

The aftermath of the US-Israeli offensive against Lebanon

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The following report was delivered by World Socialist Web Site correspondent Rick Kelly at public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne on August 22 and 24.

I would like to briefly review some of the events surrounding Israel's 34-day bombardment of Lebanon and explore the political issues that have arisen within Israel in the aftermath of the criminal US-Israeli offensive.

The war began after Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon captured two Israeli soldiers on July 12. The Israeli government claimed that its subsequent invasion was a defensive measure aimed at securing the release of the two men.

This was, in fact, a total fabrication, and set the stage for the barrage of American and Israeli lies and propaganda that followed.

With regard to the capture of the two soldiers, it should first be noted that what the media typically presents as an unprovoked operation by Hezbollah took place amid ongoing Israeli provocations on the Lebanon border. According to UN monitors, Israeli aircraft crossed the border "on an almost daily basis" between 2001 and 2003, and "persistently" until 2006. Israeli artillery and missiles have been fired into southern Lebanon on several occasions in recent years.

More fundamentally, a number of media reports have confirmed that Israel's invasion had been years in the planning. The capture of the two soldiers was seized upon by the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert as a convenient pretext. Just as Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction provided the public rationale for the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, so the Olmert government used the captured soldiers for its own political ends.

As the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on July 21: "More than a year ago, a senior Israeli army officer began giving PowerPoint presentations, on an off-the-record basis, to US and other diplomats, journalists and think tanks, setting out the plan for the current operation in revealing detail." The article quoted Gerald Steinberg, professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University, who noted that of all Israel's wars since 1948, the attack on Lebanon was the most carefully prepared. It had been "simulated and rehearsed across the board" for the last two years.

Because of its strategic value and considerable water resources, southern Lebanon has always been of interest to Israeli strategists. As far back as 1919, Chaim Weizmann, Zionist leader and subsequent Israeli president, included the Litani Valley among the "minimum requirements essential to the realisation of the Jewish National Home". More recently, Israel threatened to wage war against Lebanon in 2002 after the government constructed a pumping station in the south that threatened to divert water flowing into Israel.

Israel's latest attack on Lebanon, however, was not merely a matter between those two countries. The war was, in every sense, a joint undertaking by Israel and the US. Tel Aviv's political and military preparations were conducted in secret collaboration with the Bush administration.

The latest issue of the *New Yorker* magazine contains an article by

veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, in which he explains: "The Bush Administration was closely involved in the planning of Israel's retaliatory attacks. President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney were convinced, current and former intelligence and diplomatic officials told me, that a successful Israeli Air Force bombing campaign against Hezbollah's heavily fortified underground-missile and command-and-control complexes in Lebanon could ease Israel's security concerns and also serve as a prelude to a potential American preemptive attack on to destroy Iran's nuclear installations, some of which are also buried deep underground."

Hersh's article followed a report in the *Jerusalem Post* which quoted unnamed Israeli officials as saying that during the offensive in Lebanon, Washington had encouraged Olmert to widen the war by attacking Syria.

The Bush administration viewed Israel's offensive in Lebanon as part of its broader drive to completely restructure the Middle East and Central Asia. Having invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, strategists in Washington have now set their sights on "regime change" in Syria and Iran. The Bush administration considers these two countries as the most significant obstacles to its goal of establishing US domination in the region and securing control of critical oil and gas reserves.

Israel's attempt to destroy Hezbollah and eliminate all anti-Israeli resistance in Lebanon was viewed by Washington as the means through which further pressure could be placed upon Damascus and Tehran. It is only in this context that one can appreciate the full significance of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's infamous statement in Beirut on July 22 referring to the "birth pangs of a new Middle East". For more than three weeks, the Bush administration blocked any move towards a ceasefire.

The criminal character of the US and Israeli war aims was inevitably reflected in the nature of the military operations in Lebanon. While Israel, its allies, and much of the international media characterised the war as a limited "anti-terrorist" operation, the Olmert government's ferocious bombardment of Lebanon was in fact aimed at terrorising the entire population.

Among the first acts of the war was Israel's imposition of an air and sea blockade, which prevented vital fuel, medicine, and other supplies entering the country. Major roads and bridges throughout Lebanon were also destroyed, with those connecting the country to neighbouring states particularly affected. On July 13 Beirut's airport was crippled by a missile attack.

The following day power stations were knocked out, causing blackouts to millions of homes, schools, and hospitals. The bombardment also produced an environmental catastrophe, with an estimated 30,000 tons of heavy fuel oil seeping out of destroyed power plants into the Mediterranean Sea, polluting 120 km of Lebanon's coastline.

