

Israel's "New Middle East"

Israel's plan is to annex southern Lebanon and establish a puppet regime in Beirut

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Tanya Reinhart demonstrates that Israel's real aim in Lebanon is to establish the Litani River as its natural border. To realize this, it will first destroy Lebanon, then install a puppet regime and, finally, annex southern Lebanon.

Beirut is burning, hundreds of Lebanese die, hundreds of thousands lose all they ever owned and become refugees, and all the world is doing is rescuing the "foreign passport" residents of what was just two weeks ago "the Paris of the Middle East". Lebanon must die now, because "Israel has the right to defend itself", so goes the US mantra, used to block any international attempt to impose a cease fire.

Israel, backed by the US, portrays its war on Lebanon as a war of self defence. It is easy to sell this message to mainstream media, because the residents of the north of Israel are also in shelters, bombarded and endangered. Israel's claim that no country would let such an attack on its residents go unanswered finds many sympathetic ears. But let us reconstruct exactly how it all started.

On Wednesday, 12 July 2006, a Hezbollah unit attacked two armoured Jeeps of the Israeli army, patrolling along Israel's border with Lebanon. Three Israeli soldiers were killed in the attack and two were taken hostage. At a news conference held in Beirut a couple of hours later, Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, explained that their aim was to reach a prisoner exchange where, in return for the two captured Israeli soldiers, Israel would return three Lebanese prisoners it had refused to release in a previous prisoner exchange. Nasrallah declared that "he did not want to drag the region into war", but added that "our current restraint is not due to weakness... if they [Israel] choose to confront us, they must be prepared for surprises." (1)

The Israeli government, however, did not give a single moment for diplomacy, negotiations or even cool reflection over the situation. In a cabinet meeting that same day, it authorized a massive offensive on Lebanon. As Ha'aretz reported, "In a sharp departure from Israel's response to previous Hezbollah attacks, the cabinet session unanimously agreed that the Lebanese government should be held responsible for yesterday's events." Olmert declared: "This morning's events are not a terror attack, but the act of a sovereign state that attacked Israel for no reason and without provocation." He added that "the Lebanese government, of which Hezbollah is a part, is trying to undermine regional stability. Lebanon is responsible, and Lebanon will bear the consequences of its actions." (2)

At the cabinet meeting, "the IDF [Israeli armed forces] recommended various operations aimed at the Lebanese government and strategic targets in Lebanon", as well as a

comprehensive attack on southern Lebanon (where Hezbollah's batteries of rockets are concentrated). The government immediately approved both recommendations. The spirit of the cabinet's decision was succinctly summarized by Defence Minister Amir Peretz who said: "We're skipping the stage of threats and going straight to action."(3)

At 2150 that same day, Ha'aretz internet edition reported that, by that time, Israel had already bombarded bridges in central Lebanon and attacked "Hezbollah's posts" in southern Lebanon.(4) An Amnesty International press release of the next day (13 July) stated that, in these attacks, "some 40 Lebanese civilians have reportedly been killed... Among the Lebanese victims were a family of 10, including eight children, who were killed in Dweir village, near Nabatiyeh, and a family of seven, including a seven-month-old baby, who were killed in Baflay village near Tyre. More than 60 other civilians were injured in these or other attacks."

It was at that point, early on Wednesday night, following the first Israeli attack, that Hezbollah started its rocket attack on the north of Israel. Later the same night (before the dawn of Thursday), Israel launched its first attack on Beirut, when Israeli warplanes bombed Beirut's international airport and killed at least 27 Lebanese civilians in a series of raids. In response, Hezbollah's rocket attacks intensified on Thursday, when "more than 100 Katyusha rockets were fired into Israel from Lebanon in the largest attack of its sort since the start of the Lebanon war in 1982". Two Israeli civilians were killed in this attack, and 132 were taken to the hospital.(5) When Israel started destroying the Shi'i quarters of Beirut the following day, including a failed attempt on Nasrallah's life, Hezbollah extended its rockets attacks to Haifa.

