Israel bombs Beirut and threatens heavier strikes

Mike Head
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At least nine people died and 60 were wounded in an eight-hour assault last Thursday and Friday, when Israeli war planes struck two power stations near Beirut, blew up a telephone communication facility in the capital, destroyed two bridges linking Beirut with the south, and bombed a four-storey building in the Bekaa Valley town of Baalbeck.

The air attacks were launched in supposed retaliation for rocket attacks on settlements in northern Israel by Hezbollah, a Shiite group fighting to free southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. But unlike previous reprisals in recent years, which hit Hezbollah bases, the bombing deliberately targetted the civilian population of Beirut, as well as recently rebuilt parts of the country's social and economic infrastructure.

Some of the Israeli air raids and the manner in which civilians died bore a striking resemblance to the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia. The eight victims included five firefighters, who died when an electricity substation in Beirut was bombed by Israeli warplanes after two earlier attacks.

Most of Beirut and the surrounding regions were without electricity on Friday and routes to Sidon, south Lebanon's main city, were cut. Authorities said residents in the capital would be restricted to two hours' electricity a day for at least a month until the power stations could be rebuilt. Damage is estimated at tens of millions of dollars, including at least $US30 million for repairs to the electricity grid. Cellular telephone company Cellis calculates the cost of the damage to its telecommunications station at about $US20 million.

In statements echoed by the US and the Western media, the outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his government had no choice but to retaliate for Hezbollah attacks. In reality, the Israeli military and Netanyahu's cabinet—apparently with the eventual approval of Prime Minister-designate Ehud Barak—chose to dramatically escalate an ongoing low-level conflict across the Israel-Lebanon border.

Moreover, the Israeli military and political establishment has warned that it will strike Lebanon even harder, repeatedly if necessary, and also threatened Syria. In a show of strength on Friday, Israel moved tanks and armoured cars north toward the self-proclaimed 15 kilometre-wide "security zone" that it occupies in south Lebanon.

Outgoing Defence Minister Moshe Arens said he would not hesitate to order a new bombing campaign if Syria "did not get the message" and take action against Hezbollah. Arens claimed that Lebanon was not an independent state but was really part of Syria, which has about 30,000 troops stationed in the country. "When we attack in Lebanon, we are attacking Syrian targets," he said.

Military spokesmen were even more aggressive in asserting their readiness to escalate the conflict. Lieutenant General Shaul Mofaz, the Israeli chief of staff, said: If Hezbollah continues, then the targets are chosen, the planes are armed, the pilots are on alert, their quality is known, and we shall strike." Major General Dan Halutz, assistant chief of operations, said future attacks would target "all sources of power in Lebanon, not just Hezbollah, to convey a message that no-one is immune to an Israeli retaliation".

Arens pointedly denied Syrian reports that the Netanyahu government launched the offensive to embarrass Barak, who is in the final stages of protracted negotiations to form a coalition government after winning the Israeli elections on May 17. "I spoke to Mr Barak," Arens said. "We keep him informed of the situation all the time. We have no intention of embarrassing him. He never said that he objected to the raids."

There had also been reports in Israel that Barak was initially reluctant to allow the Beirut operation to go ahead but decided not to oppose it once the military chiefs insisted on the attack.

For his part, Lebanese Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss held both Barak and Netanyahu responsible for the casualties and damage. "What happened amounts to a catastrophe and is new proof of Israel's unlimited barbarism," he said. An emergency cabinet meeting decided to take Israel to the International Court of Justice to seek compensation.

Hoss said the damage was "practically immeasurable" because it coincided with the start of the tourist season, the most promising since the civil war that erupted in 1975. Luciano Pavarotti had sung in Beirut earlier this month. Despite the raids, Beirut hosted the Miss Europe contest on Friday night. The Baalbeck arts festival is scheduled for next month.

Over the past few years, Lebanon has spent billions of dollars rebuilding infrastructure. Partly as a result, it has a $18 billion debt to the international banks. "It seems that Israel's permanent objective is to hit the Lebanese economy every three years," said parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri.

After several years of intermittent fighting with Hezbollah, in which several dozen people have been killed each year, the Israeli military escalated the conflict last week when its surrogate, the South Lebanon Army, launched artillery attacks in the border region, in the course of which a Lebanese villager was injured.

Hezbollah retaliated with rocket attacks in the Galilee area, saying they were a "warning message" to force Israel to abide by a 1996 agreement to prevent civilian casualties. After the Israeli bombardment of Beirut began, Hezbollah forces responded with heavier missile attacks that killed two civilians and wounded 13 others in a town along the northern border.

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The civilian death toll from Israel's bombing was the greatest since the 1996 “Grapes of Wrath” bombardment of Beirut, which killed at least 200 people, mostly civilians, including more than 100 killed at a UN refugee camp. For 17 days, Israel maintained an air, artillery and naval barrage of Lebanon, and blockaded the ports of Beirut, Sidon and Tyre, forcing 300,000 people to flee their homes.

