

## After Lebanon, Israel is looking for more wars

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In-depth Report: [THE WAR ON LEBANON](#)

NAZARETH, 20 August 2006. Late last month, a fortnight into Israel's war against Lebanon, the Hebrew media published a story that passed observers by. Scientists in Haifa, according to the report, have developed a "missile-trapping" steel net that can shield buildings from rocket attacks. The Israeli government, it noted, would be able to use the net to protect vital infrastructure — oil refineries, hospitals, military installations, and public offices — while private citizens could buy a net to protect their own homes.

The fact that the government and scientists are seriously investing their hopes in such schemes tells us more about Israel's vision of the "new Middle East" than acres of analysis.

Israel regards the "home front" — its civilian population — as its Achilles' heel in the army's oppression of the Palestinians in the occupied territories, its intermittent invasions of south Lebanon, and its planned attacks further afield. The military needs the unconditional support of the country's citizenry and media to sanction its unremitting aggression against Israel's "enemies", but fears that the resolve of the home front is vulnerable to the threat posed by rockets landing in Israel, whether the home-made Qassams fired by Palestinians over the walls of their prison in Gaza or the Katyushas launched by Hizbullah from Lebanon.

Certainly Israel's leaders are not ready to examine the reasons for the rocket menace — or to search for solutions other than of the missile-catching variety.

The bloody nose Israel received in south Lebanon has not shaken its leaders' confidence in their restless militarism. If anything, their humiliation has given them cause to pursue their adventures more vigorously in an attempt to reassert the myth of Israeli invincibility, to distract domestic attention from Israel's defeat at the hands of Hizbullah, and to prove the Israeli army's continuing usefulness to its generous American benefactor.

If Israel's soldiers ever leave south Lebanon, expect a rapid return to the situation before the war of almost daily violations of Lebanese airspace by its warplanes and spy drones, plus air strikes to "rein in" Hizbullah and regular attempts on its leader Hassan Nasrallah's life. Expect more buzzing by the same warplanes of President Bashar al-Assad's palace in Damascus, assassination attempts against Hamas leader-in-exile Khaled Meshal and attacks on Hizbullah "supply lines" in Syria. Expect more apocalyptic warnings, and worse, to Iran over its assumed attempt to join Israel in the exclusive club of nuclear armed states. And, of course, expect many more attacks by ground and air of Gaza and the West Bank, with the inevitable devastating toll on Palestinian lives.

Despite its comeuppance in Lebanon, Israel is not planning to reconfigure its relationship with its neighbours. It is not seeking a new Middle East in which it will have to endure the same birth pangs as the "Arabs". It does not want to engage in a peace process that might

force it to restore, in more than appearance, the occupied territories to the Palestinians. Instead it is preparing for more asymmetrical warfare — aerial bombardments of the kind so beloved by American arms manufacturers.

The weekend's swift-moving events should be interpreted in this light. Israel, as might have been expected, was the first to break the United Nations ceasefire on Saturday when its commandoes attacked Hizbullah positions near Baalbek in north-east Lebanon, including air strikes on roads and bridges. It was not surprising that this gross violation of the ceasefire passed with little more than a murmur of condemnation. The UN's Terje Roed-Larsen referred to it as an "unwelcome development" and "unhelpful". The UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, whose current job it is to monitor the ceasefire, refused to comment, saying the attack occurred outside the area of its jurisdiction — an implicit admission of how grave a violation it really was.

Meanwhile in the media, the Associated Press called the military assault "a bold operation", and BBC World described it as a "raid" and the ensuing firefight between Israeli troops and Hizbullah as "clashes". Much later in its reports, the BBC noted that it was also a "serious breach" of the ceasefire, neglecting to mention who was responsible for the violation. That may have been because the BBC's report was immediately followed by Israeli spokesman Mark Regev accusing Hizbullah, not Israel, of violating the ceasefire. Predictably he accused Hizbullah of receiving transfers of weapons that the Israeli army operation was supposedly designed to foil.

In fact, this was no simple "clash" during an intelligence-gathering mission, as early reports in the Israeli media made clear before the official story was established. Israeli special forces launched the covert operation to capture a Hizbullah leader, Sheikh Mohammed Yazbak, way beyond the Litani River, the northern extent of Israel's supposed "buffer zone". The hit squad were disguised not only as Arabs — a regular ploy by units called "mistarvim" — but as Lebanese soldiers driving in Lebanese army vehicles. When their cover was blown, Hizbullah opened fire, killing one Israeli and wounding two more in a fierce gun battle.

(It is worth noting that, according to the later official version, Israel's elite forces were exposed only as they completed their intelligence work and were returning home. Why would Israel be using special forces, apparently in a non-belligerent fashion, in a dangerous ground operation when shipments of weapons crossing from Syria can easily be spotted by Israel's spy drones and its warplanes?)

