

US-Israeli onslaught on Lebanon intensifies

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Backed by the Bush administration, Israel has poured thousands more troops into Lebanon and escalated its aerial bombardment in its bid to crush all resistance and take control of the south of the country. With the US blocking all calls for an immediate ceasefire—to give the Israeli military more time to complete the job—Israeli leaders have openly declared that the offensive will continue for weeks.

Aided by the lack of any opposition from the UN and the European Union, the objectives set by the US and Israel from the outset of the war are being pursued methodically and with barbaric devastation. Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldiers has been used as a pretext to attempt to kill or drive out the population of south Lebanon and bring the entire country under its political sway.

Up to 20,000 IDF troops have invaded Lebanon on multiple fronts, backed by tanks, military bulldozers and ferocious air power. There is no indication that the offensive will necessarily stop at the Litani River, the northern border of Israel's self-proclaimed "security zone". IDF infantry have already crossed the river in several places, going beyond the territory that Israel occupied for 18 years from 1982 to 2000.

Throughout southern Lebanon, south Beirut and the eastern Bekaa Valley, the IDF is pursuing a scorched earth policy, reducing towns and villages to rubble, leaving the remaining residents—those too old or weak to escape—without water and food. Far from "surgical incursions" to dismantle Hezbollah command posts, as claimed by Israel, the operation is systematically blowing up and bulldozing houses, apartment buildings, community facilities and essential services to make whole areas uninhabitable.

Following the end of the 48-hour cessation of air strikes, Israeli war planes carried out a wave of bombings throughout Lebanon on Wednesday. Air strikes resumed in the battered outskirts of Beirut in the

early hours of today. Residents heard the impact of large explosions about every five minutes starting at 2.30 a.m. as missiles hit Dahieh, a Shiite Muslim suburb that has been repeatedly shelled by Israel since fighting began three weeks ago.

Yesterday IDF commandos provocatively landed near the eastern city of Baalbeck, 100 kilometres into Lebanon and close to the Syrian border. Seizing a Hezbollah-run hospital, they captured several alleged Hezbollah militants under the cover of an Israeli bombardment that killed at least 19 civilians, including five children. Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, the IDF chief of staff, told reporters at a briefing that the raid was intended to show that Israel could strike anywhere in Lebanon.

There is open speculation in the US media that the ground war will not be limited to the south but could lead to a wider military operation if Israel decides to push toward Beirut. Brigadier General Shuki Shahar, the deputy chief of the military's Northern Command, was quoted saying: "The farther north we can push them, the fewer Israeli citizens they can put under threat with these rockets."

Further south, in Tyre, the mass burial planned for 90 victims of the Qana massacre and other atrocities had to be postponed because of the intensity of the Israeli missile barrage. Tens of thousands of people are streaming out of the ancient Mediterranean city. In recent days, its population had swollen to 100,000 because of the influx of refugees from villages inland. By Tuesday, only about 15,000 remained.

It is now obvious that the slaughter of innocents at Qana was part of a wider plan to terrorise and force people to flee. With the official Lebanese civilian death toll already nearing 1,000 and the number of displaced people one million—a quarter of the country's population—Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert yesterday boasted that this was a mark of success in the

war. “All the population, which is the power base of the Hezbollah in Lebanon, was displaced,” he declared.

In other words, the strategy—agreed with Washington from the start—is the systematic de-population of south Lebanon, where the three-week onslaught has only increased popular support for Hezbollah as a national resistance movement. With IDF troops meeting further fierce opposition and Hezbollah firing more rockets into Israel on Wednesday than on any previous day of the 22-day-old war, Olmert declared that the army would not stop fighting or withdraw until a “robust” international force moved into southern Lebanon on Israel’s terms.

His government is confident that this could take weeks or more because of the insistence of the US, joined by Britain and Germany, that no truce be permitted until Israel has conquered the area. A cabinet minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, said on army radio he expected the offensive to take up to two weeks. Israeli generals are publicly predicting an even longer war. Brigadier General Alon Friedman of Israel’s Northern Command said seizing control of south Lebanon could take a week, and securing it “could take from three to eight weeks, depending on the size of the area.”

Israel is intent on retaining a free hand to carry out military operations throughout Lebanon even after a peace-keeping force is put in place. Writing in *Haaretz* today, Israeli military analyst Ze’ev Schiff commented: “Meanwhile, there is a delicate situation emerging over the mandate of the future multinational force... The danger is that sanctions will apply to both sides. This may make it very difficult for Israel to defend itself, even if it argues self-defence.”

Whatever tactical differences exist with France over the timing and composition of the planned international “stabilisation force,” there is no disagreement over its basic function, which will be to obliterate all opposition to Lebanon being reduced to a protectorate, completely subservient to US and Israeli interests.

White House spokesman Tony Snow said an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon was not on the agenda, and downplayed differences with France on the urgency of ending the fighting. “An immediate ceasefire is something that at this point doesn’t seem to be in the cards. Neither side is headed that way,” he told a press briefing.

The truth is that Washington is urging the Israelis to

get on with the slaughter as quickly as possible, as Schiff alluded to in his *Haaretz* comment yesterday. A fervent advocate of the war, he complained that the Olmert government had not yet provided the US with the “military cards” it needed to ensure the permanent eradication of Hezbollah.

“US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is the figure leading the strategy of changing the situation in Lebanon, not Prime Minister Ehud Olmert or Defense Minister Amir Peretz. She has so far managed to withstand international pressure in favor of a ceasefire,” he wrote.

The Lebanese government has continued to denounce Israel’s war crimes. Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh called Tuesday for an immediate ceasefire and the creation of an international tribunal to try the Israeli officials. Speaking of Qana, Justice Minister Charles Rizk said: “Israel committed a hideous crime against children, women and elderly and [there should be] an international and independent committee to probe the crime.”

In Beirut, Lebanon’s High Relief Committee (HRC) said it had counted 828 people killed and 3,200 wounded so far. “These are identified bodies, and the toll does not count the people still believed to be under the rubble,” an HRC spokesman said. The number of displaced has reached 913,760. Economic losses caused by the destruction of the country’s infrastructure are now estimated at \$4 billion.

Such is the “new Middle East” promised by the White House. The barbaric war on Lebanon, alongside the worsening bloodletting in US-occupied Iraq, are the product of a neo-colonial policy directed at suppressing all resistance to American dominance of the region’s massive oil and gas reserves and US imperialism’s wider goal of achieving unchallenged global hegemony.



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