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Middle East

"Israel is holding a whole population hostage"

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July 18, Gilbert Achcar talked to US Socialist Worker's Alan Maass about the causes and background of the Israeli assault on Lebanon.

THE U.S. media place the blame for Israel's attack on Hezbollah, for "starting" the violence? Is that how you view the situation?

WHATEVER ONE thinks about Hezbollah or the operation mounted by Hezbollah—and I do have my own reservations about its appropriateness with regard to its foreseeable consequences—this cannot by any logic justify what Israel is doing.

The killing of the seven Israeli soldiers and the kidnapping of two soldiers was an act of war, and Lebanon and Israel are two countries that are still at war.

Israel regularly encroaches on Lebanon's sovereignty: it has aggressed the country innumerable times, especially after 1967 (the first Israeli devastating attack on Beirut's airport took place in 1968); it invaded a small piece of Lebanese territory in 1967 (the Shebaa farms), a big chunk of southern Lebanon in 1978, half of Lebanon in 1982; it then occupied a big part of the country until 1985, its southern part until 2000, and it still holds the stretch of Lebanese territory that it seized in 1967.

Since 2000, there has been an ongoing low-intensity war between Hezbollah and Israel: cross-border skirmishes, covert Israeli action in Lebanon, including assassination of Hezbollah leaders, etc.

But what Israel is carrying out now in Lebanon is massive retaliation against a whole population. It is holding a whole population and country hostage and trying to impose its conditions.

This brutality is most cowardly, because whatever military means Hezbollah—or the whole of the Lebanese state, for that matter—possess are dwarfed by the military power of the state of Israel.

This isn't some kind of an equal fight, despite the fact that Hezbollah is retaliating with some rockets. One of the world's mightiest military powers is committing a naked aggression against one of the weakest states in the Middle East, and murdering scores of people.

They have already killed over 200 people in less than one week, and the number keeps growing day after day. The overwhelming majority, more than 90 percent, of Israel's victims are uninvolved civilians. They are neither fighters, nor even militants; just ordinary civilians, families and a considerable number of children appallingly torn to pieces by Israeli bombs.

Israel is destroying the infrastructure of the country. It is also destroying the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of people. Lebanon is a country where the summer season is very important to thousands and thousands of people—the large proportion of the population that get seasonal jobs in the tourism sector and depend on these earnings for their living for the whole year. And now these people are being fired by the tens of thousands because everybody understands that there won't be any "summer season" in Lebanon.

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If you take all this into consideration and compare it to whatever border operation Hezbollah executed, it is absolutely clear that this has become just a pretextâ€”seized on by Israel, backed by the United States and other countries, to try to impose what they have been attempting to force since 2004.

That year, they had the UN Security Council adopt a resolution calling not only for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, but also for the disarmament of armed groups in the countryâ€”meaning, above all, Hezbollah, and secondarily, the Palestinians in their refugee camps.

THE DOUBLE standard of Western media presentations of the situation and the hypocrisy of Israel's statements are so glaring that they constitute by themselves a moral aggressionâ€”for example, the capture of one soldier by the Palestinians becomes Israel's justification for a murderous and destructive assault on Gaza, while Israel holds close to 10,000 Palestinian prisoners in its jails, most of whom are civilians abducted by Israel in the territory that it occupies since 1967 in total violation of international law.

WE KNOW this double standard well. Noam Chomsky has made it one of his specialties for so many years to denounce the permanent double standards and hypocrisy in the imperial countries and in their media. We are now witnessing an appalling new case of that same double standard.

And the fact is that if this hypocrisy can go unnoticed for an average audience in Western countries, you can be sure that in the overwhelming majority of Third World countriesâ€”and, of course, in Muslim countries, and, even more so, in Arab countriesâ€”the double standard is conspicuously and outrageously obvious.

That's why people don't give any credit to the utterances of Western leadersâ€”to the Bush administration's talk about democracy and other lies.

Instead, what we are seeing right now is that the hatred toward not only Israel but the United States, and all the other Western countries backing Israel and allying with the United States, is reaching heights which are far beyond what existed before September 11, 2001.

In other words, the United States and the state of Israel are preparing for the rest of the world, including their own populations, nightmarish events, compared to which 9/11, I'm afraid, will be only a foretaste.

People in the West, especially in the United States, have to become aware of the hypocrisy of their government, and of this total lack of justice and even humanitarian commiseration in dealing with the Arab populations of the Middle East.

They have to become aware of the fact that, for very good reason, the Arab and Muslim peoples are coming to perceive that they are considered as sub-human beings, and that their lives have no value in the eyes of Israel, the United States and their allies.

Therefore, they become receptive to the kind of discourse that comes from the likes of Osama bin Ladenâ€”that if our civilian lives have no value to them, then their civilian lives should have no value to us. So we are reaching a completely infernal situation because of the criminal reactionary policies of the U.S. administration and the Israeli government.

WHAT ARE Israel's goals in carrying out this assault?

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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING, both Israel and the United States consider their main enemy in the Middle East to be not bin Laden or al-Qaeda—these are only minor nuisances in their eyes, if conveniently useful nuisances—but Iran.

There is what they call the Shiite axis or crescent, which has its source in Iran, and goes through the pro-Iranian Shiite forces in Iraq, through the Syrian government, which is allied to Iran, and reaches Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This is why they consider Hezbollah a very important enemy—because with their kind of conception of the world, they see everything through their obsession with what they consider to be their main enemy state. At the time of the Cold War, they used to see everything worldwide in terms of a confrontation with the former Soviet Union. Now, they see everything in the Middle East in terms of a confrontation with Iran.

