

Israel launches military assault on Lebanon

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13 July 2006

Israel responded to the capture of two of its soldiers by Hezbollah, which carried out a raid across the Israeli-Lebanese border Wednesday morning, by opening up a second front in its military operations, launching missile and bomb attacks from the air and sea and sending troops into southern Lebanon.

The prospect of a full-scale war with Lebanon in the north coincides with escalating Israeli attacks across its southern border in the Gaza Strip. Several hours before the eruption of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, Israel dropped a quarter-ton bomb on a house in Gaza City, killing a Hamas activist, his wife and seven of their nine children. Palestinian sources said a total of 20 Palestinians were killed in Gaza Wednesday as a result of Israeli military actions.

Three Israeli soldiers were killed in the cross-border Hezbollah raid, in addition to the two who were taken prisoner. Another four Israeli soldiers died in the initial incursion by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) into southern Lebanon when an Israeli tank ran over a land mine. A fifth Israeli soldier was killed while assisting in recovering the tank, according to the IDF.

The death of eight Israeli soldiers is the largest single-day toll in many years, and it heightened the atmosphere of crisis surrounding the regime of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The response of the Israeli government was to threaten all out war against Lebanon. Olmert said the border raid by Hezbollah was not merely an act of terrorism, but “an act of war by the state of Lebanon against the state of Israel in its sovereign territory.” He pledged to extract a “heavy price” through “very painful and far-reaching” action, and rejected a call by Hezbollah leaders in Beirut for negotiations on the release of Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners held by Israel in exchange for the return of the two captured Israeli soldiers.

Israel reportedly is holding 9,000 Arab prisoners. The

vast majority are Palestinians, but there are also some Lebanese.

Olmert again took the opportunity to threaten hostilities against Syria, describing it as “a state which supports terror... This will, of course, require an appropriate response to deal with Syria’s actions.”

Defence Minister Amir Peretz declared, “The Lebanese government, which allows Hezbollah to operate freely against Israel from its sovereign territory, will bear responsibility for the consequences and ramifications (of the cross-border attack). Israel sees itself as being free to employ any means it deems fit, and the army has been instructed accordingly.”

A high-ranking military officer said that if the soldiers were not returned in good condition, Israel would turn Lebanon back 20 years by striking its vital infrastructure.

Israel’s ground, sea and air assault on Lebanon has already been substantial and is likely to escalate in the coming days. Troops have crossed the border for the first time since Israel quit southern Lebanon six years ago. Israeli Air Force jets and helicopters have flown over the capital Beirut and navy gunboats and artillery along the border have shelled targets in Lebanon. Reports are that 27 civilians, including 10 children, were killed in overnight raids on southern Lebanon.

In the most damaging move, aircraft fired rockets at the runways of Beirut’s international airport, forcing it to be closed down.

Planes have struck over 40 targets, purported to be Hezbollah outposts. At least two civilians were killed when Israel bombed a road bridge on a major route through southern Lebanon. Four other bridges in the south were hit and five Lebanese were wounded, security sources said.

Israel has called up reserve troops, signalling the beginning of a major campaign that will now be waged on two fronts. Several thousand reservists will be

deployed along the Lebanon border, according to officials. The government also advised Israelis living along the northern border with Lebanon to seek protection in bomb shelters from rockets fired by Hezbollah forces.

Hezbollah, declared a terrorist organisation by both Israel and the US, is a major political force in Lebanon, having the support of most of the poor Shiite population and occupying posts in the current pro-Western government. The government in Beirut disassociated itself from the Hezbollah border raid.

The Bush administration immediately backed Israel's aggression in Lebanon. In its response, Washington implicitly exonerated the pro-US regime in Beirut, instead placing the onus on Syria and Iran.

A statement issued by White House press secretary Tony Snow declared: "Today Hezbollah terrorists operating from Lebanon kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and launched rocket attacks against civilian targets in Israel. The United States condemns in the strongest terms this unprovoked act of terrorism... We also hold Syria and Iran, which have provided long-standing support for Hezbollah, responsible for today's violence. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of the Israeli soldiers."

In Rome, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan echoed Washington's line, condemning the Hezbollah attack "without reservation" and demanding that the captured Israeli soldiers be released.

The characterisation of the Hezbollah action as "unprovoked" is both grotesque and absurd. The cross-border raid by the Lebanese Shiite group comes after two weeks of escalating Israeli aggression in Gaza that has left more than 60 Palestinians dead.

Moreover, Israel has never abandoned its territorial ambitions in Lebanon and Syria. To this day it has retained the Shebaa Farms, a 25 square-kilometre area of Lebanese agricultural land. It was captured by Israel in the 1967 war and again in 1973 and has been occupied ever since. The fate of Shebaa Farms is bound up with that of the much larger Golan Heights, which it is adjacent to. Formerly known as the Syrian Heights, the Golan Heights is a strategic plateau on the border of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. It was captured by Israel in the 1967 war and again in 1973 and has been occupied ever since.

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and laid siege

to Beirut, killing an estimated 18,000 people and forcing the evacuation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation leadership. Israel collaborated with the fascist Phalange in the massacre of 1,200 Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatilla camps.

It withdrew from Beirut in 1983, but continued to occupy southern Lebanon. Numerous Israeli air raids were mounted throughout the 1990s in an ongoing conflict with Hezbollah that left hundreds dead, before Israel was forced to make its partial withdrawal from southern Lebanon under Prime Minister Ehud Barak in May 2000, after an 18-year war of attrition.

Israel's offensive in Gaza continues to escalate. In addition to the bombing in Gaza City, dozens of Israeli tanks, armoured personnel carriers and armoured bulldozers, covered by Apache attack helicopters and armed drones, crossed into central Gaza and advanced to the southeastern town of Deir al Balah. Air strikes continue against Beit Hanoun and other northern towns.

Arrests continue in military operations on the West Bank. The IDF said that 18 alleged Palestinian militants were detained Tuesday night, bringing the total number of arrests to nearly 100.



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