In the wake of that operation, Israel and the Hezbollah undertook to avoid involving civilians in their conflict, and agreed to the formation of a “truce panel” made up of France, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and the United States. That panel was due to meet on Tuesday to discuss the latest conflict.

But before the panel met, the US had already defended Israel's air raids, while calling on Israel and Arab leaders for restraint. State Department spokesman James Rubin said the US had contacted Syria in an attempt to bring pressure on Hezbollah. “This situation escalated dramatically,” Rubin claimed, “as a result of Hezbollah firing barrages of Katyushas into northern Israel. Israel retaliated with strikes against civilian infrastructure in Lebanon.”

The truth is that Israel is responsible for continuing conflict across the Israel-Lebanon border since the 1970s. It invaded Lebanon in the “Litani Operation” of March 1978, killing an estimated 1,000 civilians, including Palestinian refugees. In June 1978 Israeli forces withdrew to the present “security zone” where they work with the Israeli-financed South Lebanon Army of some 3,000 soldiers. Israeli troops have remained there ever since, in defiance of UN Resolution 425, passed in that year, which calls for Israel's complete withdrawal.

In June 1982, Israel again invaded the rest of Lebanon. In operation “Peace for Galilee” Israeli forces bombed and besieged Beirut for two months until Palestine Liberation Organisation leaders agreed to leave the city. An estimated 18,000 people were killed and 30, 000 injured. The Israeli military only withdrew to its “security zone” in 1985.

In July 1993 Israel launched Operation “Accountability”, a week-long assault designed to drive the entire civilian population of southern Lebanon to Beirut. More than 55 villages were shelled and 300,000 people displaced. Nevertheless, fighting soon resumed along the border.

Despite being Prime Minister-elect, Barak has declined to comment on the Beirut bombing. However, pro-Israeli commentators said the air strikes were a blessing for him, allowing him to pursue the so-called peace process with Syrian President Hafez Assad from a position of political strength. “The attack order by Netanyahu,” wrote Abraham Rabinovich, “probably his last important decision as prime minister, may have been of major service to his successor.”

Just a day before the attack, Barak and Assad praised each other in interviews published in the London-based Arabic *Al-Hayat* newspaper. Assad described Barak as a “strong and honest man” who was eager to make peace with Syria, unlike Netanyahu, with whom it was “useless” to work. Barak said he wanted to make the “peace of the brave” with Assad, whom he credited with “building a strong, independent and self-confident Syria” since seizing power in 1970.

Elements within the Israeli military and the outgoing Likud-led coalition government are known to oppose Barak's reported plan to make a deal with Assad that could include handing back to Syria some of the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. A deal with Syria would also probably mean withdrawing from the south Lebanon “security zone”.

The major powers, particularly the US and the former colonial rulers of the Middle East, France and Britain, have for some years been pushing the Israeli regime to reach an accommodation with the neighbouring Arab capitalist governments, in order to open up the region to large-scale international investment.

While he won the May 17 general election by cautiously embracing this reconciliation, Barak, a former head of the armed forces himself, shares the militarism of the Netanyahu cabinet. Two days after the Beirut bombing Barak held last-minute talks with the present Likud leader Ariel Sharon, about including Likud in his Labour Party-led coalition, offering Sharon a senior ministerial post. Sharon, known for his involvement in every military attack over the past three decades, told reporters Likud would only join the government if it were treated as a real partner, but he thought there was a basis for that. Likud holds 19 seats in the 120-member parliament.

Other parties that have agreed to join Barak's coalition include the far-right National Religious Party, which has five seats. It has demanded that Barak ease his opposition to expanding Zionist settlements in Palestinian areas. NRP leader Yitzhak Levy, the education minister in the Netanyahu government, will become Barak's housing minister. Another partner is the Centre-Right Israel B'Aliya party, based on Russian-speaking immigrants, which holds six seats. Barak has offered its leader, outgoing trade and industry minister Natan Sharansky, control of the Interior Ministry, which selects immigrants on the basis of their “Jewishness”. Barak is still negotiating with the current rulers of the Interior Ministry, the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, who hold 17 seats.

Earlier in the month, Barak concluded coalition agreements with the Centre Party headed by former defence minister Yitzhak Mordechai and the secular Shinui party, giving him the backing of 49 MPs, still 12 short of a majority. Barak won the election under the banner of One Israel, a front that consists of his Labour Party, the Gesher party, based on Sephardic voters, and Meimad, a moderate Orthodox grouping. The Meretz movement, a traditional “left” ally of the Labour Party, will also join the government, adding 10 seats.

Barak has until July 8 to form a government but was expected to present his coalition to parliament this week. Whatever its final parliamentary shape, his regime will be an unstable one, resting heavily on the military. And the military has just demonstrated its readiness to act ruthlessly, taking full advantage of the precedent set by the US-led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

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