

An outlaw state: Israel breaks ceasefire, threatens to assassinate Hezbollah leader

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Israeli forces on Saturday carried out a flagrant violation of the ceasefire along the Lebanon-Israel border, as dozens of military commandos attacked the village of Boudai, near Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley of eastern Lebanon. The raid was the first full-scale breach in the ceasefire between Israeli and Hezbollah forces in south Lebanon which took effect on Monday, August 14.

Both Lebanese and United Nations officials denounced the raid. Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora issued a press statement in Beirut calling the attack a “flagrant violation” of the UN ceasefire resolution, while UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said he was “deeply concerned about a violation by the Israeli side of the cessation of hostilities.”

While their ostensible purpose was to intercept weapons shipments from Syria to Hezbollah fighters near Baalbek, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) captured no weapons and offered no evidence that any such shipments were the actual target of the night-time raid. It appears rather that the commandos were seeking to kidnap a top Hezbollah leader, Sheik Mohammed Yazbeck, in order to exchange him for the two IDF soldiers captured by Hezbollah last month, the nominal pretext for the month-long Israeli assault on Lebanon.

According to reports in the Lebanese press, based on local eyewitnesses, the Israeli commandos landed by helicopter in the eastern foothills of Mount Lebanon, dressed in Lebanese Army uniforms and seeking to conceal their identity as they passed through Hezbollah checkpoints on the road to Baalbek by speaking in Arabic. They were headed for a school thought to be owned by Yazbeck, who was born in Boudai but no longer lives there.

The raid became a debacle, however. Hezbollah fighters detected the Israeli ruse—reportedly because of the soldiers’ Palestinian Arabic accents—and opened fire on them. Although only ten Hezbollah soldiers were initially involved, some 300 townspeople mobilized, seized weapons and joined the fight, forcing the Israeli commandos to withdraw.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*: “The Israelis in the SUVs apparently flubbed a traditional Arabic greeting, fighters said. They were waved on to the next checkpoint, where Hezbollah fighters ambushed them, sending them fleeing into tobacco fields. ‘When the Israelis came, everybody fought them,’ said Faouzat Chamas, 51, a government agricultural worker who said he joined the skirmish. Apache helicopters fired from above, as larger helicopters evacuated the men and their vehicles, the fighters said.”

Suzanne Mazloun, the 22-year-old wife of Boudai’s mayor, Suleiman Chamas, told the press, “All—not only Hezbollah—fought. All the people in the village brought their guns to fight. Fifteen year-old boys brought guns.” One Israeli commando was killed and at least two

wounded, and the unit was picked up by helicopters after only an hour on the ground.

Villagers who spoke with the US press said the raid was a complete failure, citing evidence of more extensive Israeli casualties, including bloody bandages and syringes left behind by the fleeing commandos. "They failed completely," Sadiq Hamdi, a scrap-iron dealer, told the *New York Times*. "They were still on the road when the Hezbollah came upon them. They did not take 1 percent of what they were trying to do."

An Israeli military spokesman confirmed both the raid and casualties, adding that Israeli warplanes had joined the combat to provide air cover while the trapped commandos were extricated. This included bombing and destroying a bridge to block Hezbollah reinforcements from joining the battle. There were conflicting reports of Hezbollah casualties, ranging from zero to three killed and three wounded.

On Sunday, touring the devastation in south Beirut, Siniora called the month-long Israeli bombing campaign against his country "a crime against humanity." Speaking with reporters, he said, "What we see today is an image of the crimes Israel has committed. There is no other description other than a criminal act that shows Israel's hatred."

Israeli officials continued to defend Saturday's raid as directed against Syrian and Iranian efforts to resupply Hezbollah, without presenting any evidence. No Syrian or Iranian personnel were involved in the incident, which was conducted entirely by Lebanese villagers under the leadership of Hezbollah. The Bush administration, predictably, endorsed the raid and the Israeli pretext for it.