According to Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) figures, the air force flew more than 15,000 sorties and the navy fired 2,500 artillery shells during the offensive. An estimated 35,000 Lebanese homes and businesses were

destroyed. The bombardment of civilian targets was openly defended by the Olmert government on the basis that all so-called “terrorist infrastructure” is a legitimate target. “Terrorist infrastructure” is nothing but a code word for any building, home, business, farmland, or other asset connected with people opposed to Israel’s strategic ambitions in the Middle East.

This has already been seen in the West Bank and Gaza, where Israel has conducted an unrelenting siege of the Palestinians since Hamas won the Palestinian Authority’s legislative elections in January. While the world’s attention has focussed on Lebanon, the Olmert government has obliterated Gaza’s political, social, and economic infrastructure and has stepped up its devastating embargo of the Occupied Territories.

The war in Lebanon exposed the lie of the Olmert government and Bush administration that Hezbollah is nothing but a terrorist arm of Syria and Iran. Hezbollah is, in fact, a bourgeois nationalist movement with deep roots in Lebanon. It is a social, political, and military force which enjoys widespread support, particularly among the impoverished Shiite population, and has seats in both the Lebanese parliament and cabinet. The organisation won support for its resistance to Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000, and for its provision of education and health services to Shiites and other groups long marginalised by corrupt and sectarian Lebanese central governments.

Israeli forces committed numerous massacres during its offensive, and more than 1,100 civilians were killed. Human rights investigators and journalists have revealed many cases where Israeli fighter jets and helicopters deliberately targeted entire communities and families, including convoys of people attempting to obey IDF instructions and flee the south. There is hardly a town in southern Lebanon which has not recorded an Israeli atrocity.

In the most notorious incident, Israeli forces bombed a residential building in Qana on July 30, killing 28 civilians, including 16 children. The attack recalled another in 1996, when an Israeli precision missile killed 106 civilians taking shelter in a UN compound in the same town. In both cases, Israeli officials launched a disgraceful propaganda operation which aimed to deflect responsibility for the deaths and to blame the innocent victims for their fate.

Israel’s military operations were designed to drive everyone south of the Litani River off their land. Almost one million people, or one-quarter Lebanon’s total population, were turned into refugees during the conflict.

The Olmert government openly declared its goal of clearing the territory in order to create an empty “buffer zone” patrolled by Israeli forces. Fighter jets dropped hundreds of thousands of leaflets warning residents to flee their homes, while senior government ministers publicly declared that anyone remaining in the south would be designated legitimate military targets.

One scholar of international law defined ethnic cleansing as: “a well-defined policy of a particular group of persons to systematically eliminate another group from a given territory on the basis of religious, ethnic or national origin. Such a policy involves violence and is very often connected with military operations. It is to be achieved by all possible means, from discrimination to extermination, and entails violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.”

There is no question that on this basis, Israel is guilty of ethnic cleansing in southern Lebanon. Of course, not a single international power or major media outlet dared point this out. “Ethnic cleansing” is only ever committed by the targets of imperialist aggression, as in 1999 when the Yugoslav government’s policies in Kosovo provided the pretext for the US-led bombardment of that country. What was ethnic cleansing in Kosovo now becomes legitimate “anti-terrorist” activity in Lebanon.

The Israeli government was keen to draw a different parallel between the Yugoslav war and its campaign in Lebanon. In an interview with a German newspaper on August 6, Olmert condemned criticism of Israel’s

operations from some European governments. “Where do they get the right to preach to Israel?” he asked. “European countries attacked Kosovo and killed 10,000 civilians. 10,000! I’m not saying it was wrong to intervene in Kosovo. But please, don’t preach to us about the treatment of civilians.”

Olmert hardly had need to worry. The US-Israeli war in Lebanon again exposed the prostration of the European and Arab powers as well as the United Nations before the Bush administration. The European governments’ response can be summed up in one word—appeasement. Britain and Germany openly backed Washington’s refusal to demand an immediate ceasefire. France and other countries, while expressing certain differences with the US, did so solely out of concern for their own interests in the region. None, however, were willing to directly challenge the Bush administration for fear of being shut out of Washington’s carve up of the Middle East’s energy resources.

Similarly, the Arab League did not even meet until August 7, almost a month after the war began. The ceasefire resolution agreed to by the UN Security Council four days later came about not through any international pressure but because the US and Israel recognised that they were not achieving their aims and needed a way out.

As the *Guardian* acknowledged on August 11: “The truth behind the diplomatic efforts to stop the fighting in Lebanon, a truth which also lies behind Israel’s threat to expand the war if it is not satisfied with the outcome, is that everything now revolves around an attempt to save Israel’s face.”

The bombardment, rather than turning the Lebanese people against Hezbollah as Tel Aviv and Washington had hoped, had instead united the population against Israel. IDF troops in southern Lebanon encountered fierce resistance in every town and village they attempted to occupy.

