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Middle East

Lebanon and the Israeli Strategy of Intimidation

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[This article was written hours before the mass terrorist act that targeted Hezbollah members through pagers in the afternoon of 17 September, thus enhancing its title's topicality.]

In recent days, Israeli threats regarding an imminent attack on Lebanon have multiplied, especially since the Israeli pre-emptive attack on Hezbollah on the 25th of August, which was followed by the party's attack in retaliation for the assassination of military commander Fouad Shukr. Since that day, a chorus began to blame Benjamin Netanyahu for the size of the pre-emptive operation, which some Zionist commentators saw as less than what was required, as they wish for an attack that goes beyond military targets to reach deterrent proportions by unleashing intensive destruction on the population concentrations in which the party prevails.

What is noticeable is that the blaming was not limited to the most extremist members of the Zionist far right, champions of permanent outbidding, but it also included the Zionist "centre" represented by Benny Gantz, one of the leaders of the opposition to Netanyahu, a former Chief of Staff of the Israeli army and a member of the war cabinet that was formed to oversee the reoccupation of Gaza until his resignation from it last June, thus causing its disbanding. Gantz commented on the attack as "too little, too late". A commentator in Maariv, the newspaper that represents the views of the Zionist "centre-right", wrote that the prevention of what Hezbollah was preparing was not enough, but what was rather required was a large-scale air campaign that would deter the party from continuing to exchange missiles across the border, allowing Israelis displaced since the beginning of the current war to return to their homes.

The debate has since escalated in Zionist circles, while the pillars of the Zionist far right rushed to ward off the accusation from their ally Netanyahu, who brought them to power, by seeking to divert the criticism to the minister of war, Netanyahu's rival in the government and within the Likud Party, Yoav Galant. The latter's response was to outbid his critics by stressing the need to expand the scope of the war with Hezbollah and give it priority over the war in Gaza, whose main goals, in his opinion, have been achieved. The current Israeli Chief of Staff, Herzi Halevi, has since emphasized the effectiveness of the attacks that his forces have launched and are still launching while they prepare for a large-scale war against Hezbollah, including exercises conducted at the end of last month that comprised infantry training for a ground attack on Lebanon.

Netanyahu himself has contributed to the beating of the drums for the coming war on Lebanon, through one of his close associates in the Likud Party who attributed to him the intention to launch a war that will make the Beirut suburb "look like Gaza", as the man put it, and that will be preceded by a "preventive" attack similar to the one on the 25th of August, but lasting a few days rather than just a few minutes or hours. The Commander of Israel's Northern Command, Major General Ori Gordin, a veteran of a long series of wars beginning with the last phase of the Zionist occupation of southern Lebanon (1985-2000), participated in this one-upmanship. According to news leaked from his entourage, Gordin requested a green light for the Zionist army to reoccupy a buffer zone in southern Lebanon. Since the same news indicated that Galant and Halevi disagreed with Gordin on the issue of launching a large-scale war on Lebanon at the present time, the matter seems to fall within the tug-of-war between Netanyahu and Galant. The feud between the two men reached the point of rumours that the former is about to dismiss the latter from his ministerial position.

The Biden administration feared that this one-upmanship would lead to a major Israeli attack on Lebanon at the current time, which it does not want for two reasons: first, because it is in a "lame duck" condition that would prevent it from being able to control the situation, and second, because a new war would appear as a failure of its efforts, which its opponent, Donald Trump, will exploit in his electoral campaign at the expense of Biden's current vice

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president and his party's candidate to succeed him as president. Washington hastily sent its special envoy for the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, Amos Hochstein, who met with Galant on Monday. The minister of war elevated his tone, stressing during the meeting that war on Lebanon was imminent and that he no longer trusted the possibility of reaching peacefully what Washington tried to achieve through negotiations. The Biden administration has been advocating a return to UN Security Council Resolution 1701 adopted at the end of the 2006 war, with the withdrawal of Hezbollah forces from southern Lebanon to north of the Litani River, and their replacement by the Lebanese regular army, in addition to the UN forces present there.

Where is the truth in all this one-upmanship and intimidation? We can only repeat here what we emphasized at the end of last June, which is that "both sides, Netanyahu and the opposition, believe that there is no third option on their northern front but for Hezbollah to acquiesce and accept to withdraw north..., or for them to wage a fierce war against Hezbollah at a high cost, which they all see as necessary in order to reinforce their state's deterrent capacity, significantly diminished on the Lebanese front since 7 October." ("Is the drumbeat of war on the Israel/Lebanon front a prelude to all-out war?", 25 June 2024). Since the Zionist state cannot launch a large-scale war on Lebanon without full US participation, especially that the Biden administration has been warning that such a war would turn into a regional conflagration, it is difficult for either Netanyahu or Galant to support the initiative to launch a surprise large-scale aggression on Lebanon without Washington's green light. Israel would not have been able even to wage its genocidal war on Gaza without US participation, and Hezbollah is much stronger than Hamas and its allies inside the Strip.

Netanyahu is, therefore, currently acting with his eyes on the US election: If he feels that Trump will win, he will wait for the matter to be confirmed, or even for Trump's return to the White House, before launching a war on Lebanon in collusion with him, as a preamble for a large-scale aggression on the nuclear reactors in Iran itself. If, on the other hand, he feels that Kamala Harris's victory is the most likely, or if it happens in the election on 5 November, this will prompt him to take advantage of the remaining time of Biden's presence in the White House to escalate matters to a state of war. It is likely that he will then seek to ensure that Biden is implicated in supporting the aggression by giving Hezbollah an ultimatum with a specific and short deadline to submit to pressure and withdraw.

Netanyahu's recent positions, including his rejection of the ceasefire in Gaza and the exchange of captives sought by the Biden administration, cannot indeed be understood without taking into account the US election. Contrary to analyses that focused on Israeli domestic politics alone, there is no doubt that Netanyahu's refusal to grant the Biden administration what would appear to be a political achievement amid the current US election campaign is a great service to Trump, the fruits of which Netanyahu will seek to reap if the latter wins the presidency for a second time.

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[Gilbert Achcar blog](#)

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