

Olmert's testimony reveals the real goal of the war in Lebanon

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Nazareth. 12 March 2007. Israel's supposedly "defensive" assault on Hizbullah last summer, in which more than 1,000 Lebanese civilians were killed in a massive aerial bombardment that ended with Israel littering the country's south with cluster bombs, was cast in a definitively different light last week by Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert.

His leaked testimony to the Winograd Committee — investigating the government's failures during the month-long attack — suggests that he had been preparing for such a war at least four months before the official *casus belli*: the capture by Hizbullah of two Israeli soldiers from a border post on 12 July 2006. Lebanon's devastation was apparently designed to teach both Hizbullah and the country's wider public a lesson.

Olmert's new account clarifies the confusing series of official justifications for the war from the time.

First, we were told that the seizure of the soldiers was "an act of war" by Lebanon and that a "shock and awe" campaign was needed to secure their release. Or, as the then Chief of Staff Dan Halutz — taking time out from disposing of his shares before market prices fell — explained, his pilots were going to "turn the clock back 20 years" in Lebanon.

Then the army claimed that it was trying to stop Hizbullah's rocket strikes. But the bombing campaign targeted not only the rocket launchers but much of Lebanon, including Beirut. (It was, of course, conveniently overlooked that Hizbullah's rockets fell as a response to the Israeli bombardment and not the other way round.)

And finally we were offered variations on the theme that ended the fighting: the need to push Hizbullah (and, incidentally, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese civilians) away from the northern border with Israel.

That was the thrust of UN Resolution 1701 that brought about the official end of hostilities in mid-August. It also looked suspiciously like the reason why Israel chose at the last-minute to dump up to a million tiny bomblets — old US stocks of cluster munitions with a very high failure rate — that are lying in south Lebanon's fields, playgrounds and back yards waiting to explode.

What had been notable before Olmert's latest revelation was the clamour of the military command to distance itself from Israel's failed attack on Hizbullah. After his resignation, Halutz blamed the political echelon (meaning primarily Olmert), while his subordinates blamed both Olmert and Halutz. The former Chief of Staff was rounded on mainly because, it was claimed, being from the air force, he had over-estimated the likely effectiveness of his

pilots in “neutralising” Hizbullah’s rockets.

Given this background, Olmert has been obliging in his testimony to Winograd. He has not only shouldered responsibility for the war to the Committee, but, if Israeli media reports are to be believed, he has also publicised the fact by leaking the details.

Olmert told Winograd that, far from making war on the hoof in response to the capture of the two soldiers (the main mitigating factor for Israel’s show of aggression), he had been planning the attack on Lebanon since at least March 2006.

His testimony is more than plausible. Allusions to pre-existing plans for a ground invasion of Lebanon can be found in Israeli reporting from the time. On the first day of the war, for example, the Jerusalem Post reported: “Only weeks ago, an entire reserve division was drafted in order to train for an operation such as the one the IDF is planning in response to Wednesday morning’s Hizbullah attacks on IDF forces along the northern border.”

Olmert defended the preparations to the Committee on the grounds that Israel expected Hizbullah to seize soldiers at some point and wanted to be ready with a harsh response. The destruction of Lebanon would deter Hizbullah from considering another such operation in the future.

There was an alternative route that Olmert and his commanders could have followed: they could have sought to lessen the threat of attacks on the northern border by damping down the main inciting causes of Israel’s conflict with Hizbullah.

According to Olmert’s testimony, he was seeking just such a solution to the main problem: a small corridor of land known as the Shebaa Farms claimed by Lebanon but occupied by Israel since 1967. As a result of the Farms area’s occupation, Hizbullah has argued that Israel’s withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 was incomplete and that the territory still needed liberating.

Olmert’s claim, however, does not stand up to scrutiny.

The Israeli media revealed in January that for much of the past two years Syria’s leader, Bashar Assad, has been all but prostrating himself before Israel in back-channel negotiations over the return of Syrian territory, the Golan, currently occupied by Israel. Although those talks offered Israel the most favourable terms it could have hoped for (including declaring the Golan a peace park open to Israelis), Sharon and then Olmert — backed by the US — refused to engage Damascus.

