Washington, Tel Aviv threaten Syria and Iran

Ground invasion of Lebanon looms after Israel bombs Beirut airport, imposes blockade

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Following a major escalation of military strikes on Lebanon Thursday, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Friday ordered a further intensification of attacks by warplanes, heavy artillery and gunboats stationed off the Lebanese coast. Following a late-night meeting between Olmert and security officials, Israeli Army Radio quoted political sources as saying, "The decision was made to intensify Israel's operations in Lebanon."

Soon after, early Friday morning, Middle East time, Israeli aircraft struck the main highway linking Beirut with the Syrian capital, Damascus. That attack was aimed at consolidating the land, sea and air blockade imposed by Israel on Lebanon on Thursday, and sending yet another signal to Syria that it might be targeted by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

Israel initially claimed its military assault, the biggest air attack on Lebanon in 20 years, was aimed at forcing Hezbollah, the political-military organisation that controls southern Lebanon and that captured two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid Wednesday, to return the soldiers. This was belied by the scale of the Israeli attack, and the Israeli government rapidly escalated its demands to encompass the removal of Hezbollah from its positions near the Israeli border.

After a day of heavy bombing of Lebanese targets from the land, air and sea, resulting in the deaths of 55 Lebanese civilians and the wounding of at least 100 more, Israeli officials were increasingly talking of "breaking" Hezbollah and carrying out a long-term operation in the country. At the same time, they repeatedly accused Syria and Iran, which have long supported Hezbollah, of orchestrating the group's actions, a theme that was echoed in the statements of US officials.

On Thursday, Israel bombed the Beirut airport twice. The first attack, from the air, left huge craters in all three runways, forcing the closure of the facility. The second, by means of shells fired from gunboats, ignited two fuel depots. Israel also struck two military air bases located near the Syrian border and hit roads, bridges, power stations and villages in the southern part of the country. Three facilities of the pro-Hezbollah Al Manar television channel in Beirut and elsewhere were also bombed. In all, Israel hit over 100 targets.

At the same time, Israeli naval forces imposed a sea blockade, turning back ships seeking to deliver supplies to Lebanon.

Israeli officials made clear that no part of Lebanon would be safe from attack, and Israeli warplanes dropped leaflets over the Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut, warning residents to evacuate. Thousands of Lebanese civilians in the south and in Beirut packed up their belongings and sought to flee to Syria, the only border open to them.

Hezbollah, for its part, fired more than 80 Katyusha rockets into northern Israel, hitting 20 towns and villages. Israeli authorities said 2 civilians were killed and 43 were wounded in the rocket attacks. Hezbollah also said it bombarded the headquarters of the northern Israeli military command in Safad with dozens of rockets. It further claimed to have repulsed an Israeli military force that tried early Thursday morning to move across the border into Lebanese territory.

Israel is using Thursday's firing of Katyusha rockets into Haifa as justification for a possible ground invasion. Hezbollah denied firing rockets into the city of 250,000 some 30 miles south of the Lebanese border.

Israel brushed aside this disavowal on Thursday, and Israel's ambassador to the US, Daniel Ayalon, called the rocket firings on Haifa "a major, major escalation."

"All options are available," Israeli Army spokesman Captain Jacob Dallai said early Friday when asked about a ground offensive. "Strategically speaking, if the third largest city in Israel is under attack, it's a big thing and a response can be expected."

Israel has called up its reserves and appears to be setting the stage for a full-scale invasion with its demands that the Lebanese government clear Hezbollah fighters out of their positions along the Lebanese-Israeli border and deploy the Lebanese army in their place. Any such move, as Israel well knows, would provoke a civil war in Lebanon, where Hezbollah is supported by much of the country's poor Shiite population and holds posts in both the parliament and the cabinet of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora.

While Israel's aggression against Lebanon has evoked condemnatory statements from the European Union, Russia and France, the United States has defended it, giving Israel, publicly at least, a green light to escalate its attacks. Speaking at a joint press conference in Germany with Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday, President Bush cast Israel as the victim of terrorist aggression and said, "Israel has the right to defend itself."

Implying that Israel, which is already in the second week of a brutal incursion into Gaza, was a force for peace, Bush added, "There are a group of terrorists who want to stop the advance of peace."

In a direct threat to Damascus, Bush declared, "Syria needs to be held to account."

Bush's only caution was, "Whatever Israel does should not weaken the Siniora government in Lebanon." This government, pro-US and anti-Syria, is the product of a US-backed campaign that forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

Siniora has denounced Israel's "open-ended aggression," while insisting he had no foreknowledge of Wednesday's Hezbollah border raid. He instructed Lebanon's ambassador to the United States, Farid Abboud, to return to Beiruit after he made statements supporting Hezbollah in an interview with CNN.

The US underscored its backing for Israeli aggression on Thursday by vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution sponsored by Qatar that called for Israel to immediately end its military incursion into Gaza, which has killed scores of Palestinian civilians and created a humanitarian disaster. Ten of the council's 15 members voted in favour of the resolution, 4 others abstained, and the US cast the only "no" vote.

Within Israel itself, there is growing anxiety over the prospect of full-scale war with Lebanon and an even wider conflagration in the region. This was reflected in an editorial published in *Haaretz* under the headline "No to Lebanon War II."

Warning that "an outburst of Israel's tremendous power can easily get totally out of control," the newspaper wrote that "Syria, too, is liable to be seen as an appropriate target," and concluded: "Israel must not let the abductions drag it into a regional war."

However, both the Israeli and US governments are blaming Syria and Iran for the eruption of violence, pointing to a widening of the war to target one or both of these countries.

A senior Israeli Foreign Ministry official, Gideon Meir, told reporters Thursday that Israel had "concrete evidence that Hezbollah plans to transfer the kidnapped soldiers to Iran," without providing any evidence for the claim or revealing its supposed source. He continued: "Israel views Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran as the main players in the axis of terror and hate that endangers not only Israel, but the entire world."

The White House issued a statement declaring, "Hezbollah's actions are not in the interests of the Lebanese people, whose welfare should not be held hostage to the interests of the Syrian and Iranian regimes."

National Security Council spokesman Frederick Jones said, "We also hold Syria and Iran—which directly support Hezbollah—responsible for this attack and for the ensuing violence."