

Palestinian issue at root of violence, says ex-Lebanon hostage: Need to understand complex history and relationships

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Benjamin Weir, a former Presbyterian missionary who was held hostage for more than a year in Beirut two decades ago and has maintained friends in Lebanon ever since, says failure to reach a comprehensive peace agreement in the Middle East is at the root of the violence that recently tore that nation apart.

“Hopes for peace are not on the horizon, because the Arab-Israeli issue has not been addressed forthrightly,” Weir told the Presbyterian News Service in an interview.

Weir and his wife, Carol, served as Presbyterian missionaries in Lebanon for nearly 30 years, but he was kidnapped in Beirut May 8, 1984, by the Islamic Jihad group. He was released 16 months later.

“This tragic situation today brings back bitter memories of previous invasions of Lebanon,” said Weir, who after his release was elected moderator of the 1986 general assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). “These two antagonists, Israel and Hezbollah, have brought deep wounds on themselves.”

Weir said Hezbollah had been “very unwise” to precipitate the current round of warfare by snatching two Israeli soldiers in a border incursion earlier in July.

“Hezbollah has brought down the Lebanese house around itself.” Eventually, he predicted, there will be “a strong reaction by the Lebanese public.”

But to lay the blame solely on Hezbollah is to see the situation in the region too simplistically, Weir insisted. “It’s not just Hezbollah, but anger generated throughout the Middle East about the whole Palestinian issue,” he said. “The anger is coming from Arab people generally, not just Hezbollah, about the inability of both Israel and

the Palestinians to reach a [peace] agreement.”

Weir said there is no doubt that Hezbollah “received tremendous support from Iran,” but that support, too, needs to be placed in historical context. “The Shi’ites in Lebanon and Iran have family ties that go back generations,” he noted.

“Generations of Shia living under oppression in south Lebanon and other places have looked to Iran as a model for overcoming their oppression,” Weir said, “though very few support that particular political model.” And because the Lebanese government is very weak, “the Lebanese will not be free from influence from many directions for the foreseeable future,” he stated.

“Early this year there were rising hopes that Lebanon would once again begin to see prosperity and stability,” he noted. “Now there has been a great letdown leading to hopelessness.”

Weir, on the phone and using e-mail during the fighting, said none of his closest colleagues in Lebanon were killed or injured. The Near East School of Theology, where he taught while serving as a missionary, became a refugee shelter, as did other Christian schools and institutions in the country.

Though he realizes that passions run deep “with fear and distrust of Israel’s military establishment a reality,” Weir said, “I hope that Lebanese can become aware that Israeli civilians have suffered, too.” *-Ecumenical News International*