Israeli attack on Lebanon threatens to engulf entire Middle East in war

Editorial Board
15 July 2006

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The Israeli onslaught on Lebanon, with bombings and missile strikes and the imposition of an air and sea blockade, has brought the Middle East to the brink of all-out war. The attack on Lebanon, fully endorsed by the Bush administration, coincides with Israel's ongoing assault on the Palestinian population of Gaza, 1.5 million people who are enduring the fourth week of a siege, with electricity cut off and food supplies running low.

The Olmert government in Israel has seized on two incidents involving the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, first in Gaza on June 25, and then on Wednesday on the Lebanese border, as pretexts for an enormous military operation that was clearly prepared long in advance. It remains to be seen how far the Israeli offensive will go—to Beirut, or even to Damascus—but it is clearly aimed at accomplishing strategic objectives that have no relationship to the incidents that supposedly provoked it.

No one can seriously suggest that bombing Lebanese towns and villages, imposing a naval blockade and attempting to assassinate Sheik Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, are methods likely to win the freedom of the captured Israeli soldiers. The two soldiers taken by Hezbollah are far more likely to die as a result, killed either by their captors or by Israeli bombs.

Likewise in Gaza, the indiscriminate killing of dozens of Palestinians with bombs, shells and air-to-ground missiles will do nothing to win the release of Gilad Shalit, the private seized by Islamic militants in their raid across the Gaza border into southern Israel.

There is a long history of Israel using such events as the excuse for carrying out military actions that have a far broader strategic purpose—going back to 1978, when a full-scale invasion of Lebanon was launched using the shooting of the Israeli ambassador to Britain by Palestinian militants as a pretext. Only much later did it emerge that the invasion had been long planned, awaiting only the proper incident to provide a suitable official justification.

The same pattern is repeated in Gaza and Lebanon today. The Israeli regime has made no secret of its desire to smash up the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority. The economic blockade imposed in January, after Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, has been escalated into a full-scale military blockade of Gaza, where Hamas has its main political support.

In Lebanon, the goal of Israel is, at a minimum, the physical destruction of Hezbollah, the Shiite Islamic movement which dominates the southern third of the country. A full-scale invasion of southern Lebanon by Israeli ground forces is more than likely. Israeli Defense Minister Peretz said, "If the government of Lebanon fails to deploy its forces, as is expected of a sovereign government, we shall not allow Hezbollah forces to remain any further on the borders of the state of Israel." In other words, if the Lebanese army does not suppress Hezbollah—and no one expects it to—then the Israeli army will do so.

US military intervention in Lebanon is also likely. US media reports Friday suggested that the initial planning for such an intervention was well advanced, with 2,200 Marines to be deployed as a helicopter-borne force that would land near Beirut on the pretext of protecting the 25,000 American citizens now trapped in Lebanon by the Israeli blockade.

Separate or joint US and Israeli air strikes against Syria and Iran, and even a ground invasion of Syria, are also possible. Certainly the main focus of the Bush administration, the congressional Democrats and Republicans, and the American media has been to blame Syria and Iran for the crisis, claiming that those regimes were pulling the strings in Hezbollah.

The US media has suggested that Hezbollah's kidnapping of the two Israeli soldiers was specifically ordered by Tehran in retaliation for the referral of Iran to the UN Security Council earlier this week, in the ongoing dispute over its nuclear research program. The Bush administration has likewise blamed Syria for the ongoing insurgency in Iraq's Anbar province, since supplies and recruits have come across the Syrian border.

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq have produced a holocaust for the Iraqi people: a mounting slaughter in which tens of thousands have been killed, by sectarian gangs and militia, by car bombs and other terrorist acts, and by bombs, shells, missile attacks, indiscriminate shooting or outright murder on the part of the American occupiers.

Last week it was reported that 1,595 bodies had been brought to the Baghdad morgue during June, the largest monthly death toll yet in the escalating civil strife. The US military death toll is well over 2,500. Combined with the death toll for US soldiers in Afghanistan, Bush will soon be responsible for the destruction of more American lives than the terrorists who attacked New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.