A deal on the Golan with Syria would almost certainly have ensured that the Shebaa Farms were returned to Lebanon. Had Israel or the US wanted it, they could have made considerable progress on this front.

The other major tension was Israel’s repeated transgressions of the northern border, complemented by Hizbullah’s own, though less frequent, violations. After the army’s withdrawal in 2000, United Nations monitors recorded Israeli warplanes violating Lebanese airspace almost daily. Regular overflights were made to Beirut, where pilots used sonic booms to terrify the local population, and drones spied on much of the country. Again, had Israel halted these violations of Lebanese sovereignty, Hizbullah’s own breach of Israeli sovereignty in attacking the border post would have been hard to justify.

And finally, when Hizbullah did capture the soldiers, there was a chance for Israel to negotiate over their return. Hizbullah made clear from the outset that it wanted to exchange the soldiers for a handful of Lebanese prisoners still in Israeli jails. But, of course, as Olmert's testimony implies, Israel was not interested in talks or in halting its bombing campaign. That was not part of the plan.

We can now start to piece together why.

According to the leaks, Olmert first discussed the preparations for a war against Lebanon in January and then asked for detailed plans in March.

Understandably given the implications, Olmert's account has been decried by leading Israeli politicians. Effi Eitam has pointed out that Olmert's version echoes that of Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who claims his group knew that Israel wanted to attack Lebanon.

And Yuval Steinitz argues that, if a war was expected, Olmert should not have approved a large cut to the defence budget only weeks earlier. The explanation for that, however, can probably be found in the forecasts about the war's outcome expressed in cabinet by Halutz and government ministers. Halutz reportedly believed that an air campaign would defeat Hizbullah in two to three days, after which Lebanon's infrastructure could be wrecked unimpeded. Some ministers apparently thought the war would be over even sooner.

In addition, a red herring has been offered by the General Staff, whose commanders are claiming to the Israeli media that they were kept out of the loop by the prime minister. If Olmert was planning a war against Lebanon, they argue, he should not have left them so unprepared.

It is an intriguing, and unconvincing, proposition: who was Olmert discussing war preparations with, if not with the General Staff? And how was he planning to carry out that war if the General Staff was not intimately involved?

More interesting are the dates mentioned by Olmert. His first discussion of a war against Lebanon was held on 8 January 2006, four days after he became acting prime minister following Ariel Sharon's brain haemorrhage and coma. Olmert held his next meeting on the subject in March, presumably immediately after his victory in the elections. There were apparently more talks in April, May and July.

Rather than the impression that has been created by Olmert of a rookie prime minister and military novice "going it alone" in planning a major military offensive against a neighbouring state, a more likely scenario starts to take shape. It suggests that from the moment that Olmert took up the reins of power, he was slowly brought into the army's confidence, first tentatively in January and then more fully after his election. He was allowed to know of the senior command's secret and well-advanced plans for war — plans, we can assume, his predecessor, Ariel Sharon, a former general, had been deeply involved in advancing.

But why would Olmert now want to shoulder responsibility for the unsuccessful war if he only approved, rather than formulated, it? Possibly because Olmert, who has appeared militarily weak and inexperienced to the Israeli public, does not want to prove his critics right. And also because, with most of his political capital exhausted, he would be unlikely to survive a battle for Israeli hearts and minds against the army (according to all polls, the most revered institution in Israeli society) should he try to blame them for last summer's

fiasco. With Halutz gone, Olmert has little choice but to say “mea culpa”.

What is the evidence that Israel’s generals had already established the protocols for a war?

First, an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, published soon after the outbreak of war, revealed that the Israeli army had been readying for a wide-ranging assault on Lebanon for years, and had a specific plan for a “Three-Week War” that they had shared with Washington think-tanks and US officials.

“More than a year ago, a senior Israeli army officer began giving PowerPoint presentations, on an off-the-record basis, to US and other diplomats, journalists and think tanks, setting out the plan for the current operation in revealing detail,” wrote reporter Matthew Kalman.

