

Is Beirut Burning?

By [Uri Avnery](#)

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

“IT SEEMS that Nasrallah survived,” Israeli newspapers announced, after 23 tons of bombs were dropped on a site in Beirut, where the Hizbullah leader was supposedly hiding in a bunker.

An interesting formulation. A few hours after the bombing, Nazrallah had given an interview to Aljazeera television. Not only did he look alive, but even composed and confident. He spoke about the bombardment – proof that the interview was recorded on the same day.

So what does “it seems that” mean? Very simple: Nasrallah pretends to be alive, but you can’t believe an Arab. Everyone knows that Arabs always lie. That’s in their very nature, as Ehud Barak once pronounced.

THE KILLING of the man is a national aim, almost the main aim of the war. This is, perhaps, the first war in history waged by a state in order to kill one person. Until now, only the Mafia thought along those lines. Even the British in World War II did not proclaim that their aim was to kill Hitler. On the contrary, they wanted to catch him alive, in order to put him on trial. Probably that’s what the Americans wanted, too, in their war against Saddam Hussein.

But our ministers have officially decided that that is the aim. There is not much novelty in that: successive Israeli governments have adopted a policy of killing the leaders of opposing groups. Our army has killed, among others, Hizbullah leader Abbas Mussawi, PLO no. 2 Abu Jihad, as well as Sheik Ahmad Yassin and other Hamas leaders. Almost all Palestinians, and not only they, are convinced that Yassir Arafat was also murdered.

And the results? The place of Mussawi was filled by Nasrallah, who is far more able. Sheik Yassin was succeeded by far more radical leaders. Instead of Arafat we got Hamas.

As in other political matters, a primitive military mindset governs this reasoning too.

A PERSON returning here after a long absence and seeing our TV screens might get the impression that a military junta is governing Israel, in the (former) South American manner.

On all TV channels, every evening, one sees a parade of military brass in uniform. They explain not only the day’s military actions, but also comment on political matters and lay down the political and propaganda line.

During all the other hours of broadcasting time, a dozen or so have-been generals repeat again and again the message of the army commanders. (Some of them don’t look particularly intelligent – not to say downright stupid. It is frightening to think that these people were once in a position to decide who would live and who would die.)

True, we are a democracy. The army is completely subject to the civilian establishment. According to the law, the cabinet is the “supreme commander” of the army (which in Israel includes the navy and air force). But in practice, today it is the top brass who decide all political and military matters. When Dan Halutz tells the ministers that the military command has decided on this or that operation, no minister dares to express opposition. Certainly not the hapless Labor Party ministers.

Ehud Olmert presents himself as the heir to Churchill (“blood, sweat and tears”). That’s quite pathetic enough. Then Amir Peretz puffs up his chest and shoots threats in all directions, and that’s even more pathetic, if that’s possible. He resembles nothing so much as a fly standing on the ear of an ox and proclaiming: “we are ploughing!”

The Chief-of-Staff announced last week with satisfaction: “The army enjoys the full backing of the government!” That is also an interesting formulation. It implies that the army decides what to do, and the government provides “backing”. And that’s how it is, of course.

NOW IT is not a secret anymore: this war has been planned for a long time. The military correspondents proudly reported this week that the army has been exercising for this war in all its details for several years. Only a month ago, there was a large war game to rehearse the entrance of land forces into South Lebanon – at a time when both the politicians and the generals were declaring that “we shall never again get into the Lebanon quagmire. We shall never again introduce land forces there.” Now we are in the quagmire, and large land forces are operating in the area.

The other side, too, has been preparing this war for years. Not only did they build caches of thousands of missiles, but they have also prepared an elaborate system of Vietnam-style bunkers, tunnels and caves. Our soldiers are now encountering this system and paying a high price. As always, our army has treated “the Arabs” with disdain and discounted their military capabilities.

That is one of the problems of the military mentality. Talleyrand was not wrong when he said that “war is much too serious a thing to be left to military men.” The mentality of the generals, resulting from their education and profession, is by nature force-oriented, simplistic, one-dimensional, not to say primitive. It is based on the belief that all problems can be solved by force, and if that does not work – then by more force.