The Bush administration will not retreat from Iraq and cannot maintain the status quo, as the country slides deeper into civil war

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and popular opposition to the war mounts among the American people. A sizeable section of the US ruling elite, frustrated by the quagmire in Iraq, believes that the only hope of military success lies in "expanding the problem," as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has put it. They believe that Iran is using its growing influence on the Iraqi Shiite parties and militias to undermine US control of the puppet regime established in Baghdad, and that a military confrontation with Tehran is inevitable.

The *Wall Street Journal* is the semi-official voice of these layers, and it published an editorial Friday, entitled "States of Terror," which openly advocated military action against both Syria and Iran. The editorial declared, "There will be no resolution in Lebanon and Gaza until the regimes in Syria and Iran believe they will pay a price..."

Criticizing Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for her pro forma appeal that "all sides must act with restraint," the *Journal* said, "The White House has cited Syria and Iran as the culprits behind this week's events, but more forceful words and action are called for."

The mushrooming crisis in the Middle East is a predictable consequence of the massive military intervention by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the increasingly aggressive and reckless policy of American imperialism throughout the region. This includes the *carte blanche* given by the Bush administration to Israel to use its US-financed and US-built war machine against its neighbors and against the persecuted and oppressed Palestinian people.

The policy of United States and Israel is based on a never-ending cycle of war. The Bush administration rests its entire foreign policy on the belief that American military power and high-tech weaponry can solve every problem. The Zionist project is similarly predicated on unrestrained use of force against the Palestinians and other targets, such as Hezbollah. Both policies have proven to be disastrous for the people of the region, including the Jewish population of Israel.

As a US client state, Israel has long been dependent on a vast flow of economic and military aid from Washington. For the last decade, it has sought to exploit the unchallenged international supremacy of the United States, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to reject any negotiations for a territorial settlement with the Palestinians and instead impose its dictates unilaterally on the Palestinian Authority.

This was the content of the Sharon government's withdrawal last year from Gaza, closing down a handful of unviable settlements in order to draw an international border with 1.5 million Palestinians on the other side, insuring a Jewish majority in Israel and the remaining occupied territories for at least another decade.

Similar concerns are driving the Olmert government's policy of wall-building and resettlement on the West Bank. While planning to abandon a handful of Zionist settlements, Olmert's government is drawing the new border unilaterally to give the best land to the Israelis, including all of Jerusalem, while the Palestinians are relegated to a rump state on barely 60 percent of the occupied territory.

In the last few days, the American media has been filled with denunciations of Hamas and Hezbollah, portraying them as terrorist organizations and fitting targets for a massive escalation of military force. But in the final analysis, the real target of the United States and Israel is not this or that organization, but the oppressed masses throughout the Middle East. They aim to destroy the will to struggle of the tens of millions of people who have never accepted the Zionist dispossession of the Palestinian people, and who will never accept the US conquest of Iraq and the establishment of a neo-colonial stooge regime in Baghdad.

There is a profound sense in which the policies of the United States and Israel appear counterproductive and self-defeating. The Bush administration played a major role in creating the current Lebanese government, and the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon has been touted as one of its few foreign policy successes in the Middle East. Yet the Israeli attacks threaten to undermine and discredit the regime in Beirut, which is compelled to stand by impotently while Lebanese citizens are slaughtered, now in the dozens, soon perhaps in the hundreds and thousands.

Similarly, it might appear irrational that an administration which has been unable to subjugate Iraq (population 26 million), would attack Syria (population 18 million) and even Iran (population 75 million). But such attacks are the logical outcome of the imperialist perspective that it is possible for American imperialism to impose its will on the Middle East, and obtain control of the region's vast oil resources, through sheer force of arms.

In reality, the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq has proven a strategic disaster for American imperialism. It has aroused the population of the entire region, and literally billions of people throughout the world, dispelling illusions that the United States could be identified with democracy, freedom or opposition to colonialism.

It is now 58 years since the state of Israel was established, and 39 years since the Six-Day War which expanded Zionist control of Palestinian territory to include the West Bank and Gaza. These six decades have been an unending chain of violence—war, repression, terrorism, assassination, the expulsion of populations. Now a new and even more terrible war threatens.

The first premise of any solution to the crisis of the Middle East is the removal of American imperialism from the region. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party demand the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and an end to Washington's military and financial sponsorship of Israeli domination over the Palestinian people.

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