

Roots of Shia terrorism

'Bomb the usual Shia terrorists!' Enough, once and for all, of mollicoddling terrorists and kidnappers. Let's get really tough.

Such are the demands now coming from angry North Americans in response to the kidnapping and murder of western hostages in Lebanon.

But before we bomb Lebanon back into the Stone Age, a question. Where did those frightful Shia terrorists come from?

I was with the Israeli Army in southern Lebanon when Shia 'terrorism' began. Shia (or Shi'ites) are Lebanon's largest religious-ethnic group. Most live in backwaters southern Lebanon just north of the Israeli border. Before 1982, the year Israel launched a massive invasion of Lebanon, no one outside of the Mideast had ever heard of them. They were an underclass economically exploited and politically dominated by the nation's Maronite Christian elite.

All that the Israelis knew about the Shia was that they strongly objected to the PLO-run mini-state that had grown up in southern Lebanon and might well provide Israel with useful allies against the Palestinians.

The Shia had managed to stay largely neutral in the seven-year old civil war that was ranging further north between Maronites, Moslems, Druzes, PLO and Syria. It continues today, as we see in Beirut's frightful devastation this week.

When Israeli troops rolled into Lebanon in late 1982, Shia reaction was muted acquiescence. A few Shia even greeted the Israelis as liberators from the swaggering PLO units in south Lebanon. Then, on Ashura, the most holy and emotional day of the Shia creed, an Israeli military convoy bulldozed its way through a crowd of worshippers in the town of Nabatiyah. Rioting, then fighting, erupted.

I was entering Nabatiyah with an Israeli Army convoy soon after. We had to abruptly skirt around the town when more fighting broke out. Inept and often callous Israeli treatment of the local Shia population quickly turned it to sullen resistance.

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Israeli then annexed a chunk of southern Lebanon and garrisoned it with a group of Lebanese thugs and renegades known grandly as the 'South Lebanese Army.' These mercenaries so savaged the Shia villages in the region that armed resistance soon followed.

Stirred up by support from Iran, the Shia turned from silent sheep into death-defying guerillas. Attacks on Israeli units were answered by bombing and shelling of Shia villages. Hundreds of Shias were taken back into Israel as hostages or prisoners. This, in turn, provoked more Shia attacks. The Israelis branded the Shia resistance as 'terrorists,' while the Shia called themselves holy warriors fighting almost with their bare hands against an army of occupation.

Enter the American Marines. They went into Beirut, supposedly as a peace-keeping force. In reality, they were sent by the fuddled Reagan Administration to prop up the Israeli-supported Maronites in the spreading civil war.

Unknown to the U.S. public, the CIA had funneled at least \$300 million through Israel to the Maronites before 1982, in an effort to secure Maronite minority rule in Lebanon. Neither did most Americans know that the U.S. paid for about 75% of the cost of Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon.

The Shia, however, were well aware of this fact. Not only were the Shia drawn into Lebanon's civil war, they also found themselves in a mini-war with Israel and the U.S.

Shia suicide bombers finally drove out the U.S. Marines from Beirut and forced the Israelis back into their 'security zone' in southern Lebanon. Iran and Syria both used the Shia to thwart U.S. and Israeli plans to turn Lebanon into a protectorate under Maronite rule.

So the cycle of violence, terror and counter-terror accelerated. The Israelis and the U.S. Navy bombed more Shia villages. Shia suicide squads and kidnappers went out hunting Israelis and westerners. As one Shia cleric said, hostages were their best protection against bombing, 'our-anti-aircraft system.'

Determined to wipe out the senior Shia leadership, Ollie North and his warriors organized a car bombing in Beirut that was supposed to have killed Sheik Fadlallah, the most important Shia cleric. The attack failed and 88 civilians were killed.

Over a bloody decade, the Shia turned from unknown farmers who minded their own business into fanatical terrorists — or freedom fighters — you choose the label.

One point is clear: While individual westerners are innocent victims, the U.S. government has long been an active combatant in both Lebanon's civil war and in the Gulf War against Iran. Everyone, except for the western public, knows this.

When you kick a hornet's nest, expect to get stung.

