

Rice leaves bloody footprints in Lebanon

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At some point in the future, when the ill-fated American drive for hegemony in the first decade of the twenty-first century is subjected to critical study, historians will discover ugly parallels between the tenure of Condoleezza Rice as American secretary of state under President Bush and that of Joachim Ribbentrop as German foreign minister under Chancellor Hitler. All the characteristics of the foreign policy of the Third Reich as it set the stage for World War—its depraved deceitfulness, cynicism, hypocrisy, recklessness, fascination with violence and utter contempt for human life—are to be observed 70 years later in the operations of the Bush administration, for whom Rice serves as chief foreign policy spokesman.

Each of these “qualities” was prominently on display during the last 48 hours, as Secretary of State Rice descended on war-torn Lebanon, before continuing on to Israel. What Rice witnessed in Beirut was the product of policies that she herself had set into motion. But, aside from the hypocritical and token expressions of regret, she gave no indication of being particularly bothered. Quite the opposite. In the midst of a city that has been subjected to massive bombardment, in a country that has been utterly devastated by the actions of the Israeli war machine, where tens of thousands of men, women and children are homeless, and without adequate food and water, Rice proclaimed with evident pride that a new Middle East was being born.

One can only imagine what her Lebanese interlocutors must have thought as they listened to Rice insist that the United States did not support a cease-fire at this time. First, conditions must be created for a “lasting peace.” Translation: Israel must be given time to wreak further havoc, to continue its barbaric assault upon Lebanon and its people, until all internal resistance to the country’s conversion into a semi-protectorate of the United States and Israel, and an auxiliary base of operations for the overthrow of the Syrian government and future war against Iran, is completed.

Moving on to Israel, Rice’s basic message to the Olmert government was: Get on with it. Emboldened by the unstinting support of the United States, the Israeli military felt free to blow a UN observation post to smithereens.

As soon as Rice left the region, Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz announced that the Israeli military would establish an unspecified “security zone” in southern Lebanon, signalling a

full-scale re-invasion of the area, which Israel occupied from 1982 to 2000. Israeli government sources estimated the width of the zone at anything up to 10km, but General Alon Friedman, one of Israel’s commanders for its northern region, earlier spoke of penetrating up to 70km into Lebanon.

Shortly after Peretz’s declaration, an Israeli air strike killed United Nations peacekeepers at an observation post in southern Lebanon. The UN in Lebanon said the four, from Austria, Canada, China and Finland, had taken shelter in a bunker under the post after it was earlier shelled 14 times by Israeli artillery. A rescue team was also shelled as it tried to clear the rubble.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said he was “shocked and deeply distressed” at the “apparently deliberate targeting” of the post. The UN post was clearly marked and its coordinates recorded with the Israeli military. The 2,000-strong UN mission has been operational in the border area since 1978.

The only conceivable reason to demolish the UN post was to prevent any monitoring of the Israeli offensive. The UN observers along the Israel-Lebanese border, known as the Blue Line, keep close track of major violence, as well as individual incidents, and issue daily press reports.

The UN figures, which do not include attacks further north, give a rare snapshot into the intensity of the onslaught in southern Lebanon. On July 24 alone, for example, Israel conducted 45 air raids and artillery strikes near the Blue Line, while Hezbollah launched 12 missiles. That was in addition to numerous clashes around the town of Bint Jbail, which Israel has pulverised and captured after six days of fierce fighting.

After the UN post was destroyed, Israeli warplanes destroyed two neighbouring houses in Nabatiyeh, which is 10km north of Bint Jbail and has been heavily bombarded in the past few days. In one house, a man and his wife and their son were killed, while three men died in the other house.

Israeli denials of a deliberate strike on the UN post to restrict the monitoring of such war crimes have no credibility. In fact, such an attack is perfectly consistent with its past record. Four days after Israel launched the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, its fighter-bombers and gunboats sank the USS Liberty, a US intelligence ship off the Sinai Peninsula, killing 34 US seamen and wounding 171. The only reason for the calculated attack was that the Liberty’s intercepts flatly contradicted Israel’s claim that Egypt had attacked Israel, and that the massive air assault on three Arab states was in retaliation.

