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Middle East

Israel's new Lebanon war

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The present war in Lebanon began with the kidnapping of two and killing of three Israeli soldiers by Hizbollah. The Israeli Defence Force responded with a massive campaign of air strikes across Lebanon. Hizbollah in turn responded by firing missiles into Israel. On the simple basis of this chronology, IDF actions cannot be explained as "self defence" against the Hizbollah missile attacks. In any event they were grossly disproportionate, deliberately targeting densely populated civilian areas and basic infrastructure. Of the hundreds of civilians to have died over three weeks, 20 are Lebanese for every one Israeli.

In the first instance therefore, this is a war of criminal aggression by the Israeli state - designed to destabilise Lebanon and the region and assert the Zionist state's power by bullying weak and compliant states into submission. The real Israeli agenda was set out early on by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, to wage war against the "axis of evil that stretches from Teheran to Damascus."

Blame for the war cannot be ascribed to Hizbollah's initial action - however risky any military engagement with the IDF may be. To state otherwise is to accept that the people of Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere should just sit on their hands.

[<http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L320xH213/lb2-05126.jpg>]

It was a very limited response to a long history of IDF kidnapping of Lebanese citizens, an illegal occupation of the Shab'aa Farms area of the country and repeated bombings and other aggressive cross border incursions. And as even staunch supporters of the Israeli state have pointed out the IDF onslaught made no sense militarily if the primary aim was releasing prisoners or stopping Hizbollah missiles. It is therefore logical to assume that the origins of this onslaught are independent. Experienced observers, like veteran Israeli oppositionist Uri Avnery believe it was years in the planning and only awaited a pretext. In any event, once Hizbollah called for an immediate unconditional ceasefire, the Israeli state (in refusing to agree) was entirely responsible for any continued violence.

The Hizbollah kidnapping came after two weeks of an Israeli onslaught on Gaza - that still continues at full strength - slaughtering civilians, kidnapping politicians and others and destroying basic infrastructure. This in turn followed months of sanctions against the democratically elected Hamas-led Palestinian Administration designed to smash it. The European Union and the USA both supported the blockade. Pro-western regimes across the Arab world were silent. UN relief organisations and other NGOs all declared a major humanitarian crisis. Non-EU Switzerland was the sole western state voicing protest. Hizbollah's action was undoubtedly a legitimate act of solidarity against this general trend - interpreted and welcome as such on the street in Gaza and across the Middle East.

Hizbollah is not a "terrorist" organisation, whatever that is. It is a mass movement with dozens of MPs and ministers in the national government. This government is a coalition that straddles all sections of Lebanese society - meaning that the party is accepted as a legitimate democratic entity by nearly all strands of that society, whatever the disagreements over politics or religion. It is a resistance movement that owes its origins to the 1982 Israeli invasion of the country (which involved the notorious Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp massacres organised by Olmert's predecessor as PM and political mentor, Ariel Sharon) and 18 years of occupation. Its legitimacy stems from its role in resisting this occupation and finally driving Israel out - in the context of the unwillingness or inability of other forces in Lebanon or the Arab world to take action.

As socialists in favour of secularism in politics, we cannot give political support to Hizbollah given its religious character. Nonetheless, like Hamas it is strongly rooted in and serves a community that is religious. Like Hamas it is often wrongly characterised as "fundamentalist" when it has nothing in common with Taliban-style politics. It has, by

its actions, shown willing to work with other forces for the unity of a multi-confessional Lebanon.

Whilst reserving the right to criticise its politics and tactics, we nonetheless call for socialists, anti-imperialists and anti-war activists to show unconditional solidarity with its resistance to Israel's murderous attack and other attempts to interfere with the right of the Lebanese people to free self-determination.

Given the Israeli state's stance in claiming to "root out Hizbollah terrorism", it is ironic that the Prime Minister of Lebanon, which Israel sees as an ally, himself described Hizbollah as a "resistance movement" as the bombs rained down on Beirut. And in back door diplomatic negotiations by the USA and European powers, Hizbollah has entrusted the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, a member of the Shia-based Amal party to speak on their behalf. Therefore attempts "root out" Hizbollah threaten to pull down with it the political as well as economic and social infrastructure.

It seems that Israeli strategists may have been fooled by Western propaganda about last year's "Cedar Revolution" (in which mass mobilisations following the murder of Rafik Hariri and the fingering of the Syrian government for being involved led to Syria being driven out) and the Lebanese elections that followed. It may be that Olmert sought to drive a sectarian wedge into Lebanese society to get other communities to turn on Hizbollah - similar to Israel's utilisation of the Falange and Christian right forces during the 1970s civil war and the 18 year occupation.

If so, this seems to have been a massive miscalculation. There have been no mass rallies denouncing Hizbollah despite the tremendous devastation and loss of life across the country. Israel has failed to shift the question of "Hizbollah disarmament" from its previous position within the politics of Lebanon - one to be resolved internally, by agreement of all parties, if at all.

Another interpretation is that this was no Israeli miscalculation and it was a frustration at Hizbollah's integration into the country's body politic that fed a desire to smash it - this was an exercise in attempted regime change. This would explain the targeting of the Lebanese army and even one or two Christian communities - almost as though to teach them a lesson. Certainly once it was apparent that air strikes were not sufficient, the military invasion was underway the IDF took on the job for itself.

In this context the deliberate targeting of an unarmed UN outpost and Red Cross ambulances - despite the risk of increasing international isolation - may have been calculated as necessary to remove any independent observers from the scene before the real slaughter. A not dissimilar tactic to the deliberate targeting of hospitals and doctors during ferocious US assaults on Fallujah and other cities in Iraq - in order to minimise independent reports of atrocities.

