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A Classic Evacuation



James Watt CVO served extensively in the Middle East, including most recently as British Ambassador to Egypt (2011-14), Jordan (2006-11) and Lebanon (2003-6). His 37-year diplomatic career covered many of the major political and security questions of the day, providing wide experience also of economic, business and development issues.

On 12 July 2006 the Israeli Air Force launched a sudden attack on targets in Lebanon in retaliation for a Hizbullah operation that morning on the border. Israeli announcements made clear that this would be a punitive assault on Lebanon itself, not only on Hizbullah. Over the next five weeks, having soon run out of legitimate Hizbullah targets, it pummelled a widening selection of mostly civilian targets, alleging that they might be hiding Hizbullah rockets. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made a statement encouraging them. James Watt was there as British Ambassador, and had come straight from a job as FCO Consular Director, responsible for world-wide planning for contingencies of this kind. The Embassy was well prepared to handle the evacuation of the 10,000 or so British Citizens in Lebanon, almost all of them dual nationals, and James was no novice. But many unknowns confronted the Embassy team. In this personal account he aims to highlight the lessons learnt.

API: What were your first thoughts as the crisis situations developed?

Nervousness, of course. There was no telling how things would develop. I knew I had to protect my staff and their families, and to take care of our British nationals. But I needed to ask my staff to take risks in order to achieve the latter. They would have to volunteer. I could not compel them. Unsurprisingly, the noise of heavy bombs (in fact air-launched missiles from out of sight planes), at irregular intervals and in unexpected places, around the clock, was unsettling. I'd had some previous experience of bombardments, but this was much worse.

API: How well prepared were you and your team?

We had good plans, and morale was high. They say no plan survives contact with the enemy. This does not have to be true. Ours was adaptable. It did not try to cover all the details, leaving room for improvisation. It proved sufficiently robust.

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API: What took you by surprise?

The Israelis chose not to knock out the mobile telephone network. Presumably so as to monitor Hizbullah communications. Had they done so it would have been very difficult to communicate with our nationals in order to arrange the evacuation, or even communicate with each other. We had been braced for that. The other surprise, having been told never to include the Royal Navy in our planning, was to be offered straight away a seaborne evacuation option. We grabbed it. The alternative would have been to arrange a difficult land evacuation northwards to the Syrian border at Tripoli, the road to Damascus having come under attack immediately.

API: What went right?

My staff almost without exception stepped up to the challenge, taking on ad hoc crisis roles. Even family members did - in my case my wife and my 18-year old daughter, who had arrived the previous day to spend the holidays. The FCO fretted about the duty of care and legal liability, but in the end let us get on with it. The Israelis had set a rectangle over central Beirut, including the Embassy and the port (though not as it happens my own house in Yarzé), inside which they promised not to attack. This was not fully kept but gave a measure of reassurance. The Royal Navy was superb. With the cooperation of the Lebanese authorities, we used Beirut port to mount the evacuation. A British infantry battalion was discreetly landed to provide security at the embarkation point. The first destroyer arrived on the third evening, and took aboard children and whichever parents were looking after them, among them families from the Embassy. It was a relief to see that ship slip away into the night. A first success. We'd guessed that only a quarter of our nationals would want to be evacuated, and this turned out to be accurate. We added a further 2,500 EU and Commonwealth nationals, to make a total of 5,000. The evacuation was completed in two weeks, after which we could evacuate almost all our remaining UK-based staff, and devote our attention to helping end the conflict.

API: What didn't go so right?

We were lucky. Nothing important in our own plans. But of course the pointless destruction of a country in which we had such close friendships and affinities was deeply saddening.

API: When it was all over, what lessons stayed with you?

Nervous exhaustion: personal stamina is tested to the limits. I had no sleep for more than a couple of hours each night, because of the relentless bombing, for the first eleven nights, as I recall. You always factor rotation and relief into your crisis team to cope with this. But as the chief it's not easy to apply that to yourself. And emotion: our families and staff were performing heroically and suffering great strain, above all our Lebanese colleagues whose country and in some cases homes were being destroyed. You had to be there for them all the time, and be alert to each individual case.

API: What golden rules do you have for crisis preparation?

You have to have rehearsed and trained your crisis team, which in our case was pretty much the whole Embassy. Whatever the form the crisis takes, from earthquake to conflict, when it starts they must know what they're likely to be doing. Above all you need to train on the vital First Hour: the decisions and actions required at the very start, from which success or failure flows. It's not magic: it just needs careful and systematic thinking through, as a team, of all the aspects. The other key thing to prepare for are your communications. What would happen if the mobile network did go down? And the internet? And the landline? You would fall back on handheld radios, and to reach an audience beyond that (in our case our community) you would need to use that very old method, an announcement on the BBC World Service! There's plenty more of course, but if you can remember two golden tips, they are First Hour readiness and your comms.

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