The raid on Boudai is something of a metaphor for the entire war: Israeli arrogance and military command of the air, running up against fierce resistance in the form of a militia based on and drawn from the local population. Even the notoriously pro-Israeli American press, whose editorials invariably characterize Hezbollah as a terrorist organization equivalent to Al Qaeda, has been compelled to acknowledge the mass base of the Shia militia.

Friday's *New York Times*, for instance, carried the following paragraph: "Hezbollah guerrillas, known in Lebanon as 'the resistance,' have operated in the south for years. They are almost entirely local men hardened by 18 years of Israeli occupation after its 1982 invasion. During that time, they lived and worked in their native villages, building an elaborate social-service network and extensive underground fortifications and caches of modern weaponry that astounded Israel in a month of bitter fighting. 'No one knew they had these things, not the military, not the intelligence,' said an equally astonished Lebanese Army general, speaking privately."

The outcome of the month-long war has been a strategic disaster for both the Israelis and the Bush administration. Israel and the US had prepared the war long in advance, awaiting only a suitable pretext to unleash the supposedly unstoppable power of Israel's air force, artillery and tanks on the guerrilla fighters armed only with rockets and small arms. The goal was to create the conditions for consolidating a pliant, pro-American regime in Lebanon that would serve as a base against Syria and Iran.

Saturday's raid is one of multiple efforts by the Israeli and American governments to manage the perceptions of the war and overturn its devastating impact on popular consciousness both in the Arab countries and within Israel itself.

That concern may in part account for the extraordinary interview given by an unnamed high-ranking Israeli general to the *New York Times*, published Sunday, under the headline, "Israel Committed to Block Arms and Kill Nasrallah." Citing this "senior Israeli commander," the *Times* reported that "Israel intends to do its best... to kill the militia's leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah..."

"There's only one solution for him," the Israeli officer told the *Times*, referring to Nasrallah. "This man must die."

There is no other country in the world that could so publicly announce its intention of assassinating a prominent political opponent, fully expecting that this bloodthirsty declaration will meet with no censure either in the US or, for that matter, most of the European press. One can only imagine the outcry that would have ensued were the situation reversed, and Sheik Nasrallah had declared his determination to assassinate Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert or Defense Minister Peretz.

These comments demonstrate not only the impunity enjoyed by a regime which openly boasts of its contempt for international law, but also the regime's mounting desperation. The Olmert government evidently feels that the extermination of the Hezbollah leader would be an adequate substitute for its failed effort to exterminate the entire organization, and would allow it to portray the war as a victory for both its domestic and international audience.

In a further provocation, Israeli forces arrested the deputy prime minister of the Palestinian Authority early Saturday. Nasser Shaer was seized by troops who surrounded his home in Ramallah before dawn and arrested him for being a member of Hamas. Shaer is the highest-ranking official of the Palestinian Authority to be arrested since the Israeli onslaught on Gaza began, just two weeks before the outbreak of the war in Lebanon.

There are many signs that the shaky ceasefire agreement worked out August 11 in the United Nations Security Council could disintegrate within days. The senior UN representative in the region, Reje Roed-Larsen, said the week-old agreement could collapse into "an abyss of violence and bloodshed" if there were further major violations. He warned that the Israeli raid, and still more the threat of future raids, could discourage countries from contributing troops to the expanded UNIFIL peacekeeping force.

France, which pushed hardest for the expansion of UNIFIL and was angling to lead it, offered only 200 troops, in addition to the 200 it already has stationed in south Lebanon. This is far below the 3,000 or more expected from whichever European power takes leadership of the 15,000-strong force, and left both the UN, the Bush administration and the Israelis seeking an alternative. Israeli Prime Minister Olmert telephoned Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi Sunday and appealed for Italy to lead the force.

The Israelis are also seeking to exercise a veto over the composition of the UN peacekeeping force. Olmert announced Sunday that he opposed the inclusion in the force troops from any nation that does not recognize the state of Israel, thereby excluding Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, all Moslem-majority countries that have no diplomatic relations with Israel. The three countries are the only ones to offer front-line armored units for the UNIFIL deployment, which could pose a potential obstacle for future Israeli military action.

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