These considerations may also explain the reluctance of Israel and its backers to embrace the idea of a new international force in southern Lebanon - fearing that it may be an inadequate tool for the desired forcible destruction of Hizbollah.

Which is not to say that any international intervention into Lebanon - whether under the guise of the UN, NATO or other umbrella - should be supported. On the contrary it should be opposed. History, in Lebanon and elsewhere, has shown that such an intervention, whatever its terms would inevitably be for the purpose of imposing an agenda dominated by the major imperialist powers - the same forces that control the security council and have set the pace in the so-called "peace process" in Israel/Palestine.

Whatever the Israeli state's calculation, the apparent political and military failure was underlined by a sudden U-turn in announcing a temporary ceasefire, only 48 hours after dismissing the possibility, in response to global outrage at the murderous attack on the village of Qana leaving over 60 civilians dead. This despite Hizbollah having, that day,

launched it's highest daily number of missiles, almost three weeks after the start of war.

If clarity were needed, Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad Siniora told Condoleeza Rice she was not welcome to return to Beirut until the US changed its stance - an unheard of statement from the leader of a small, impoverished pro-western government. As though to rub in the apparent collapse of Israeli/US/British military objectives, Siniora went on to thank Hizbollah for its "sacrifices" in defence of Lebanon's sovereignty. The subsequent climbdown over a ceasefire is a humiliation for the mammoth Washington-financed and organised war machine - made worse by a context of five years of failed war aims in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The USA and Britain have been steadfast in providing unconditional and uncritical support for Israel. This support for the deliberate mass murder of civilians has been transparently obvious to the whole world despite the paper-thin attempt to hide it behind the diplomatic nicety of "opposing an immediate ceasefire" or "the necessity of laying out the basis for a lasting peace".

US/British perspectives have been so indistinguishable to Olmert's that they have used almost exactly the same words. On the 18th July Blair explained the war aims in terms of "an arc of extremism right across that region, that wants to disrupt the process towards democracy and freedom, whether it's in Iraq or in Lebanon or down in the Palestinian territory, that arc of extremism is being supported by countries like Iran and Syria".

The next day he said, "We need to recognise the fundamental nature of the struggle in the region which has far reaching consequences far beyond our own region and even in countries like our own. All over the Middle East there are those who want to modernise their nations who believe as we do in democracy and liberty and tolerance. But ranged against them are extremists who believe the opposite who believe in fundamentalist states and war not against Israeli actions, but against its existence. In virtually every country of the region including on the streets of Baghdad such a struggle is being played out". Who can doubt that the Israeli state, as it always has done, is acting as regional proxy for imperialism?

Imperialist war aims are to continue by other means what has been so disastrously impossible in other parts of the Middle East. The debacle in Iraq and Afghanistan and anxiety over the risks of any military attack on Iran have destabilised the Bush/Blair goal of re-organising the region around an imperialist military-economic game plan. The new "domino theory" of "democratic revolutions" installing a series of compliant pro-western governments on the model of Jordan and Egypt, across the region has been thrown off course in Iraq. Elections in Palestine, Egypt and even Lebanon have given democratic legitimacy to precisely those forces the war was designed to eradicate.

The increasing focus for this imperialist anxiety is Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere. The Lebanon onslaught thus appears to be conceived as a new route to fulfilling these aims - hitting what had been perceived as a soft spot - a "small" guerrilla organisation in a mixed country historically aligned to the West.

But things haven't gone to plan. There have been protests across the middle East. Pro-Western dictatorial regimes like Saudi Arabia, that have sat on their hands or given a tacit nod to this aggression, are openly concerned about destabilisation.

Israeli public support for the war has largely remained rock solid. There have been no mass protests. But the small protests have a capacity to grow, as the lies about the purpose and conduct of the war become obvious and the military, human, financial and diplomatic costs become apparent. Support for those small forces of opposition within Israeli society is a crucial element to solidarity within the imperialist states.

Another key task in Britain is to target British complicity. Public opinion has quickly understood the true picture,

opposing the government's craven stance by a clear majority. Unlike the Iraq war there is no fig leaf of overthrowing a brutal dictator or removing WMDs. Here emperor Blair, from the start, had no clothes. His usual moral claim of "humanitarian interventionism" was immediately revealed as its opposite - moral bankruptcy and collusion with war crimes. Already he is paying a price with deep splits at the highest level of his government among the most senior and loyal cabinet ministers - one of whom, Straw, has broken the basic principle of British parliamentary politics - collective cabinet responsibility.

Of course Straw and others deserve absolutely no credit for this stance, having enthusiastically fought for and implemented five years worth of war mongering across the Middle East and a "war on terror" against the muslim community at home. Similarly when supine Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett woke from her slumbers long enough to protest at US planes sending bombs to Israel stopping over in Prestwich, Glasgow. These splits and vacillations simply go to show quite how weak Blair is and how much pressure the government is under. He should go now.

During the furore over the recent raid in Forest Gate, East London and the anniversary of the murder of Jean Charles de Menezes, Blair's line was consistently that these steps will continue to be necessary to "protect" British citizens against terrorism. Not only will the current British state stance outrage the Muslim community, but it once again demonstrates that the imperialist state is the cause and driving force behind instability and danger.

We face a highly volatile situation. If Israel and the imperialists succeed in their aims of smashing Hizbollah and re-organising Lebanon this would be a strategic victory in the strategy across the region following which there will be further aggression against Iran and any other less than compliant state.

However if this war does not succeed and, as current events possibly indicate - it radicalises opposition to Zionism and imperialism across Lebanese society and a host of other Arab states against Israel and its backers - it could become a small but significant step towards shifting the balance of political forces against imperialism.

Solidarity action continues to be urgently and visibly needed.