The battle for the small border town of Bint Jbeil highlighted Israel’s inability to enforce its will. After demolishing almost every building in the area, IDF troops entered the town on July 25 and declared that it was under their control. The next day Hezbollah militants launched a coordinated ambush, killing up to 17 Israeli soldiers and destroying several tanks with rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank missiles and mortar fire. The IDF’s subsequent withdrawal from the town was widely recognised within Israel as a major defeat and public confidence in the government’s claims of a successful campaign was shaken.

The government’s credibility was further dented in the final two days of the war when Israel lost 29 soldiers in a desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to end hostilities in a position of perceived strength. The ground offensive, which involved as many as 30,000 troops pouring over the border, failed to secure any significant additional territory or to clear Hezbollah fighters from south of the Litani. Hezbollah continued to fire hundreds of rockets into Israel, despite Olmert’s earlier claims to have largely eliminated its rocket firing capacities.

The war ended in a political debacle for the Zionist state and the United States. Ordinary people throughout the Middle East and internationally were outraged by US and Israeli war crimes, and in the minds of millions, the offensive in Lebanon confirmed the status of the Bush administration and the Olmert government as criminal regimes.

In Lebanon, hundreds of thousands of refugees flooded back to what remained of their homes in Beirut and the south, in defiance of Israeli warnings to stay away. Hezbollah militants have now openly re-emerged to provide funds and other assistance to residents affected by the war.

No one in Israel now expects either the 15,000 strong multinational force or the Lebanese military to forcibly disarm Hezbollah. Any attempt by the Lebanese government to enforce such an order would risk splitting the military along sectarian lines and provoking a renewed civil war throughout the country.

Neither are any of the countries proposing to contribute troops to the UN-force willing to risk getting involved in a colonial-style war against

Hezbollah militants. This concern, combined with a fear that the ceasefire will not hold for long, is behind the reluctance of countries such as France to contribute anything more than a token force to Lebanon.

In Israel, bitter recriminations have erupted. There has been infighting within the Kadima-Labour coalition government, within the military, and between senior IDF figures and the cabinet. It now appears likely that IDF chief of staff Dan Halutz will be forced to resign, and several government ministers are under severe pressure.

The government may collapse in the next few weeks or months. Public support for the ruling coalition has evaporated in the aftermath of the conflict, and senior columnists in virtually every Israeli newspaper have called on Olmert to resign and for fresh elections to be held.

The government has come under fire from within the political and military establishment for many different aspects of its handling of the war—for not adequately protecting Israeli citizens in the north from Hezbollah rockets, for not properly supplying Israeli troops sent into Lebanon, for failing to launch a full ground offensive throughout Lebanon, for failing to widen the war to include Syria and Iran, and so on.

While this opposition reflects the frustrations of the extreme right, there are indications that ordinary Israelis are beginning to ask more fundamental questions, even though anti-militarist sentiments find no reflection in the media or the major political parties.

One potentially explosive aspect of the crisis is the question of how Israel is going to pay for the war. The latest government estimates have put the cost at between \$US4.5 billion to \$US5 billion, equivalent to 4 percent of Israel's gross domestic product and 9 percent of total government spending. Israel's finance minister has already announced that in order to satisfy the international markets, taxes will not be raised and the budget deficit kept stable. The cost of the war will therefore be borne by the Israeli working class, through further cuts to education, health, and other social services.

These spending cuts will exacerbate growing class tensions within Israel. More than 1.5 million Israelis, or one-quarter of the population, live below the poverty line, and unemployment is almost 9 percent. The far-reaching "free market" economic reforms implemented in recent years have resulted in Israel now having the second-highest rate of social inequality among advanced capitalist countries, behind the US.

Political developments within Israel will of course continue to be bound up with the rapidly changing situation in the Middle East. The UN-sponsored ceasefire in Lebanon resolved nothing, and there is now a general feeling within Israel that it is a question of when, rather than if, the war resumes in the north. The IDF has staged a number of provocative military operations in the past few days and senior commanders have threatened to assassinate Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Any Hezbollah response to these flagrant violations of the ceasefire terms could quickly lead to a renewed Israeli offensive.

There is little question that the Bush administration would endorse a return to war. Washington has left no doubt that despite the recent setback in Lebanon, the fundamental strategy of enforcing US imperialism's hegemony in the Middle East through war and "regime change" remains unaltered.

A new political force is required to prevent the slide towards a regional conflagration and to bring the war criminals in Washington and Tel Aviv to justice. This can be accomplished only through the building of a new political movement based on the perspective of uniting working people internationally in a common struggle for the socialist transformation of society. Workers of all nationalities, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds in the Middle East must unite in opposition to all forms of nationalism, including Zionism, and wage a struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East. This is the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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