It is difficult to see how this operation could be characterised as "defensive" except in the Orwellian language employed by Israel's army — which, after all, is misleadingly known as the Israel Defence Forces. UN Resolution 1701, the legal basis of the ceasefire, calls on Israel to halt "all offensive military operations". How much more offensive could the operation be?

But, more significantly, what is Israel's intention towards the United Nation's ceasefire when it chooses to violate it not only by assaulting Hizbullah positions in an area outside the "buffer zone" it has invaded but also then implicates the Lebanese army in the attack? Is there not a danger that Hizbullah fighters may now fire on Lebanese troops fearing that they are undercover Israeli soldiers? Does Israel's deceit not further weaken the standing of the Lebanese army, which under Resolution 1701 is supposed to be policing south Lebanon on Israel's behalf? Could reluctance on the part of Lebanon's army to engage Hizbullah as a

result not potentially provide an excuse for Israel to renew hostilities? And what would have been said had Israel launched the same operation disguised as UN peacekeepers, the international force arriving to augment the Lebanese soldiers already in the area? These questions need urgent answers but, as usual, they were not raised by diplomats or the media.

On the same day, the Israeli army also launched another “raid”, this time in Ramallah in the West Bank. There they “arrested”, in the media’s continuing complicity in the corrupted language of occupation, the Palestinians’ deputy prime minister. His “offence” is belonging to the political wing of Hamas, the party democratically elected by the Palestinian people earlier this year to run their government in defiance of Israeli wishes. Even the Israeli daily Haaretz newspaper characterised Nasser Shaer as a “relative moderate” — the “relative” presumably a reference, in Israeli eyes, to the fact that he belongs to Hamas. Shaer had only avoided the fate of other captured Hamas cabinet ministers and legislators by hiding for the past six weeks from the army — a fitting metaphor for the fate of a fledgling Palestinian democracy under the jackboot of Israeli oppression.

A leading legislator from the rival Fatah party, Saeb Erekat, pointed out the obvious: that the seizure of half the cabinet was making it impossible for Fatah, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, to negotiate with Hamas over joining a government of national unity. Such a coalition might offer the Palestinians a desperately needed route out of their international isolation and prepare the path for negotiations with Israel on future withdrawals from occupied Palestinian territory. Israel’s interest in stifling such a government, therefore, speaks for itself. And ordinary Israelis still wonder why the Palestinians fire their makeshift rockets into Israel. Duh!

On the diplomatic front, Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Dan Gillerman, rejected out of hand a peace initiative from the Arab League that it hopes to bring before the Security Council next month. The Arab League proposal follows a similar attempt at a comprehensive peace plan by the Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, in 2002 that was also instantly brushed aside by Israel. On this occasion, Gillerman claimed there was no point in a new peace process; Israel, he said, wanted to concentrate on disarming Hizbullah under UN Resolution 1701. Presumably that means more provocative “raids”, like the one on Saturday, in violation of the ceasefire.

Where does all this “defensive” Israeli activity leave us? Answer: on the verge of more war and carnage, whether inflicted on the Palestinians, on Lebanon, on Syria, on Iran, or on all of them. Iran’s head of the army warned on Saturday that he was preparing for an attack by Israel. Probably a wise assumption on his part, especially as US officials were suggesting at the weekend that the UN Security Council is about to adopt sanctions that will include military force to stop Iran’s assumed nuclear ambitions.

In fact, Israel looks ready to pick a fight with just about anyone in its neighbourhood whose complicity in the White House’s new Middle East has not already been assured, either like Jordan and Egypt by the monthly pay cheques direct from Washington, or like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states by the cash-guzzling pipelines bringing oil to the West. The official enemies — those who refuse to prostrate themselves before Western oil interests and Israeli regional hegemony — must be brought to their knees just as Iraq already has been.

What will these wars achieve? That is the hardest question to answer, because every possible outcome appears to spell catastrophe for the region, including for Israel, and

ultimately for the West. If Israel received a bloody nose from a month of taking on a few thousand Hizbullah fighters on their home turf, what can the combined might of Israel and the US hope to achieve in a battleground that drags in the whole Middle East? How will Israel survive in a region torn apart by war, by a new Shiite ascendancy that makes the old colonialily devised mosaic of Arab states redundant and by the consequent tectonic shifts in identity and borders?

President Bush observed at the weekend that, although it may look like Hizbullah won the war with Israel, it will take time to see who is the true victor. He may be right, but it is hard to believe that either Israel or the United States can build a missile-catching net big enough to withstand the fall-out from the looming war.

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