

FRANCE'S TANGLED WEB

As I am writing this, France is trying to water down the Security Council resolution mandating Hezbollah's disarmament before Israel leaves South Lebanon. This doesn't surprise me. France is not an ally of the U.S., not a friend of Israel and is usually eager to ingratiate itself with Middle Eastern oil potentates and potential nuclear powers.

I am, however, surprised that during the first few weeks of Israeli incursion, France was uncharacteristically willing to follow U.S. lead in blaming Hezbollah for initiating hostilities and didn't demand Israel's immediate withdrawal.

Was this the result of a belated awareness that appeasement didn't work in Munich in 1938 and that betrayal of Israel in 2006 would no more bring peace than the betrayal of Czechoslovakia did then? Was it a decision to impress Iran and North Korea that France's behavior was not as predictable as they had come to expect? Or was it an attempt to save and preserve a free Francophile Lebanon with its bilingual Arabic and French elite?

Any one of these reasons might have played a part, but it is likely that France's apparent flip-flop was motivated by its little-known history of its bloody relationship with the Hezbollah that goes back to 1978. That year France had agreed to contribute troops to the UN force (UNIFIL) that was to be stationed on the Israel-Lebanon border. According to an article in The Weekly Standard by Oliver Guitta, a foreign affairs and counterterrorism expert in Washington, a series of cross-border raids by Palestinians resulted in Israel's pushing the PLO north of the Litani River, the 800-strong French contingent was increased by 800 U.S. Marines, 400 Italian troops, and in 1982 a new Shiite force was born – Hezbollah!

Hezbollah wasted no time in targeting the Western soldiers in Lebanon. In April 1983 there was a rocket attack in Lebanon, in August a hijacking of an Air France jet in Teheran, and on October 23, an attack on military barracks in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. Marines and 58 French soldiers. In response, the DGSE (French equivalent of the CIA) convinced of Iran's responsibility for these acts, and aware of others being planned, attempted and failed to blow up the Iranian embassy in Beirut.

Iran hit back. Hezbollah bombed the French embassy in Kuwait, killed 10 French soldiers in Lebanon, conducted a bloody truck bomb attack on a French position and threatened France with reprisals if French troops did not leave Lebanon within 10 days. In response, on December 23, France expelled 6 Iranian diplomats accused of being terrorists. A week later, on December 31, 1983, Islamic Jihad bombed a Marseilles train station and the high-speed Paris-Marseilles train killing four. In retaliation, France bombed an Islamic Amal and Hezbollah camp in Baalbek - several dozen Lebanese Shiites were killed and Ayatollah Khomeini denounced France as a "terrorist state".

In 1984 French troops left Lebanon but Iran ordered more attacks on France, mostly because of French support for Saddam Hussein. Between March 1985 and January 1987, Hezbollah took 16 French diplomats and journalists hostage in Lebanon. Some were held for as long as three years, one was murdered.

By September 1986 Hezbollah – under Iran's direction – had conducted a terror campaign in France that killed 13 and injured hundreds. FBI's French equivalent, the DST, reported to Prime Minister Chirac: "Nothing could have been decided without the blessing of either Iranian parliament president Rafsanjani or Ayatollah Montazeri."

The 1990s were uneventful – France practiced accommodation and appeasement. There was an awkward moment in 2000 when Lionel Jospin, the left-wing prime minister, described the Hezbollah as a terrorist group during a press conference in Israel and president Chirac angrily reminded Jospin that foreign policy was shaped by the president, not the prime minister. In

pursuit of appeasement Hezbollah's leader, Nasrallah, was invited to a pro-French summit in Beirut in October 2002.

But in December 2003, the Hezbollah was angered again: the headscarf worn by Muslim women was banned in France's public schools. Chirac was warned, in an official Hezbollah letter, that the ban would cause "complications". The ban was passed in 2004.

More recently there was the usual French equivocation. In 2004, the French Ambassador to the U.S. called Hezbollah a "mostly social organization" and rejected its inclusion in the European Union's terrorist list.

Still, in August 2004, France and the U.S. cosponsored the U.N. resolution 1559 that mandated the removal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah. In February 2005, Rafik Hariri, former Lebanese prime minister and a personal friend of Jacques Chirac, was murdered, apparently with the participation of Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. On August 29, Chirac stated that every aspect of Resolution 1559 must be enforced and the minister of European Affairs Catherine Colonna condemned Hezbollah's "illegal and violent actions against Israel".

Finally, on January 19, 2006, Chirac declared that in the case of terrorist attack on France, its allies or its national interests, the French response might be nuclear. The message was clearly intended for Iran – and Hezbollah.

French messages are still mixed. It still refuses to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization and criticizes Israel for using "disproportionate force". At the same time, foreign minister Doute-Blazy has said that, "The first condition for a cease-fire is the disarming on Hezbollah".

Now let's see what France will actually do.