That view was confirmed this week by an anonymous senior officer who told the Haaretz newspaper that the army had a well-established plan for an extensive ground invasion of Lebanon, but that Olmert had shied away from putting it into action. “I don’t know if he [Olmert] was familiar with the details of the plan, but everyone knew that the IDF [army] had a ground operation ready for implementation.”

And second, we have an interview in the Israeli media with Meyrav Wurmser, the wife of one of the highest officials in the Bush Administration, David Wurmser, Vice-President Dick Cheney’s adviser on the Middle East. Meyrav Wurmser, an Israeli citizen, is herself closely associated with MEMRI, a group translating (and mistranslating) speeches by Arab leaders and officials that is known for its ties to the Israeli secret services.

She told the website of Israel’s leading newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, that the US stalled over imposing a ceasefire during Israel’s assault on Lebanon because the Bush Administration was expecting the war to be expanded to Syria.

“The anger [in the White House] is over the fact that Israel did not fight against the Syrians. The neocons are responsible for the fact that Israel got a lot of time and space. They believed that Israel should be allowed to win. A great part of it was the thought that Israel should fight against the real enemy, the one backing Hizbullah. It was obvious that it is impossible to fight directly against Iran, but the thought was that its [Iran’s] strategic and important ally [Syria] should be hit.”

In other words, the picture that emerges is of a long-standing plan by the Israeli army, approved by senior US officials, for a rapid war against Lebanon — followed by possible intimidatory strikes against Syria — using the pretext of a cross-border incident involving Hizbullah. The real purpose, we can surmise, was to weaken what are seen by Israel and the US to be Tehran’s allies before an attack on Iran itself.

That was why neither the Americans nor Israel wanted, or appear still to want, to negotiate with Assad over the Golan and seek a peace agreement that could — for once — change the map of the Middle East for the better.

Despite signs of a slight thawing in Washington’s relations with Iran and Syria in the past few days, driven by the desperate US need to stop sinking deeper into the mire of Iraq, Damascus is understandably wary.

The continuing aggressive Israeli and US postures have provoked a predictable reaction from Syria: it has started building up its defences along the border with Israel. But in the

Alice Through the Looking Glass world of Israeli military intelligence, that response is being interpreted — or spun — as a sign of an imminent attack by Syria.

Such, for example, is the opinion of Martin Van Creveld, an Israeli professor of military history, usually described as eminent and doubtless with impeccable contacts in the Israeli military establishment, who recently penned an article in the American Jewish weekly, the Forward.

He suggests that Syria, rather than wanting to negotiate over the Golan — as all the evidence suggests — is planning to launch an attack on Israel, possibly using chemical weapons, in October 2008 under cover of fog and rain. The goal of the attack? Apparently, says the professor, Syria wants to “inflict casualties” and ensure Jerusalem “throws in the towel”.

What’s the professor’s evidence for these Syrian designs? That its military has been on an armaments shopping spree in Russia, and has been studying the lessons of the Lebanon war.

He predicts (of Syria, not Israel) the following: “Some incident will be generated and used as an excuse for opening rocket fire on the Golan Heights and the Galilee.” And he concludes: “Overall the emerging Syrian plan is a good one with a reasonable chance of success.”

And what can stop the Syrians? Not peace talks, argues Van Creveld. “Obviously, much will depend on what happens in Iraq and Iran. A short, successful American offensive in Iran may persuade Assad that the Israelis, much of whose hardware is either American or American-derived, cannot be countered, especially in the air. Conversely, an American withdrawal from Iraq, combined with an American-Iranian stalemate in the Persian Gulf, will go a long way toward untying Assad’s hands.”

It all sounds familiar. Iran wants the nuclear destruction of Israel, and Syria wants Jerusalem to “throw in the towel” — or so the neocons and the useful idiots of “the clash of civilisations” would have us believe. The fear must be that they get their way and push Israel and the US towards another pre-emptive war — or maybe two.

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