The way it started, there was nothing in Hezbollah's military act, whatever one may think of it, to justify Israel's massive disproportionate response. Lebanon has had a long-standing border dispute with Israel: in 2000, when Israel, under Prime Minister Ehud Barak, withdrew from southern Lebanon, Israel kept a small piece of land known as the Shaba farms (near Mount Dov), which it claims belonged historically to Syria and not to Lebanon, though both Syria and Lebanon deny that. The Lebanese government has frequently appealed to the US and others for Israel's withdrawal also from this land, which has remained the centre of friction in southern Lebanon, in order to ease the tension in the area and to help the Lebanese internal negotiations over implementing UN resolutions. The most recent such appeal was in mid-April 2006, in a Washington meeting between Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and George Bush.(6) In the six years since Israel withdrew, there have been frequent border incidents between Hezbollah and the Israeli army, and ceasefire violations of the type committed now by Hezbollah have occurred before, initiated by either side, and more frequently by Israel. None of the previous incidents resulted in Katyusha shelling of the north of Israel, which has enjoyed full calm since Israel's withdrawal. It was possible for Israel to handle this incident as all its predecessors, with at most a local retaliation, or a prisoner exchange or, even better, with an attempt to solve this border dispute once and for all. Instead, Israel opted for a global war. As Peretz put it: "The goal is for this incident to end with Hezbollah so badly beaten that not a man in it does not regret having launched this incident [sic]."(7)

The Israeli government knew right from the start that launching its offensive would expose the north of Israel to heavy Katyusha rockets attacks. This was openly discussed at this government's first meeting on Wednesday: "Hezbollah is likely to respond to the Israeli attacks with massive rocket launches at Israel, and in that case, the IDF might move ground

forces into Lebanon".(8) One cannot avoid the conclusion that, for the Israeli army and government, endangering the lives of residents of northern Israel was a price worth paying in order to justify the planned ground offensive. They started preparing Israelis on that same Wednesday for what may be ahead: "We may be facing a completely different reality, in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis will, for a short time, find themselves in danger from Hezbollah's rockets," said a senior defence official. "These include residents of the centre of the country."(9) For the Israeli military leadership, not only the Lebanese and the Palestinians, but also the Israelis are just pawns in some big military vision.

The speed at which everything happened (along with many other pieces of information) indicates that Israel has been waiting for a long time for "the international conditions to ripen" for the massive war on Lebanon it has been planning. In fact, one does not need to speculate on this since, right from the start, Israeli and US official sources have been pretty open in this regard. As a senior Israeli official explained to the Washington Post on 16 July, "Hezbollah's cross-border raid has provided a 'unique moment' with a 'convergence of interests'."(10) The paper goes on to explain what this convergence of interests is:

For the United States, the broader goal is to strangle the axis of Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and Iran, which the Bush administration believes is pooling resources to change the strategic playing field in the Middle East, US officials say.(11)

For the US, the Middle East is a "strategic playing field", where the game is establishing full US domination. The US already controls Iraq and Afghanistan, and considers Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and a few other states as friendly cooperating regimes. But even with this massive foothold, full US domination is still far from established. Iran has only been strengthened by the Iraq war and refuses to accept the decrees of the master. Throughout the Arab world, including in the "friendly regimes", there is boiling anger at the US, at the heart of which is not only the occupation of Iraq, but the brutal oppression of the Palestinians, and the US backing of Israel's policies. The new axis of the four enemies of the Bush administration (Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran) are bodies viewed by the Arab world as resisting US or Israel's rule, and standing for Arab liberation. From Bush's perspective, he only has two years to consolidate his vision of complete US control of the Middle East, and to do that, all seeds of resistance should be crushed in a devastating blow that will make it clear to every single Arab that obeying the master is the only way to stay alive. If Israel is willing to do the job and crush not only the Palestinians, but also Lebanon and Hezbollah, then the US, torn from the inside by growing resentment over Bush's wars, and perhaps unable to send new soldiers to be killed for this cause right now, will give Israel all the backing it can. As Rice announced in her visit in Jerusalem on 25 July, what is at stakes is "a new Middle East". "We will prevail," she promised Olmert.

