Israeli reprisals hit Lebanese civilians

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Israeli air raids have left much of Lebanon without power. The attacks were carried out in violation of the 1996 April Understanding, the American-brokered rules of war on the protection of civilians in Lebanon and Israel.

In the wake of the air raids, Israel and the United States have charged Syria, the dominant force in Lebanon, where it has 30,000 troops, with failing to restrain Hezbollah fighters based in southern Lebanon, who have killed seven Israeli soldiers in the last three weeks. Their accusations increase the possibility of Syria being drawn into the conflict.

Encouraged by Washington's stance, Israeli officials have announced that any future attacks on its army of occupation in southern Lebanon will pave the way for new attacks on Lebanon's infrastructure. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak declared, "We shall respond when and how we want with very painful strikes against all of Syrian-controlled Lebanese territory."

Barak's statement was followed by another Israeli air and artillery attack on villages just north of the Israeli occupied zone. This came despite condemnation of the Israeli attack by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Last week Israeli F-16 bombers targeted three power stations in Jamhour, Zgharta and Baalbeck in Lebanon, the mountain village of Ein Bouswar and the home of a Hezbollah leader in Tyre. Fifteen civilians in Baalbek and at least two people in Tyre were wounded.

The air attacks were launched in retaliation for the deaths of five Israeli soldiers in Israeli-occupied Southern Lebanon in 10 days and Hezbollah's assassination of Akl Hashem, the second-in-command of Israel's proxy force, the militia known as the South Lebanon Army. Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim group that has relied on the patronage of Syria and Iran in its campaign to free southern Lebanon from the Israelis, who have occupied the region for nearly two decades.

Last week's air raids on power stations were a carbon copy of a raid last June on the same power station at Jamhour, where five people died. That power station had only just been replaced at enormous cost. Lebanon has spent billions of dollars rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed during its civil war and is already more than $20 billion in debt to the international banks.

In the latest attacks Beirut lost its entire power supply and much of the country was left without electricity. The hardship is particularly great as the weather is freezing and there is snow on the ground. The Lebanese people face power cuts for the 12 months it could take to repair the power stations, at a cost of at least $50 million.

Barak holds the office of both prime minister and defence minister and is a former chief of staff of Israel's defence forces. He came to power last May, promising a withdrawal from Lebanon by July this year and a final peace settlement with Yassir Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. He also held out hopes of a deal with Syria.

However his actions in the past week belie his election promises. Barak warned, "Those who harmed us will be harmed." He said he would do "whatever it takes" to save Israeli lives. Foreign Minister David Levy was even more aggressive. "The soil of Lebanon will burn", he said, "if Hezbollah fires rockets into Israel."

The prime minister has declared a military state of emergency and ordered all those living just south of the Lebanese border to stay in underground bomb shelters. Anyone who refuses can be arrested. This is despite the fact that Hezbollah has not to date fired rockets into Israel and no Israeli civilians have been hurt since the latest resumption of hostilities in southern Lebanon. Such restraint on Hezbollah's part suggests that Syria is attempting to prevent the conflict from escalating.

Following the air raids there have been further ground attacks on Israeli positions, resulting in the death and wounding of more Israeli soldiers. Israel responded with air attacks on villages north of the “security zone”. Hezbollah described the air raids as "blind aggression and a violation" of earlier accords. It ordered an alert on the southern suburbs of Beirut in anticipation of further Israeli attacks.

Lebanese Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss said it was "Lebanon's destiny to suffer Israel's repeated aggressions, which are aimed at softening our resistance to its occupation of our land." He called on the US to prevent Israel from attacking civilian targets. Syrian radio said that Barak wanted to "obliterate" all chances of peace in the Middle East. The raids were denounced throughout the Arab world.

Israel has been largely responsible for continuing conflict both within Lebanon and across the Israel-Lebanon border since the 1970s. It invaded Lebanon in “Operation Litani” in March 1978, killing an estimated 1,000 civilians, including Palestinian refugees.

In June 1978 Israeli forces withdrew to the present “security zone”. Its purpose was to create a buffer between the Palestinian refugees, whom they drove north to the suburbs of Beirut, and the northern villages of Israel. Israel created and financed its own proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army, to police the region.

In June 1982 Israel invaded the rest of Lebanon. In operation “Peace for Galilee” Israeli forces bombed and besieged Beirut. An estimated 18,000 people were killed and 30,000 injured. The siege ended with the forced evacuation of the PLO leaders from Lebanon in August 1982. Within a few weeks of the evacuation,

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Israeli forces allowed the fascist Phalange to enter the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatilla and massacre 1,200 Palestinians.

The Israeli military only withdrew from Beirut in 1983, settling in its present security zone in 1985. It has occupied southern Lebanon ever since, in defiance of the 1978 UN Security Council Resolution 425, which calls for Israel's complete withdrawal.