Besides that, Israel has its own specific reasons for wanting to get rid of Hezbollah, as the organization that played the major role in forcing Israel to withdraw from Lebanon, in 2000. This is an organization that is permanently defying Israel by its very existence, its very presence.

Ever since Israel left Lebanon, there's been a determination to take revenge on Hezbollah, and we're now witnessing Israel in the midst of carrying this out, using the pretext of the border clashes.

THE U.S. government denounces Hezbollah as a band of terrorists. What is the actual role that it plays in Lebanon?

THROUGHOUT THE years, Lebanese politics have had a communal dynamic, so you have some kind of identification of communities with this or that political organization. Hezbollah managed to become the main force in the Shiite community, which is the largest minority in Lebanon, where no religious community constitutes a majority.

Hezbollah came to play this role for a variety of reasons. The major one is the role that Hezbollah played in liberating southern Lebanon, where the Shiite community is concentrated, from the Israeli invasion.

But there are other factors. Generally speaking, the rise of Hezbollah's influence fits into a framework that we've seen at the regional level for the last 30 years, where the failure of the left and the bankruptcy of nationalist leaderships create a void in the leadership of the mass movement that has been filled by organizations of an Islamic fundamentalist character.

This was very much propelled by the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The shock wave of the revolution was tremendous in the area—especially, of course, among the Shiites, since Iran is a Shiite country.

The birth of Hezbollah was the result of the conjunction of this shock wave with the conditions created by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It was born after the invasion, and its rise was associated with its success in the fight against the occupation.

Another factor is the way that Hezbollah managed to build its social base. Hezbollah was very much backed by Iran from its founding. Tehran trains and funds Hezbollah, and the organization has made clever use of the funds that it gets. It organizes several kinds of social services and a social network, which helps huge numbers of Shiite families.

It also managed to translate the clout built through the resistance in political terms, when it entered the elections. Hezbollah has an important fraction in the Lebanese parliament and there are even Hezbollah ministers in the

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Lebanese government.

So it's not a "terrorist" organization, as Washington's and Israel's terrorist governments call it. It is a mass party fully involved in the legal political life in Lebanon.

No one in Lebanon, except for a tiny minority of ultra reactionaries, considers what Hezbollah does in confronting Israel to be "terrorism." The Lebanese government itself considers it as national resistance.

CAN YOU talk about how Israel's assault on Lebanon is connected to the intensified war on Palestinians since Hamas won control of the Palestinian Authority?

THERE ARE several connections. To be sure, there are connections of a kind that fit into Washington's conspiracy theory.

Hamas and Hezbollah are both organizations in the same regional alliance. Part of Hamas's leadership live in exile in Syria, and it has very good relations with Iran. Tehran backs Hamas: when the new Palestinian government was elected, and there was a boycott organized by the Western powers and Israel, Iran was the first country to pledge support for the Palestinians to compensate for that boycott.

The other connection is the result of how Israel's onslaught on Gaza has been so traumatizing for the whole region.

Whatever the original motivation for Hezbollah's operation that captured the Israelisâ€”I'm saying this, because Hezbollah's chief Hassan Nasrallah said that it had been months in the planningâ€”when it took place, it was seen across the whole Middle East as a legitimate and necessary gesture of solidarity with the people of Gaza who are being crushed by Israel. That's why there was a lot of sympathy for it.

Like in Lebanon now, Israel used the pretext of the abduction of one of its soldiers in Gaza to hold the whole population hostage and begin a frenzy of destruction and murder that falls into the canons of state mass terrorism of the worst sort known in history.

HOW DOES the war on Lebanon fit with the other wars that the U.S. and Israel are carrying out in the Middle East?

FOR ISRAEL and the U.S., the main enemy, as I said, is the whole alliance, with Iran as the most central part of the alliance. The main target is the Iranian regime, which they want to get rid of, in one way or another.

The Syrian regime is more of a secondary enemy. I don't believe that there is a real drive toward overthrowing that regime. Israeli officials explain that they don't wish to see a new Iraq unfolding at their border, because they know that if the Syrian regime were to collapse, that's what you would get: a chaotic situation that could very much threaten the security of Israel.

Of course, they would like to get the Syrian government to break with Iran. And they want to compel Tehran, too, to abide by their rules. But because they don't have any confidence in the Iranian regime, they wish that they could overthrow it in one way or another. That's their basic goal: what they call in Washingtonese "regime change."

With the prevailing replica of the Cold War imperialist mentality, Hezbollah is presented as a mere agency of Iran. Now, to be sure, it's no secret to anyone that Hezbollah is closely linked to both Damascus and Tehran. And

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Hezbollah would have been foolish to undertake its July 12 attack without some degree of coordination with its backers.

So what? Unlike those of the Afghan mujahadeen, when they were fighting against the Soviet occupation of their country, the weapons Hezbollah is using are, of course, not U.S.-made or U.S.-provided!

It is absolutely normal for forces confronted with much more powerful enemies to try to find external sources of support. Hezbollah has to get the means from somewhere to be able to resist.

Or does Washington believe that it is entitled to intervene wherever it wants by the sole right of its "manifest destiny"â€”for instance, backing today the so-called People's Mujahedin of Iran in its cross-border attacks against Iran from U.S.-occupied Iraq, after having backed yesterday the far more significant contras against Nicaragua's governmentâ€”while Iran has no right to support its correligionists in Lebanon or Palestine. This chutzpah is only exceeded by U.S. complaints against Iranian interference in Iraq, a country under U.S. occupation!

The fact that Hezbollah has links to Syria and Iran doesn't mean in the least that it is not waging a legitimate national resistance struggleâ€”in the same way that the fact that the Vietnamese were backed by this or that Communist country didn't mean in the least that they were not fighting for the liberation of their country.