Crisis atmosphere builds in Israel

Mike Head
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Israel's fragile Kadima-Labour coalition government is facing mounting popular unease, both with the atrocities being inflicted on Lebanon and with the collapse of the government's initial claims of a swift victory in the month-old war.

According to media opinion polls, the first two weeks of the conflict produced a dramatic turnaround in the previous dissatisfaction with the performance of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who replaced the comatose Ariel Sharon as Kadima leader, and Defence Minister Amir Peretz, the former trade union federation boss who ousted Shimon Peres as Labour Party leader.

Polling published in *Maariv* indicated that 78 percent of respondents were satisfied with Olmert's performance, up from just 43 percent in just two weeks. Satisfaction with Peretz had jumped from 28 percent to 61 percent.

The longer the war has dragged on, however, the more disenchantment has surfaced. Over the past week, in particular, Olmert's claims to have already decimated Hezbollah have backfired. In another survey published by *Maariv* on August 4, only 55 percent of respondents said Israel was winning the war, while 3.5 percent said Hezbollah was winning and nearly 38 percent said "no one" was winning.

The loudest voices, at least in the media, are those from within the military and political establishment demanding even more aggressive action. After 12 Israeli soldiers and three civilians were killed by rockets last weekend, military analyst Ze'ev Schiff, writing in *Haaretz*, called for "a prompt, more extensive aerial and ground operation."

Echoing Schiff, Agriculture Minister Shaul Simhon said the Israeli army should push beyond the Litani River to the Alawi River, 25 kilometres further north. "We have to get it into our heads that this is not just a military operation; this is war," Simhon said. "We've got to stop going for surgical strikes and put down massive fire. We've been treading water."

Confronted by unexpectedly strong resistance in Lebanon, increasingly strident calls are emerging for the "cleansing" or "purging" of south Lebanon. "We need to use a few divisions who will have to flush southern Lebanon up to the Litani River," Ben Caspit, a *Maariv* columnist, wrote. "With tremendous force, with a massive amount of armour and fire. Why? Because there is no other choice."

In a *Haaretz* column, Gideon Levy, a critic of the war, cited other media commentary calling for even greater barbarity in Lebanon: "Haim Ramon 'doesn't understand' why there is still electricity in Baalbek; Eli Yishai proposes turning south Lebanon into a 'sandbox'; Yoav Limor, a Channel 1 military correspondent, proposes an exhibition of Hezbollah corpses and the next day to conduct a parade of prisoners in their underwear, 'to strengthen the home front's morale.' "

Others are publicly calling for the extension of the war to Syria and Iran in order to take full advantage of Washington's backing. In a *Jerusalem Post* op-ed last piece week, former public security minister Uzi Landau declared that Syria "must also pay a direct price." He continued: "Any further Hezbollah attacks on our citizens will result in more extensive and harsher attacks on Syria.... This war, forced upon us, is a one-time opportunity to disrupt the plans of Iran and Syria while most of the democratic world still supports us."

Last Sunday, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that Israeli defence officials had told the newspaper that they were receiving indications from the US that America would be interested in seeing Israel attack Syria.

At the same time, anti-war protests are growing, together with anger over the war's physical and financial impact on the working class. On August 5, the largest demonstration to date was held in Tel Aviv, joined by more than 5,000 people, according to

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Haaretz. The turnout was more than twice the number that organisers had agreed upon with police in order to secure permission for the rally.

Among the speakers was Zohar Milgrom, a reserve soldier who announced his refusal to serve in Lebanon. “Under no circumstances am I ready to be a partner in the war crimes that the country is committing,” he told the crowd. He became the third to face jail for refusing to fight in Lebanon.

Another speaker referred to the underlying social polarisation in Israel, as well as in Lebanon. Dr. Gadi Algazi of Tel Aviv University said: “This war is being committed on the back of the most poor, both in Israel and in Lebanon. Those who cannot escape are paying the heaviest price in this war.”

Thousands of Arab Israelis marched through Umm al-Fahm last week, despite fear of official and police victimisation. Their chants included “Israel is a terror state” and “Our people in Gaza and Lebanon will not surrender.”

While still relatively small, more than 100 anti-war demonstrations have been staged in Israel over the past month, even though the leaders of the former protest movement, Peace Now, have backed the war and the Israeli media has largely refused to report the protests.

Protesters have bitterly denounced Peretz, who took office as an avowed supporter of negotiations with the Palestinians and claimed to oppose the severe cuts to welfare and working class living standards imposed by the previous Likud-Labour government of Sharon and Peres.

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