

Rice begins Mideast tour to promote US-Israeli war aims

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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in Beirut, Lebanon Monday, the first stop in a trip whose purpose is to shore up the joint US-Israeli military campaign against Hezbollah and give more time for the Israeli military to use American bombs and weapons to devastate Lebanon.

Rice visits Israel not, as media accounts suggest, to act as a moderating influence on the Zionist regime. Rather, following the logic of Bush administration foreign policy, Rice will pressure the Israelis to intensify the violence in south Lebanon so as to create the optimum conditions for joint Israeli and American pressure against the Syrian regime of President Bashar Assad.

Inadvertently indicating the real rationale of US policy, Rice declared on her arrival in Lebanon that the US government sought to create a “new Middle East.” Washington has encouraged the assault on Lebanon and supplied Israel with the necessary arms and international backing because the Bush administration sees this escalation as a way of breaking out of the strategic stalemate in Iraq and weakening both Syria and Iran.

There is a strong element of recklessness and disorientation in this perspective. The contradictions in US foreign policy are evident: the Bush administration is seeking to consolidate a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq at the same time that it attempts to liquidate the Shiite-based Hezbollah in Lebanon and prepares for war with the Shiite fundamentalist rulers of Iran.

Iraq’s US-backed prime minister, Nouri Maliki, has issued repeated denunciations of the Israeli attack on Hezbollah, and important sections of the Shiite clergy have called on him to postpone this week’s planned trip to Washington to protest the rain of US bombs and missiles—delivered by Israel’s US-built warplanes—on the Shiite population of south Lebanon.

These contradictions are kept largely out of public view by the servile American media, but they are well known in official circles in Washington, and some criticism is being voiced within the foreign policy establishment. Robert Malley, a former Clinton administration Mideast expert, noted that Rice’s trip makes no sense as diplomacy, since, according to the Bush administration, there are six parties to the current conflict—Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran—and the US government refuses to talk to four of them.

Even more scathing was the assessment by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who ridiculed Rice’s rhetoric about the birth of a new Middle East. In an interview with the German press, he warned, “That was not a very happy formulation. Labor pains sometimes end in the death of the infant. One must try to know what these labor pains are actually producing. Otherwise one is merely speculating, and playing a form of Russian Roulette with history. This

could all end for the United States in a disaster in the Middle East.”

Rice’s first stop in the region was an unscheduled visit to Beirut on her way to Jerusalem. Her aim was to prop up the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, installed last year after the US-backed campaign to force Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon. Rice is seeking to organize whatever coalition of Lebanese political forces can be cobbled together to support the destruction of Hezbollah.

Two weeks into the joint US-Israeli war against the people of Lebanon, the direct military assault is clearly facing a crisis, with Israeli troops encountering unexpectedly tough resistance on the ground, and saturation bombing of south Lebanon so far failing to stop Hezbollah forces from launching rockets against towns in northern Israel.

A large force of Israeli soldiers from the Golani division fought their way into the Hezbollah stronghold of Bint Jbail on Monday. Hezbollah fighters remained in control of the town, but the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), equipped with tanks and armored bulldozers, took control of a key hilltop. The intensity of the fighting is demonstrated in the casualty totals: four Israeli soldiers killed and 20 wounded, with only two Hezbollah fighters taken prisoner. At least one Israeli tank was in flames.

“Air power alone is proving insufficient to rout the guerrillas, who are proving tough opponents on the ground as well,” said one report by the Associated Press. The dispatch continued: “[S]mall-scale pinpoint operations to root out guerrilla positions along the border are proving far more daunting than expected, according to soldiers returning from battle. The troops complain of difficult terrain and being surprised by Hezbollah guerrillas who pop out from behind bushes firing automatic weapons or rocket-propelled grenades.”

A second Associated Press writer described the scene as follows: “The heavy guns thundered before dawn Monday, sending deadly shells crashing down into the Lebanese border town and paving the way for the advancing Israeli tanks and troops. By daybreak, bloody and bruised soldiers, shock etched deep in their faces, were streaming back over the border into Israel.... Two Israeli soldiers were killed and at least 20 were wounded Monday, the army said, as guerrillas in the town, a Hezbollah stronghold, issued a withering barrage of bullets, anti-tank missiles and mortar shells.”

The determination of the resistance has clearly stunned both Israeli commanders and the rank-and-file soldiers of the IDF. The Associated Press account described the use of an IDF tank as an improvised ambulance: “Having brought back his wounded comrades, a tank driver sat on the turret clutching his head between his gloved hands and crying while two crew members tried to console him.”

At a hospital in northern Israel where wounded soldiers were being

taken, 21-year-old Yishai Green, lying in his bed, gave this description of the battle for Bint Jbail: "It's a real mess and I am not allowed to talk about it."

