

Protests denounce Arab leaders' complicity in Israeli assault

Mike Head
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The Israeli onslaught on Lebanon and Gaza has laid bare the widening divide between the victims of the assault—the Palestinian and Arab masses—and the Arab bourgeois ruling elites. Protests have erupted across the Middle East condemning not only Israel and the US, but also the Arab governments, which have either openly supported Israel's offensive or limited themselves to timid verbal protests against it.

For decades, the Arab bourgeoisie has colluded with Washington and Israel to preserve its interests at the expense of the dispossessed Palestinian people and the Arab working population as a whole. But never before have Arab leaders been so open in lining up behind Israeli military aggression. Previously, Arab governments would collaborate behind the scenes and give assurances to Washington or Tel Aviv, but they refrained from publicly denouncing an Arab movement under attack from Israel.

Even before Israel launched its attack on Lebanon, the Egyptian government had acted in conjunction with Israel's assault on Gaza, which began on June 15, by sealing its border with Gaza. It posted 2,500 police on the border to prevent refugees fleeing the invasion and also block Gaza residents from returning from Egypt to protect their homes. That action had already provoked outrage in Egypt, and last Friday Palestinian militants forced open the Rafah border crossing, clearing the way for hundreds of people who had been trapped on the Egyptian side.

On the same day, as the Arab League prepared to convene a foreign ministers' meeting to discuss the attack on Lebanon, President Bush called the leaders of Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia—America's closest Arab allies—and instructed them to adhere to the American-Israeli propaganda line, according to which Hezbollah, and by implication Hezbollah's backers in Iran and Syria, are responsible for the Israeli onslaught on Lebanon.

Jordan's King Abdullah and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak responded with a joint statement on Friday condemning Hezbollah for "adventurism that does not serve Arab interests" and warning against any moves that could edge the region towards "uncalculated confrontations." Soon after, a Saudi spokesman blamed Hezbollah's "uncalculated

adventures" for "exposing Arab nations... to grave dangers without these nations having a say in the matter."

Even as Mubarak and Abdullah met in Cairo, nearly 5,000 people rallied nearby at the Al-Azhar Mosque to protest the Israeli attacks. In the Jordanian capital Amman, more than 2,000 demonstrators gathered at a mosque after Friday prayers, shouting, "Zionists get out, get out!" and "Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan are one people!"

At the Arab League summit held the following day in Cairo, according to delegates who briefed journalists, Saudi Arabian foreign minister Saudi al-Faisal was backed by Jordan, Egypt, several Persian Gulf states and the Palestinian Authority in accusing Hezbollah of "unexpected, inappropriate and irresponsible acts." Reportedly unable to agree on a joint declaration, the meeting ended with a series of token criticisms of the Israeli response, hypocritical declarations of "solidarity with the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples," and a plea to the United Nations Security Council to call for a ceasefire. At the concurrent Group of 8 summit meeting in Russia, Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted with approval that a number of Arab countries had criticised Hezbollah. Bush let it be known that he had spoken to Arab leaders to explain that he would block any G8 or UN call for a ceasefire.

After the Arab League meeting, protests were staged throughout the region, with some journalists noting that the participants were not only Shiite supporters of Hezbollah, but also Sunnis and members of secular movements. In some cases, they defied police repression.

Demonstrations took place in all of Egypt's main cities, in which, according to press reports, the protesters condemned the Arab regimes' inaction and demanded the opening of Egypt's northern borders to enable people to "fight alongside their Palestinian and Lebanese brethren." Protestors also demanded the severing of relations with Israel and the expulsion of its ambassador in Cairo. One newspaper published a photograph of an Egyptian lawyer holding a Palestinian flag bearing the words, "Arab kings, presidents, and sheiks: 'SPIT ON YOU'."

Jordanian cities also witnessed mass demonstrations, according to the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya TV. The previous day riot police had beaten and arrested scores of worshippers and broken up a pro-Palestinian rally organised by the Muslim

Brotherhood at a mosque in Amman. Police sources said they dispersed the gathering, attended by several thousand worshippers, for violating a law that bans public assemblies held without prior approval.