But Israel is not sacrificing its soldiers and citizens only to please the Bush administration. The "new Middle East" has been a dream of the ruling Israeli military circles since at least 1982, when Sharon led the country to the first Lebanon war with precisely this declared goal. Hezbollah's leaders have argued for years that its real long-term role is to protect Lebanon, whose army is too weak to do this. They have said that Israel has never given up its aspirations for Lebanon and that the only reason it pulled out of southern Lebanon in 2000 is because Hezbollah's resistance has made maintaining the occupation too costly. Lebanon's people know what every Israeli old enough to remember knows: that, in the vision of Ben Gurion, Israel's founding leader, Israel's border should be "natural", that is, the Jordan River in the East, and the Litani River of Lebanon in the north. In 1967, Israel gained control over the Jordan River, in the occupied Palestinian land, but all its attempts to

establish the Litani border have failed so far.

As I argued in Israel/Palestine, already when the Israeli army left southern Lebanon in 2000, the plans to return were ready.⁽¹²⁾ But, in Israel's military vision, in the next round, the land should be first "cleaned" of its residents, as Israel did when it occupied the Syrian Golan Heights in 1967, and as it is doing now in southern Lebanon. To enable Israel's eventual realization of Ben Gurion's vision, it is necessary to establish a "friendly regime" in Lebanon, one that will collaborate in crushing any resistance. To do this, it is necessary first to destroy the country, as in the US model of Iraq. These were precisely Sharon's declared aims in the first Lebanon war. Israel and the US believe that now conditions have ripened enough that these aims can finally be realized.

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Notes

1. Yoav Stern, "Nasrallah: Only deal will free kidnapped soldiers," Ha'aretz 13 July 2006.
2. Amos Harel, Aluf Benn and Gideon Alon, "Gov't okays massive strikes on Lebanon," Ha'aretz, 13 July 2006.
3. Ibid.
4. Amos Har'el, "Israel prepares for widespread military escalation," Ha'aretz internet edition, Last update - 21:50 12 July 2006.
5. Amos Harel, Jack Khoury and Nir Hasson, "Over 100 Katyushas hit north," Ha'aretz 14 July 2006.
6. "Lebanese PM to lobby President Bush on Israeli withdrawal from Shaba," by Reuters, Ha'aretz, 16 April 2006: "Lebanon's prime minister (is) asking US President George Bush to put pressure on Israel to pull out of a border strip and thus enable his government to extend its authority over all Lebanese land... 'Israel has to withdraw from the Shaba Farms and has to stop violating our airspace and water,' Siniora said. This was essential if the Lebanese government was 'to become the sole monopoly of holding weapons in the country...,' he added. 'Very important as well is to seek the support of President Bush so that Lebanon will not become in any way a ball in the courtyard of others or ... a courtyard for the confrontations of others in the region,' Siniora said. Lebanon's rival leaders are engaged in a 'national dialogue' aimed at resolving the country's political crisis, the worst since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war. One key issue is the disarming of Hezbollah... The Shi'i Muslim group says its weapons are still required to liberate Shaba Farms and to defend Lebanon against any Israeli threats."
7. Amos Harel, Aluf Benn and Gideon Alon, "Gov't okays massive strikes on Lebanon', Ha'aretz,13 July 2006.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

10. Robin Wright, "Strikes are called part of broad strategy," Washington Post, Sunday 16 July 2006; A15.

11. Ibid.

12. Tanya Reinhart, Israel-Palestine - how to end the war of 1948, Seven Stories press 2002, 2005, p. 83-87. See "How Israel left Lebanon" (Media articles section, as of Thursday).

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