In April 1996 over 100 Lebanese civilians were killed and hundreds more wounded when Israel shelled a United Nations compound. An independent United Nations investigation found Israel's claim that the shelling was an accident to be unsupported by the facts.

Once Rice left Beirut, Israel resumed air raids, after a lull during her stopover. A string of huge explosions raised a pall of smoke from Beirut's southern districts. Early Tuesday, Israel also renewed air strikes on its second front, in the Gaza Strip, wounding eight people, local residents and medics said.

Earlier, in another monstrous violation of humanitarian law, two Red Cross ambulances were struck by rockets fired from Israeli helicopters near the port city of Tyre, where refugees have fled to escape the assault on south Lebanon. Six people, including the two drivers, were seriously injured. At least 10 such ambulances, clearly marked with crosses, flashing blue lights and giant Red Cross flags, have been bombed in the past two weeks, killing more than a dozen civilian passengers.

Ceasefire pleas dismissed

In Beirut, in an affront to Lebanon's millions of victims and countless dead, Rice claimed to be "deeply concerned" by "what they are enduring". But her announced emergency aid for the victims—some \$30 million—is dwarfed by the billions of dollars being spent to supply Israel with the missiles and military hardware to maim and terrorise the population.

Rice dismissed out of hand Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's pleas for an immediate halt to the fighting, even after he expressed fears that his government could fall if the bombardment continued. She also rejected a proposal by Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, who is regarded as an ally of Hezbollah, for an immediate ceasefire to be followed by a prisoner exchange and for Israel to allow the return of Lebanese who had fled the south, before discussing a wider plan to resolve the conflict.

In Jerusalem, Rice urged the Kadima-Labour government to escalate its drive into Lebanon in the face of growing signs of misgivings in Israel over the war and the unexpectedly strong resistance being displayed by Hezbollah fighters. Over recent days, several prominent Israeli commentators have expressed fears that a protracted ground war, with mounting casualties, would inevitably arouse opposition. Writing in *Haaretz* on July 23, Gideon Levy warned:

"The war will become an imbroglio. When it becomes apparent that the air force is not enough, the ground invasion that has already begun will intensify. The cliché about the Lebanese quagmire will be revalidated, and when the soldiers are killed, as is already happening daily, in house to house hunting, the protests will rise and divide society."

On a visit to southern Israel the day before meeting Rice, Olmert had pulled back from his earlier vows to smash Hezbollah, saying instead that the "international response and the changes in the Arab world will, I believe, allow us to, within a reasonable time frame, build a model solution that will significantly weaken and isolate Hezbollah." Olmert also said that Israel would not be dragged into an invasion of Lebanon.

After leaving Jerusalem, Rice stopped over in the West Bank to meet Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas, who pledged to maintain a "period of calm" and stop Palestinian attacks on Israeli forces, despite the ongoing Israeli aggression on both fronts. Several Palestinian factions called a general strike in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, calling on Abbas to boycott the meeting with Rice. They accused Israel of waging a war of "genocide" against the Palestinians and Lebanese after receiving a green light from the US administration.

In a transparent operation to give the Israeli military more time to pursue the US-financed war drive, Rice will spend the rest of the week attending two international conferences to discuss the Middle East crisis. She has first flown to Rome where various proposals are being floated for a NATO or EU and Arab "stabilisation" force to police Hezbollah's ouster from southern Lebanon. True to form, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, one of Bush's closest allies, described the violence in Lebanon as a "catastrophe" but insisted that a cessation of hostilities required the completion of such a plan.

Rice will then fly to an Asian Regional Forum conference in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday and Friday to be attended by China, Russia, India, Australia and Japan, as well as the EU. According to the *Times* of London, "Western politicians clearly hope that some of those countries will provide manpower for a force that British officials say would run into the high thousands."

Such an occupation plan would require not only militarily demolishing Hezbollah, by killing thousands of its fighters, but also dismantling its entire infrastructure of schools, hospitals, welfare services and reconstruction projects. This will further inflame popular hostility across the Middle East, triggering eruptions of violence that Washington clearly calculates it can exploit to widen the war to Syria and Iran.



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