

What is happening in Lebanon?

Major political firestorm in the Middle East?

By [Laurie King-Irani](#)

Global Research, May 25, 2007

Electronic Lebanon 25 May 2007

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A survey of US television and radio news over the last 24 hours has told me the following:

1. Bombings and gunfights in Lebanon. Again.
2. Breathless analyses on US news programs about Al-Qaida's spread to the shores of the eastern Mediterranean.
3. Analysts using the "cookie cutter" approach to this new development by citing the events of 1975-1976 and the tensions between Lebanese and Palestinian refugees.
4. CNN's putative Lebanon analyst, Brent Sadler, characterized Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon as "breeding grounds for terrorism," but now, according to Mr. Sadler, it's Islamic-flavored terrorism.

This is all very ominous, anxiety-provoking and compelling "infotainment" — and completely in line with the distorted views of US foreign policy makers.

Such simplistic and knee-jerk reactions to Lebanon's current travails are too easy, and not up to the standards of good and responsible journalism.

I've spent much of the past 48 hours trying to get a better grasp on what is really going on in Tripoli. It's not easy to do, and it occurred to me this morning that this may, in fact, be *the* story: the difficulty of interpreting these events stems from the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the ways that dramatic changes throughout the region, and indeed, the world, are echoing through Lebanon's war-damaged sociopolitical landscape.

Yesterday, Robert Fisk, the veteran war correspondent and author of the best book on Lebanon's decades of agony, *Pity the Nation*, observed in *The Independent* that:

"Not since the war — yes, the Lebanese civil war that we are all still trying to forget — have I heard this many bullets cracking across the streets of a Lebanese city. ... The bloody events in Lebanon yesterday passed so swiftly — and so dangerously for those of us on the streets — that I am still unsure what happened."

Well, if Robert Fisk is confused, how can Brent Sadler be so sure he knows what is going on in Lebanon? It's easy to point fingers at Syria, to invoke the shadowy and amorphous threat of Al-Qaida, to blame the Palestinians, or (in fine Lebanese fashion) to see a complex and nefarious plot underlying the bloodletting in Tripoli.

Any eruption of large-scale violence in Lebanon is cause for concern, since so many related regional crises are "hot-wired" through Lebanon, and the war that raged there during the last decades of the 20th century was in fact three wars: A local, regional, and international confrontation that intersected and metastasized in horrific ways. For those of us who have lived in, and love, Lebanon, the fear of the 1975-1991 war's return always lurks in the back of the mind.

The events of the last week, however, cannot be explained in relation to that earlier war, nor entirely in relation to the murky mysteries surrounding the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, or even last summer's brutal Israeli assault on Lebanon. Nor are the disturbing developments in Tripoli rooted in Palestinian-Lebanese tensions. Of course, US commentators have been quick to peg the Syrians and Palestinians as the culprits. But that is too simplistic.

What's now happening in Lebanon requires a much more subtle and fine-grained interpretation, one that takes on board the reverberations of political developments from Baghdad to Washington, while attending to emerging social and economic conditions in the Middle East. The situation is much more complicated, fluid, unbounded, and therefore ominous than CNN's "experts" seem to grasp. There are new aspects to the current violence, perhaps most noteworthy is the emergence of a militia in Lebanon that has no clearly delineated connection to any particular family or traditional ethno-confessional leadership in the Lebanese context. There is some new political logic or system at work here, but it is irresponsible to present simple or pat explanations.

Over the next few days, Electronic Lebanon will be providing more insights into, and analyses of, the latest outbreak of conflict in Lebanon. For now, however, I'd like to outline some issues and realities that any comprehensive and valid explanation of this week's events must include:

1. A huge demographic swell of youth is now coming into their majority, and they have no real leadership or clear focus for political action, nor do they see much hope or options in the current political and economic system.

2. Shifting global configurations are key to any explanation of what is happening in Lebanon. Although the US remains the world's leading military power, that is no longer relevant or important to the regional political system. US influence is on the wane, its status and reputation completely sullied during the last six years of the Bush Administration's disastrous and delusional "War on Global Terror." In fact, the US has now become more of a pariah or liability for the region's elite, particularly in Lebanon, where the government is characterized as "Pro-American, pro-democracy," while the Opposition (led by Hizbullah) is deemed a dangerous terrorist force. Iraq, as well as the horrors in Occupied Palestine, are now "exhibits A and B" in how and why not to trust the US. The US has given not only itself, but the very concept of democracy, a bad name in the region.

3. Although al-Qaida makes the news a lot, I don't think it (whatever "it" is) commands the

attention, respect and support in Lebanon or Palestine as does Hizbullah, the only group in the region to successfully challenge and defeat the Israeli Army.

4. Shifting regional oppositions are also key to understanding this week's events in Lebanon. The Palestinian movement as an institution, i.e., the movement-turned-establishment of the 1960s-mid-1990s, is no more, although people are still very moved and mobilized by the Palestinian tragedy. Hamas is no longer a unified organization. Leftist groups are weak. Rapidly growing gaps between rich and poor mean that there's not much chance of middle class, broad-based movements for change or reform. But then, those sorts of social movements are usually rooted in national identity and nation-state projects, and the nation state is no longer a big draw, or at least not as big a draw as religion, family, ethnicity — or movements for justice, usually theologically defined (but not always; Egyptian secular and leftist activism is now back on the streets of Cairo).

5. The largely manufactured tensions between Shi'is and Sunnis in Iraq (or, to be more precise, the "Lebanonization" of Iraq encouraged by the United States) will ultimately reverberate elsewhere, probably to the detriment of US allies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. And for non-allies, or quasi-allies, like Lebanon and Syria, this poses real dangers.

6. The ability of groups like Al-Qaida (and again, I don't think that this group exists in the way that the US government or media present it as existing) to do seriously dramatic actions does not hinge upon grass-roots support. They are not a broad-based movement, but could do (or people claiming to be them could do) major attacks that could influence various players' moves in the region and beyond.

7. It's no longer an "either/or" situation, and maybe it never was. It is not as if people have a choice: pro-US or anti-US. The situation now seems fluid enough that some new groupings and ideologies could emerge, that don't look to either the West or various permutations of political Islam to design a new project.

A major political firestorm may overtake the Middle East this summer. It's hard to predict just how it might start, and harder to predict what it will devour. The time for preventing disasters, such as the one now emerging in Lebanon, is long past, though. The irresponsibility of the United States had a lot to do with this. Although it is hard to define the new forms of leadership and political projects emerging in the Middle East, one thing is certain: they won't be directed from, or funded by, Washington, DC. Nor will they be comprehensible to mainstream US news reporters and analysts who remain blinded by past events or official explanations that tie everything to "terrorism."

Laurie King-Irani is a cofounder of Electronic Lebanon. She teaches social anthropology in Washington, DC.

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Articles by: **Laurie King-Irani**

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