

The Israel/US agenda for war against Lebanon

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Israel is preparing to expand its war from Gaza and the West Bank into southern Lebanon, with the full support of the Biden administration.

Speaking to Israeli reservists on the border with Gaza last week, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said that Israeli troops will “very soon go into action” on the country’s northern border with Lebanon. The forces close to you, he said, “are leaving the field and moving towards the north, and preparing for what comes next.” Tens of thousands of regular troops and some 60,000 reservists are already deployed in northern Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned at the end of last year that Israel would “single-handedly turn Beirut and South Lebanon, not far from here, into Gaza and Khan Yunis [Gaza’s second-largest city]” if Hezbollah—the bourgeois clerical group allied with Iran that has substantial support in Lebanon—launched an all-out war against Israel. He has insisted that Hezbollah moves its forces north of the Litani River. If US-led diplomatic efforts failed to achieve this by the end of January, Israel would begin expanding its attacks on Hezbollah.

Sarit Zehavi, the founder and president of the Alma Research and Education Center which covers security threats in Israel’s north, told the *Breaking Defence* news outlet that Israel’s leadership had escalated the amount and “quality” of strikes in a bid to score a military success and damage Hezbollah’s capabilities before any diplomatic talks led to a ceasefire.

Hezbollah played a key role, along with Iran and Russia, in helping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad defeat Islamist proxy forces backed by the CIA, the Gulf states, Turkey and Israel that were trying to topple his regime. Part of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance” that includes Hamas, Shia militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen, it supports various Palestinian factions in southern Lebanon as well as a Hamas bureau in Beirut’s southern suburb of Dahiyeh, a stronghold.

Israeli air raids and artillery barrage attacks inside Lebanon that have included using white phosphorous in civilian areas in violation of international humanitarian law, and Hezbollah’s attacks on Israeli forces in northern Israel have taken place on a near-daily basis. But so far, Hezbollah has calibrated its actions to prevent a full-scale war with Israel, with its leader Hassan Nasrallah at pains in public pronouncements to avoid escalating the conflict. This is despite Israel’s targeted strikes last month that killed Saleh al-Aroui, a senior official of Hamas’s political bureau in Beirut and a commander within its military wing, and Wissam Tawil, a prominent Hezbollah figure and member of its elite Radwan Force.

The bombardment has forced around 76,000 Lebanese living near the border to flee their homes. Southern Lebanon is home to a poor Shiite population and a Hezbollah stronghold. According to the UN, Israeli air strikes have damaged at least 426 rural locations, burning huge swathes of agricultural land and making it impossible for farmers to harvest their crops. More than 170 Hezbollah fighters and at least 25 civilians have killed since October 8. An estimated 80,000 Israelis have evacuated Israel’s northern towns, while nine soldiers and six civilians have been

killed.

Netanyahu and Gallant’s objective is to eliminate Hezbollah as a military and political force in Lebanon, as part of its broader preparations for war against Iran. Hezbollah, with 30,000-50,000 fighters and an arsenal of attack drones, small arms, artillery, tanks and precision-guided missiles is a far more significant military opponent than Hamas.

With its Shi’ite and Palestinian allies, Hezbollah constitutes the largest bloc in Lebanon’s confessional-based and fragmented political system, drawing support from the impoverished masses ruined by the looting of the country’s wealth by the handful of billionaires that have run the country since the end of the civil war in 1990, including Riad Salameh who for three decades ran Lebanon’s central bank and is wanted by several European countries on charges of siphoning off hundreds of millions of dollars and money laundering. The Lebanese lira has lost more than 98 percent of its value since 2019, with its black-market rate reaching up to 140,000 to the US dollar in mid-March, leading to the world’s highest food price inflation. Between February 2022 and 2023, Lebanon witnessed a 261 percent increase in prices, following years of triple digit inflation.

Eradicating Hezbollah means eliminating all mass opposition to Israel and US domination of this small state, carved out of Greater Syria by France after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and home to six million people. This is the Biden administration’s opening move, with Israel as its stalking horse, of its broader offensive aimed at driving Iran, its allied militias and Russia out of Syria prior to launching a full-scale war on Tehran as a critical component of its existential struggle with Russia and China.

The imperialist powers, beset by massive internal social contradictions, are also attempting to channel these internal tensions outward, toward an external enemy. These wars provide the basis for continuous attacks on democratic rights and the outlawing of domestic political opposition.

The US has led talks, along with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and France, with some of the fascistic Christian and Sunni factions and armed forces in Lebanon in a bid to strengthen their hand against Iranian-backed Hezbollah, which is also part of the government. Their aims are to shore up support for Israel, force Hezbollah to agree the choice of a Lebanese president acceptable to the participants and remove Hezbollah’s forces from southern Lebanon.

The country has been without a president since Michel Aoun left office at the end of his term in October 2022. This has paralysed Lebanon’s caretaker government headed by the country’s richest man Najib Mikati, who was unable to cobble together a government after the May 2022 elections. He has no power to pass legislation or a budget even as the country has defaulted on its international loans, much less agree to the “economic reforms” demanded by the International Monetary Fund and international banks in return for a restructuring of its debts.

