

Israeli war crimes aimed at “cleansing” south Lebanon

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On Tuesday, Israeli warplanes struck the southern Lebanese town of Ghaziyeh, killing at least 14 people. Missiles demolished civilian homes just as some 1,500 mourners were participating in a procession to bury 15 of their relatives and neighbors slain just the day before. The explosions sent the crowd running in panic, dropping shrouded corpses in the street.

Ghaziyeh’s normal population of 23,000 has reportedly been swelled by a wave of refugees. It is a predominantly Shiite town near Sidon, a region where most of the population is composed of Sunni Muslims. Many people from further south had fled there to stay with relatives and friends.

There was no indication that the town was used to launch rockets against Israel or had any intrinsic strategic significance. The objective was merely to further terrorize people who have already suffered the loss of their homes and seen members of their families massacred in the relentless Israeli bombardment of southern Lebanon. The aim is to force them to flee further north, or kill them.

Israeli planes have dropped leaflets on southern Lebanon announcing an open-ended curfew, violation of which is punishable by death from the air. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) has warned that any vehicles on the roads will be struck. Anyone disobeying these orders will be considered a terrorist and a target for Israeli bombs, missiles and shells.

This threat, combined with the escalating air war against the south, has effectively shut down attempts by the International Red Cross and other relief agencies to bring desperately needed food, water and medical supplies into the ravaged south. The bombing of roads and the destruction of the last bridge crossing the Litani River into the southern city of Tyre has cut off the region from rest of Lebanon and the rest of the world.

The head of the International Red Cross, Jacob Kellenberger, accused Israel of violating the Geneva Conventions—that is, committing a war crime—by threatening aid convoys with military attack. Kellenberger dismissed Israel’s claims that its leaflets warning of imminent air strikes somehow justified violent attacks on civilians. “By letting down leaflets, you cannot get rid of your responsibilities under international humanitarian law,” he said.

The Israeli practice is akin to a serial murderer telephoning

death threats to people before killing them and then blaming the victims for their own deaths, because, after all, “they were warned.”

This is the real context in which the United Nations Security Council is going through the motions of considering a US-French resolution designed not to end the fighting, but to allow it to continue until US-Israeli objectives are met. This document demands that Hezbollah disarm, while it allows the 10,000 Israeli troops occupying Lebanese territory to remain and permits Israel to continue “defensive” air strikes and artillery bombardments.

It essentially demands that Hezbollah, a mass movement of Lebanon’s impoverished Shiite population, commit suicide and that the government of Lebanon accept the status of an occupied protectorate. By presenting an utterly unacceptable proposal, Washington aims at provoking Lebanese rejection and then using this supposed opposition to “peace” as a justification for continuing the month-old war.

In a further indication that it has no intention of compromising on the terms of its UN diktat to the Lebanese people, the Bush administration Tuesday dismissed a Lebanese proposal to send 15,000 Lebanese troops to the south to take control of the area from the Israeli army. A State Department spokesman declared that the Lebanese army is not “a robust enough entity to be able to, on their own, exercise total control of that southern area of Lebanon.”

This word “robust” is endlessly repeated to describe a proposed multinational force to be sent into the region. It is a euphemism for an occupation army that will utilize murderous force against the local population to achieve US and Israeli war aims.

In a rare moment of candor at the UN, the Qatari foreign minister told the Security Council on Tuesday: “It is most saddening that the council stands idly by, crippled, unable to stop the blood bath which has become the bitter daily lot of the defenseless Lebanese people.”

He warned that adoption of the US-French resolution posed the “danger of civil war in Lebanon.” This is no idle threat. The proposed smashing of Hezbollah would be seen by the Shiite population as an attempt to disenfranchise and oppress them, reversing the results of Lebanon’s previous civil war and

restoring the power once wielded by Israel's traditional ally in the country, the Maronite Christian right.

Such social reengineering of the country—carried out under George Bush's slogans of "freedom" and a "new Middle East"—would undoubtedly ignite a new round of bitter sectarian warfare.

What the US-Israeli offensive aims to accomplish as its immediate goal is the thorough ethnic cleansing of southern Lebanon.

This is a term that never appears in the mainstream media in relation to the present war in Lebanon. It appears only in the occasional stories following the continuing tensions in former Yugoslavia, where US-led NATO forces intervened in 1999 with a savage bombing campaign against Serbia, which was carried out under the pretext of halting ethnic cleansing in the province of Kosovo. The end result has been a thorough ethnic cleansing of the Serb population at the hands of the Kosovar nationalists whom Washington supported.

In the Israeli offensive against south Lebanon, the media invariably refers to air strikes and ground assaults against "Hezbollah strongholds," a formulation meant to conceal the fact that the real target is the Shiite population as a whole. Missiles, cluster bombs and artillery shells are employed to massacre men, women and children in order to terrorize the entire population and send them fleeing north.

Unlike the wave of moral outrage generated by the US media over the alleged ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, which was critical in conditioning public opinion and providing a pretext for Washington's war against Serbia, there is no similar condemnation of Israel for the mass expulsion of a population.

One major television network, the ineffable Fox News, expressed more concern for the lost dogs of northern Israel than for the Lebanese women and children buried beneath the rubble of buildings demolished by US-supplied Israeli bombs.

The IDF has had little success in defeating Hezbollah or even halting its rocket attacks against Israel, but its strategy against the civilian population has proven effective. While more than 1,000 Lebanese have been killed and approximately 3,500 wounded—the majority of them women and children—one million Lebanese, fully a quarter of the national population, have been turned into refugees, most of them driven from their homes in the south.

Ethnic cleansing is nothing new for Israel. The very foundation of the Israeli state was bound up with the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and farms. The Zionist leaders employed massacres and terror to drive out the native population.

As the well-known Israeli historian Benny Morris acknowledged in a 2004 interview with the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, "A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians. Therefore, it was necessary to uproot them. There was no choice but to expel that population. It was necessary to cleanse the hinterland and

cleanse the border areas and cleanse the main roads."

In 1967, with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, military terror was once again utilized to drive hundreds of thousands of Palestinians off their land, paving the way for the Zionist settlements in the occupied territories and Israel's claims over all of Jerusalem.

There is no reason to believe that anything different is being planned for Lebanon. Once again Israel, in the name of "security," is driving an Arab population off of its land. Where does this process end?

There is every indication that the IDF is now being deployed to conquer Lebanese territory between the Israeli border and the Litani River, 18 miles to the north. A new senior officer known to favor a far more extensive ground assault, Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, has been placed in charge of the Lebanon operation. *Haaretz* reported that his mission would be "to coordinate land, air and sea operations in case of a widescale offensive."

There is more at work in the current Lebanon war, however, than Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing against the country's Shiite population and the potential annexation of Lebanese territory. Prodding the Israeli government to intensify its attacks is the Bush administration. It sees the IDF offensive as a means of furthering its own objective of setting the stage for new wars of aggression in the Middle East, to achieve "regime change" in Iran and Syria and bring the extensive oil reserves of the entire region under uncontested US control.

This is the reality behind the Bush's rhetoric, casting the conflict as one between "freedom" and "democracy," on the one side, and "Islamic fascism," on the other.

If anything in the present war recalls the crimes of fascism, it is not the Lebanese, who are fighting an Israeli army that has invaded their land, but rather the regimes in Washington and Israel, which are utilizing overwhelming military force to conquer an oppressed people.

Like the one-sided wars waged by fascist regimes that shocked the world's conscience in the 1930s—from the rape of Ethiopia to the incineration of Guernica—the destruction of Lebanon contains the seeds of a global conflagration.



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