The Israeli military command seemed to be struggling to grasp the scale of the resistance. Maj. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, IDF chief of operations, initially said 100-200 Hezbollah fighters were dug in at Bint Jbail. Later the overall commander of the IDF, Dan Halutz, estimated the Hezbollah force at over 500.

Despite the biggest Israeli ground offensive since the war began July 12, with Israeli troops making penetrations into Lebanese territory of up to five miles, along a 40-mile stretch of border, Hezbollah units were able to launch nearly 100 rockets, keeping up the pace of firing that they have maintained for the past two weeks.

Whatever the outcome of the current border battles—and no one can doubt that, with overwhelming firepower and control of the air, the IDF will eventually prevail in any such tactical conflict—there are clear indications that from a strategic standpoint the long-planned US-Israeli military operation is in difficulty.

The expectation that heavy bombing alone would suffice to cripple Hezbollah has clearly not been fulfilled. Substantial resistance remains, no prominent Hezbollah leaders have been killed, and the missile firings continue unabated.

The principal impact on Lebanon has been to destroy, not Hezbollah, but the bulk of the country's civilian infrastructure, painstakingly rebuilt over the last 15 years after the widespread devastation of the civil war. According to media accounts Monday evening, some 90 percent of Lebanese paved roads and 95 percent of bridges—a vital feature in the mountainous terrain—have been rendered unusable by Israeli bombs.

One of the most flagrant attacks on infrastructure came Sunday night, with the destruction of two television towers in the Lebanese highlands, populated by the Maronite Christians who were courted by the Israelis in their previous invasions of Lebanon. While one tower was used to broadcast the Hezbollah network, the other was operated by the Maronite-based Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation. The only reason for its destruction was to take down any source of on-the-spot reporting about the devastating impact of Israel's bombing campaign.

This reflects the belief on the part of the Olmert government in Israel that such reporting will inflame international opposition to the bombing. But a more direct concern is the impact of such reports on Israeli public opinion.

Despite the claims of virtual unanimity within the populace in support of the bombing campaign, the Israeli political establishment knows the history of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the subsequent growth of popular outrage over the mass murders committed by the IDF and its Lebanese allies in the fascist Phalange. Then-defense minister Ariel Sharon, the organizer of the invasion, was subsequently found partially responsible for these crimes by an Israeli commission and forced to step down.

The current assault on Lebanon is already a war crime of similar dimensions. Although the American media uncritically parrots Israeli and Bush administration propaganda, portraying Hezbollah as a terrorist organization engaged in wanton attacks on civilians, while Israel targets the terrorist combatants and seeks to avoid civilian casualties, the real state of affairs can be seen in the following figures:

As of Monday there were 39 Israeli deaths, of which 22 were soldiers killed in combat and 17 were civilians. On the Lebanese side, there are at least 384 deaths, of which only 31 are Lebanese army soldiers (most blown up in their barracks by Israeli bombs) or

Hezbollah guerrillas, while 353 are civilians.

In other words, 42 percent of Israeli casualties are civilians, while 91 percent of Lebanese casualties are civilians. Israel, moreover, is using US-built laser-guided bombs and other weapons that are far more precise in their targeting than the relatively primitive Katyusha rockets of Hezbollah. If these weapons are killing hundreds of Lebanese civilians, it is part of a deliberate policy.

As the scale of the death and destruction inflicted on the Lebanese people becomes apparent—and as the casualty toll among Israeli troops begins to mount as well—a sharp swing in Israeli public opinion is inevitable.

The military mobilization will also have a huge direct effect on the Israeli population. Some 18,000 military reservists have been called up—the equivalent of mobilizing 750,000 new soldiers in the United States. Nearly ten percent of the entire Israeli population, men, women and children, is enlisted in either the IDF or in its reserve forces. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, such a mobilization has in the past sparked internal resistance to military actions like the punitive operations in Palestinian towns on the West Bank: "Perhaps due to the perspective that age and experience bring, reservists are likelier than their counterparts in the regular army to question whether Israeli military actions are justified by the threat the country faces."

The Israeli government is in evident crisis over Olmert's decision, taken without consulting the cabinet, to launch a full-scale military response to an incident—the kidnapping of two soldiers—that in the past would have been handled through back-channel negotiations. There is no consensus within the cabinet as to what the next step is to be if, as is universally expected, Hezbollah continues to reject demands to return the two soldiers, withdraw from the border region and dismantle its stockpile of rockets.

Already the Olmert government has shifted its position on the introduction of an international force into the border region, a sign of weakness and internal disarray. Government spokesmen who initially rejected any international force now suggest that a NATO force would be acceptable.

However, it is entirely possible that the Israeli response to its difficulties, under pressure from Rice and the Bush administration, will be to escalate its violence in Lebanon and adopt an even more provocative posture toward Syria and Iran.



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