The success of Israel's military aggression would not have been possible but for the Egyptian deal with Israel in 1979 and the abandonment of the Palestinians by the Syrian, Lebanese and Arab bourgeois leaders. In 1982 Yassir Arafat, the leader of the PLO, and President Assad of Syria agreed to pool their forces to meet the Israeli attack. But after the Israeli air force had destroyed the Syrian SAM missile systems and 40 of their fighters in one day, Assad agreed to a unilateral truce with Israel without so much as consulting Arafat. This truce has been in effect ever since. Assad thereby paved the way for Israel to besiege Beirut.

Since the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1991, there have been more than 2,000 Israeli air raids on the country. Some of the major operations by Israel in Lebanon include:

* “Operation Accountability”—a seven-day blitz directed against Hezbollah that left 132 Lebanese dead, mainly civilians, shelled 55 villages and drove 300,000 from their homes, in July 1993. Retaliatory Katyusha rocket attacks by Hezbollah killed several Israelis in northern Israel.

* In 1996, the “Operation Grapes of Wrath” bombardment of Beirut, to break Hezbollah's military capability, left at least 200 dead, mainly civilians, including more than 100 killed at a UN refugee camp. For 16 days Israel maintained an air, artillery and naval barrage of Lebanon, and blockaded the ports of Beirut, Sidon and Tyre, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Hezbollah's Katyusha rocket attacks injured 60 Israelis.

It was in the wake of that operation that Israel and 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.

* Israel attacked power stations and bridges in the Beirut area, killing six people, in June 1999. Hezbollah rocket attacks killed two Israeli civilians, the first Israeli deaths since 1995.

The escalation in the conflict comes at a critical time in the three-way, US-sponsored talks between Israel, Syria and Lebanon that resumed at the end of last year after a break of four years. Israel was attempting to co-ordinate a withdrawal from south Lebanon with a peace deal with Syria, thereby further isolating Arafat and the PLO.

President Assad, for all his anti-Zionist rhetoric, has in practical terms been at peace with Israel for nearly two decades. But now, sick and elderly, he is desperate to reach some accommodation with the US and Israel. He is seeking to attract investment into Syria's ailing economy and regain the Golan Heights, lost to Israel in the June 1967 War, and thereby secure the succession of his son, Bashir, to the presidency.

Nearly half a million Syrians are hoping to return to the Golan villages or rebuild their communities on their old sites. Many of those displaced have been living in camps in Damascus and in Daraa, six miles from the Jordanian border. The Golan area is a major horticultural region whose apples, grapes and figs could be processed or sold on both sides of a new border.

Lebanon too is desperate for a deal that will enable it to integrate more readily into the global economy, free from Israeli attacks. But however welcome an end of Israeli occupation and air raids will be to the long-suffering Lebanese people, withdrawal will not significantly alleviate their poverty and hardship.

Talks came to a halt last month when Syria found out that Israel had no intention of making a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the shores of Lake Galilee, the June 4, 1967 border. At best a withdrawal was contingent upon other issues, such as security arrangements for the radar installation on Mount Hermon, normalisation of trade, border and diplomatic relations between the two countries, and water.

A leaked US document showed that while Syria was prepared to make a number of concessions, the Israelis would not even use the word “withdraw”, only “redeploy”. This “redeployment” would exclude civilians, meaning that Israel's Golan settlements of 17,000 people would remain.

It seems that in order to put pressure on Israel to adopt a more conciliatory approach, Syria's President Assad allowed Hezbollah to attack the South Lebanon Army and the Israeli occupation forces, while remaining within the rules of the 1996 Understanding. But if Hezbollah and Assad do not back down, Barak has made it clear that he will use his military superiority to force them into submission. As the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* put it last week, "The Syrians must be given a choice: continue to talk peace with Israel or fight with it in Lebanon."

The Barak government is coming under mounting political and economic pressures on the domestic front. Unemployment is currently at 9.4 percent and the gap between the rich and poor has grown ever wider since Israel abandoned its welfare state policies and embraced “free market” policies of deregulation and privatisation. A series of strikes in education and the public services has disrupted daily life.

The “land for peace” deal with Syria has polarised political opinion in Israel. There is opposition to the peace talks, with demonstrations of tens of thousands opposing a Golan withdrawal. Many fear that an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon will mean that Israel's northern towns will be in the firing line. But more than 100 Israel soldiers have died in the “security zone” and the mounting casualties have raised pressure for an early end to the 22-year occupation.

Meanwhile Barak's One Israel coalition, based on the Labour Party, has been rocked by a scandal over its election financing. The state controller has fined it almost $3.2 million and launched a criminal investigation that will focus on several of Barak's most senior advisors. It has also criticised Barak personally. The prime minister is considering an appeal to the High Court.

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