In Kuwait, hundreds of people demonstrated outside the US embassy last Saturday in support of Hezbollah. Under the repressive conditions that prevail in Kuwait, the protest was a rare event. Demonstrators chanted pro-Hezbollah slogans and condemned US policy in the Middle East. "America and Israel are two faces of one kind of terrorism," read one banner.

In Bahrain, some 10,000 Sunnis and Shiites marched in the capital, Manama. The protest was the third in less than 48 hours in the predominantly Shiite gulf kingdom, where it normally takes three days to get government approval for demonstrations. Hundreds of Bahraini Shiites also took to the streets in Karzakan, 15 kilometres south of Manama. They denounced the Arab governments, chanting, "Defeated Arabs, your silence is a crime."

One woman protestor complained that Arab governments "spend billions on defence forces that cannot protect us, and when the people step in to defend themselves, they paint them as traitors." Another demonstrator said: "To the UN and the West we are sub-humans. The Israelis kill scores of Arabs each day, but the world only cares when Israelis are killed, and they want us to entrust our fate into their hands."

Thousands of protestors thronged the streets of central Damascus last Monday in a demonstration sanctioned by the Syrian Baathist regime, which is under threat from the US and Israel. They waved Syrian and Hezbollah flags and shouted their support for Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader. Some carried banners reading, "Long live the resistance and down with surrenders."

Smaller rallies were held in other Syrian towns and villages. Earlier, hundreds of Syrian women and representatives of Arab women's organisations staged a sit-in before the UN headquarters in Damascus.

Thousands of Palestinians rallied in the Gaza Strip and West Bank Monday to express support for Hezbollah. Some 2,000 people marched from the Red Crescent headquarters in Gaza City to the parliament building. Women carried pictures of sons, husbands or parents among the more than 10,000 detainees in Israel.

Another 2,000 people marched in Ramallah on the West Bank. Last Saturday, some 1,500 Arab Israelis, including Knesset members, protested in Nazareth. A pamphlet distributed at the scene called on the government to "end the war crimes" and the "killing of children."

In Yemen, a mass demonstration was planned to march to the US embassy to demand the expulsion of the US ambassador.

The anger in Arab countries was so palpable that several American media outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and the Associated Press, warned of the destabilising consequences of

the Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza for the Arab regimes.

The *New York Times* quoted Omar Ajaq, who with his family had escaped the bombing of Beirut's southern suburbs to find shelter in central Beirut. "I am ashamed of the Arabs," he said. "They are utterly useless. People are now betting on the resistance. We no longer have faith in Arab leaders."

An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* declared, "winds of anger are blowing through the Middle East that are likely to strengthen the political hand of radical Islamists from Egypt to Saudi Arabia."

The newspaper interviewed Ahmed, an Egyptian mechanic, whose comments pointed to the underlying social discontent two decades after Mubarak's predecessor, Anwar Sadat, signed the 1979 Camp David Accord with Israel, making Egypt the first Arab country to formally recognise the Zionist state. "The regime claimed that peace with Israel would create prosperity and jobs," he said. "But we have been at peace for over 20 years and have not seen any prosperity. We can't watch our Palestinian and Lebanese and Iraqi brothers be slaughtered every day and do nothing."

A similar report in the *Los Angeles Times* drew attention to the "deepening gulf between rulers and ruled." It quoted Iman Hamdi, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo, who said: "What has the Egyptian government done to thwart the Israeli aggressions? The government is having normal relations with Israel, sitting back and saying how much they love Palestine, while Palestinians are being shot dead every day. And then comes this very small nationalist resistance movement which finally manages to do something that all the Arab governments with their huge armies haven't been able to do. It very much discredits these regimes in the eyes of the people."

The newspaper also warned that Bush's decision not to support the Lebanese government's plea for a ceasefire, even though that government had been installed with American support, "dealt a further blow to public feelings about the US in the region."



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