That is well illustrated by the planning and execution of the current war. This was based on the assumption that if we cause terrible suffering to the population, they will rise up and demand the removal of Hizbullah. A minimal understanding of mass psychology would suggest the opposite. The killing of hundreds of Lebanese civilians, belonging to all the ethno-religious communities, the turning of the lives of the others into hell, and the destruction of the life-supporting infrastructure of Lebanese society will arouse a groundswell of fury and hatred – against Israel, and not against the heroes, as they see them, who sacrifice their lives in their defense.

The result will be a strengthening of Hizbullah, not only today, but for years to come. Perhaps that will be the main outcome of the war, more important than all the military achievements, if any. And not only in Lebanon, but throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

Faced with the horrors that are shown on all television and many computer screens, world opinion is also changing. What was seen at the beginning as a justified response to the

capture of the two soldiers now looks like the barbaric actions of a brutal war-machine. The elephant in a china shop.

Thousands of e-mail distribution lists have circulated a horrible series of photos of mutilated babies and children. At the end, there is a macabre photo: jolly Israeli children writing "greetings" on the artillery shells that are about to be fired. Then there appears a message: "Thanks to the children of Israel for this nice gift. Thanks to the world that does nothing. Signed: the children of Lebanon and Palestine."

The woman who heads the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has already defined these acts as war crimes – something that may in future mean trouble for Israeli army officers.

IN GENERAL, when army officers are determining the policy of a nation, serious moral problems arise.

In war, a commander is obliged to take hard decisions. He sends soldiers into battle, knowing that many will not return and others will be maimed for life. He hardens his heart. As General Amos Yaron told his officers after the Sabra and Shatila massacre: "Our senses have been blunted!"

Years of the occupation regime in the Palestinian territories have caused a terrible callousness as far as human lives are concerned. The killing of ten to twenty Palestinians every day, including women and children, as happens now in Gaza, does not agitate anyone. It doesn't even make the headlines. Gradually, even routine expressions like "We regret...we had no intention...the most moral army in the world..." and all the other trite phrases are not heard anymore.

Now this numbness is revealing itself in Lebanon. Air Force officers, calm and comfortable, sit in front of the cameras and speak about "bundles of targets", as if they were talking about a technical problem, and not about living human beings. They speak about driving hundreds of thousands of human beings from their homes as an imposing military achievement, and do not hide their satisfaction in face of human beings whose whole life has been destroyed. The word that is most popular with the generals at this time is "pulverize" – we pulverize, they are being pulverized, neighborhoods are pulverized, buildings are pulverized, people are pulverized.

Even the launching of rockets at our towns and villages does not justify this ignoring of moral considerations in fighting the war. There were other ways of responding to the Hizbullah provocation, without turning Lebanon into rubble. The moral numbness will be transformed into grievous political damage, both immediate and long term. Only a fool or worse ignores moral values – in the end, they always take revenge.

IT IS almost banal to say that it is easier to start a war than to finish it. One knows how it starts, it is impossible to know how it will end.

Wars take place in the realm of uncertainty. Unforeseen things happen. Even the greatest captains in history could not control the wars they started. War has its own laws.

We started a war of days. It turned into a war of weeks. Now they are speaking of a war of months. Our army started a "surgical" action of the Air Force, afterwards it sent small units into Lebanon, now whole brigades are fighting there, and reservists are being called up in

large numbers for a wholesale 1982-style invasion. Some people already foresee that the war may roll towards a confrontation with Syria.

All this time, the United States has been using all its might in order to prevent the cessation of hostilities. All signs indicate that it is pushing Israel towards a war with Syria – a country that has ballistic missiles with chemical and biological warheads.

Only one thing is already certain on the 11th day of the war: Nothing good will come of it. Whatever happens – Hizbullah will emerge strengthened. If there had been hopes in the past that Lebanon would slowly become a normal country, where Hizbullah would be deprived of a pretext for maintaining a military force of its own, we have now provided the organization with the perfect justification: Israel is destroying Lebanon, only Hizbullah is fighting to defend the country.

As for deterrence: a war in which our huge military machine cannot overcome a small guerilla organization in 11 days of total war certainly has not rehabilitated its deterrent power. In this respect, it is not important how long this war will last and what will be its results – the fact that a few thousand fighters have withstood the Israeli army for 11 days and more, has already been imprinted in the consciousness of hundred of millions of Arabs and Muslims.

From this war nothing good will come – not for Israel, not for Lebanon and not for Palestine. The “New Middle East” that will be its result will be a worse place to live in.

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