iran, on the side of Syria, Palestine and Hezbollah. Realistically, that could lead to the annihilation of entire areas and nations.

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In that period of time, I drove to, and managed to enter the border region. I first arrived at the city of Naqoura on the Mediterranean coast, and then drove all the way to the Lebanese border with the occupied Golan Heights, following the so-called Blue Line, controlled by UNIFIL.

At several places on my right, the huge Israeli border wall was now clearly visible. UNIFIL patrols consisted of armored vehicles, manned mainly by indifferent looking Indonesian soldiers. Some were taking selfies, with Israel behind them. For the United Nations, there seemed to be no urgency in the region. In fact, right after the Israeli attacks, the UN began discussing the possibility of cutting the number of UNIFIL soldiers, as well as the UNIFIL budget.

As always when visiting this border, what appeared striking to me was the proximity of Israeli and Lebanese villages; tens of meters only, in some areas.

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What followed, was a chilling, tense silence.

Then, about one week after the Israeli attacks, Hezbollah retaliated.

I was called by a TV station, asked to analyze events. As I spoke, journalists were getting the latest news from the border.

Hezbollah fired anti-tank rockets at an Israeli vehicle patrolling near the Blue Line. It hit an Israeli tank (other reports said 'armored vehicle'). According to Hezbollah, all Israeli soldiers inside the vehicle either died or were injured. Allegedly, among the casualties, was an Israeli top-ranking commander - described as 'a General'.

Those who are familiar with Israeli tactics for Palestine and the Golan Heights know that Israeli 'retaliations' in such scenarios, include the bombing of civilian targets, and the destruction of houses or entire blocks of houses.

Entire Lebanon held its breath.

This time it became clear that Hezbollah was not going to back down. And Lebanon in general obviously has reached the point when it was ready to confront Israel, if that was what it would take to maintain its dignity.

I spoke to many Lebanese people. They were frightened, concerned, particularly if they had family and children. But they were also surprisingly calm. "If this is what fate brings, then so be it!"

Then, quickly, events became bizarre and confusing:

Israeli newspapers, including the Jerusalem Post, began quoting the Israeli Defense Forces, who were claiming that 'Yes, an attack against Israel took place, but there were no Israeli casualties.'

Almost simultaneously, Israeli-leaked videos began appearing on YouTube and elsewhere, showing Israeli soldiers carrying injured buddies to helicopters. Later, these very clips were blocked by YouTube itself, for "violating terms and conditions".

A few days later, the entire discussion generally stopped, at both ends.

Israel 'retaliated' promptly. In the most peculiar way, too: it fired around one hundred rockets into Lebanon. But all the rockets landed in fields. No target was hit. Meaning: it was decided not to aim at any targets, considering the Israeli capacity to hit with great precision. More exactly: it was decided to make sure that no target would be hit. In the end, nobody was killed, and no one injured.

As I wrote above, villages, several towns and settlements are constructed right near the border line. Both Israel and Hezbollah have enormous firepower. If they wanted to, they could inflict tremendous damage and losses of lives on each other.

For some reason, they decided not to.

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I think, this is what happened:

By attacking four countries simultaneously, Israel miscalculated. Iraq and Lebanon were not ready to accept the humiliation and barefaced attacks against their territories.

There were clear signals sent in Tel Aviv's direction. And Netanyahu understood.

For days after the Israeli attacks, Hezbollah and Israel faced each other, in chilling defiance, separated only by a concrete wall, and by the inept UNIFIL troops. Both sides were aiming at each other great arsenals of missiles and other weaponry.

One wrong move, and the entire region could go up in flames. One tiny, erroneous move, and who knows how many lives of innocent people would be lost.

I believe, or perhaps I want to believe, that both sides suddenly imagined a huge 'black hole' - what of this part of the world could become. They envisioned smoke, destruction and death; inevitable if they would not decide to immediately back down.

At the last moment, they did. They backed down. I don't know how, who made the decision first. Were they communicating, even coordinating the de-escalation?

It was what, in Asia, we call 'saving face'.

Shots were fired. Most likely, no one died. Halas!

Was an Israeli 'general' killed? I don't know. Actually, I do not want to know. I am absolutely fine with the outcome: no full war in the Middle East. For now, this is the best we can get.

Of course, this should be just the beginning. The insanity has to end. I am not convinced that it will. But what happened at the end of August 2019 clearly indicates that it could.

Unfortunately, we are living in a world when only strength guarantees survival. If Hezbollah was not as strong as it is now, Israel would most likely not have thought twice; it would have overrun the entire Lebanon, in order to destroy its Shi'a adversary inside it.

But Hezbollah is strong.

And also, we have just learnt that there are at least some 'boundaries' which Israel is not willing to cross. In brief: Netanyahu is brutal, but he is not suicidal. For now, Lebanon, Israel and the rest of the Middle East, have survived. For now.

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His latest books are: "Exposing Lies Of The Empire" and "Fighting Against Western Imperialism". Discussion with Noam Chomsky: On Western Terrorism. Point of No Return is his critically acclaimed political novel. Oceania - a book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific. His provocative book

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