

Growing disquiet in Israel over Lebanon war

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In a private meeting with 70 American Jewish leaders in his Jerusalem office on July 25, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed that his government would not “run away” from the war in Lebanon. Olmert told the United Jewish Communities Solidarity Mission that the battle “may be painful,” with two million Israelis living in bomb shelters and daily life at a halt in the country’s north. But he cited an opinion poll showing that 95 percent of the country’s Jewish population supported the war.

Despite Olmert’s declarations, there are signs of mounting unease in Israel. As yet, there is no mass movement against the invasion of Lebanon, as there was in 1982. But there have been daily antiwar vigils, the announcement of the war’s first conscientious objector, and media commentaries calling into question the war’s morality or warning that it is leading to disaster.

Several factors are contributing to the disquiet, including genuine horror at the atrocities being committed against the defenceless Lebanese population. There is also shock at the unexpectedly determined resistance of Hezbollah fighters, the failure of the Israeli military’s aerial bombardment to crush Hezbollah, making a ground war necessary, and the rising casualty toll among Israeli soldiers. Disputes have also emerged over the war’s economic and social impact on ordinary Israelis, particularly in the north.

During the first two weeks of the offensive in Lebanon, relatively small but significant antiwar rallies were staged in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. This week, another demonstration was held in Haifa, demanding an immediate cessation of the fighting in both Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

Protesters carried signs, in Hebrew, Arabic and English, reading: “Stop the War”, “Ceasefire Now” and “Better to Exchange Prisoners than to Dig Graves.” When counter-protesters arrived at the rally, local

police demanded that the antiwar demonstration disperse and detained four participants. The pro-war supporters yelled racist phrases such as “Death to Arabs” and threw stones at the demonstrators, yet it was the latter who were arrested.

Protests have also taken place in front of the prime minister’s house every day, with women calling out the number of deaths in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, and Lebanon. Another group has demonstrated every day in Haifa and held protests in a number of cities every Friday.

Several of these groups issued an open letter to visiting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, calling on her “to end the war in Lebanon immediately.” They wrote, “[T]he core reason for the violence in our region is the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories and the ongoing oppression of the entire civil society in the occupied territories.”

This week, 40 Israeli film makers sent a message of “camaraderie and solidarity” to Arab filmmakers gathered in Paris for the Arab Film Biennial. “We unequivocally oppose the brutality and cruelty of Israeli policy, which has reached new heights in recent weeks. Nothing justifies the continued occupation, closure and oppression in Palestine. Nothing justifies the bombing of civilians and the destruction of infrastructures in Lebanon and Gaza.”

The war produced its first conscientious objector last week when Staff Sergeant Itzik Shabbat, a 28-year-old TV producer, refused to comply with an emergency order to report for reserve duty in the Palestinian territories in order to free troops for the Lebanese front. Shabbat, a resident of Sderot, a town that has sustained rocket attacks, told Haaretz:

“I know people will attack me and ask how could I not take part in this war when Qassams are falling on my hometown and Katyushas on the towns in the north. In my opinion, only this type of opposition that I’ve

chosen will put an end to the madness that is going on now and will shatter the false feeling that the entire home front supports this unnecessary war that is based on deceptive considerations.”

A member of the movement Courage to Refuse, Shabbat has in the past been jailed for 28 days for disobeying orders to serve in the Palestinian territories.

The families of the three soldiers whose capture became the pretext for the US-backed war have also spoken out. Mikki Goldwasser, the mother of one of the soldiers held by Hezbollah, yesterday called for peace talks. After a meeting of the families on July 18, Noam Shalit, whose son Gilad was captured by Hamas, told the *Jerusalem Post*: “The agenda has gone in a different direction, towards a war. People, civilians, are getting killed, more soldiers are getting killed, but we won’t let people forget about us.” Shalit first appealed for prisoner exchange negotiations on July 6, but the Olmert government rejected his call.

The war is intensifying social tensions, and conflicts have broken out over the government’s refusal to guarantee salary payments and compensation for those displaced or unable to work. The burden of war is falling heaviest on the working class and poor. They are the ones most likely to lose their livelihoods and be stuck in underground shelters—unable to afford to move house or live in distant hotels.

The pledges that Labour leader Amir Peretz, now the defence minister, made at the last election to transfer funds from the military to deal with Israel’s many social problems—poverty, socio-economic inequality, unemployment, lack of affordable child care, inadequate support for the elderly and deprived schools—have been effectively scrapped. Instead, the demands of the military, led by Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, for the cancellation of proposed cuts in the defence budget have been carried out.

Meretz-Yachad, a so-called “left” social democratic party which has fully backed the war, has sought to head off discontent by taking legal action to force the government to officially declare war and a state of emergency, thus activating a law that mandates compensation payments for war-related financial losses.

In his July 23 *Haaretz* column, “Stop Now, Immediately,” Gideon Levy warned: “The Israeli rear, which has so far displayed impressive resilience, will

not remain indifferent in the shelters for much longer. Slowly, the cracks will open and citizens will begin to ask why we are dying and what we are killing for.”

Levy also warned of growing international criticism and hostility toward Israel. While the scenes of devastation were not being shown to Israeli audiences, “the world sees entire neighborhoods that have been destroyed, hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing in panic, homeless, and hundreds of civilians dead and wounded, including many children who have nothing to do with Hezbollah.”



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