US envoy Amos Hochstein, who was born in Israel and served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as a tank crewman, is expected to return to

Beirut in an effort to force Hezbollah withdraw its fighters 18 miles north of the border with Israel to the far side of the Litani River. However, Lebanon has insisted in return that Israel withdraws from occupied Lebanese lands—there are 13 disputed areas along the Israel, Lebanon and Syria border—and stops its violations of Lebanese sovereignty.

Israel's war on Lebanon is aimed at pushing through the political restructuring of the country, suppressing the pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel sentiments of Lebanese workers and peasants, more than 80 percent of whom live in poverty, and strengthening the power of right-wing, pro-US forces such as the Christian Phalange and Lebanese Forces and the Sunni parties within the anti-Syrian/pro-Saudi Arabia March 14 Alliance.

With the coming to power of the most far-right, militarist wing of the Zionist factions in the November 2022 elections, Israel has rejected all efforts at political solutions, preferring military force to achieve its longstanding objectives of expanding the territories under its control and eradicating all obstacles in its path. This marries up with the Biden administration's preparations for a future military intervention against Iran.

US and Israeli interventions in Lebanon

Israel has long sought to transform Lebanon into a virtual protectorate, with David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister keen to support the establishment of a Christian state in Lebanon. Such was the longstanding alignment of the right-wing Maronite parties with the Zionists that they only briefly sent a token force in the 1948 Arab Israeli war in support of the Palestinians.

After the 1967 Arab Israeli war, in which Lebanon did not take part, and Yasser Arafat and his Fatah movement's assumption of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership, the PLO began conducting raids from Lebanon into Israel and took control of the country's Palestinian refugee camps. Israel retaliated with raids against Lebanese villages to incite the Lebanese people against the PLO. This intensified after the PLO, which had been driven out of Jordan with Israel's help in 1970, moved its base to Lebanon.

Apart from its commitment to armed struggle in pursuit of democratic and secular nationhood, the PLO articulated no political or social programme for the Palestinian and Lebanese workers and peasants and sought support not from the international working class but from the bourgeois Arab regimes that repeatedly betrayed the Palestinians. While the PLO was a genuinely popular movement and contained within its ranks diverse social tendencies, its bourgeois programme could never overcome the political impasse into which the Palestinian masses had been led by the perfidy of the Arab regimes upon which it depended.

Using the opportunity created by the 1978 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt—the most important Arab country—Israel set about creating a new order in the Middle East by invading Lebanon. Its aim was the destruction of the PLO leadership and the permanent economic integration of the Occupied Territories into Israel, while destroying Syria's power in the region and establishing a right-wing Christian government in Lebanon.

In March 1978, during the Lebanese civil war, Israel sent military forces across the border justifying its actions as a response to PLO terrorist activity. Though compelled by international pressure to withdraw after its military operations had resulted in more than 2,000 Lebanese deaths, Israel maintained control of a 12-mile strip north of the border by sponsoring a right-wing militia, dubbed the South Lebanon Army, under the proxy leadership of Major Saad Haddad.

Four years later, in 1982, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and his defense minister, Ariel Sharon, set into motion a more ambitious plan to take political control of all Lebanon and expel the PLO from the country. Once again, a pretext was found when an Israeli ambassador was wounded in London by a Palestinian assassin in June 1982. Though intelligence experts acknowledged that the PLO had nothing to do with

this incident, the Begin government invaded Lebanon. In an operation titled "Peace for Galilee," Israeli troops swept north toward the outskirts of Beirut, which was subjected to protracted bombing. The war forced the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon and led to the Israeli-sanctioned slaughter of 3,500 Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp in 1982 by Lebanese fascist militiamen.

The United States became involved in the subjugation of Lebanon, with the Reagan administration stationing Marines in Beirut. US participation in attacks on the poorer neighborhoods of Beirut (which were shelled by American naval vessels) created deep hostility, leading to the 1983 suicide bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut, which killed 63 people, including 52 Lebanese and embassy employees. A month later two truck bombs struck at American marines, killing 307 people. Shortly after, the Reagan administration decided to cut its losses and withdraw from Lebanon.

The rise of Hezbollah as a political and military force

The Israeli regime sought to maintain control over substantial portions of south Lebanon. It was out of the popular resistance to the occupation that Hezbollah emerged as a military and political force. The guerrilla war conducted by Hezbollah eventually forced Israel to withdraw its forces in 2000, although cross-border attacks continued.

For Israel's ruling elite, Hezbollah and Lebanon are unfinished business. Hezbollah, the "Party of God," was formed in the 1980s as an "Islamic Resistance" dedicated to armed struggle against Israel, amid Israel's occupation of Lebanon during the 1975-90 civil war that served as a proxy war for the competing regional powers, France, Israel and the US. It was supported by Syria and Iran's clerical regime that came to power following the 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew the hated US-backed Shah Reza Pahlavi dictatorship. Within Lebanon, it drew its support from the Shiite masses, historically one of the poorest and most neglected communities that were discriminated against by the dominant Christian, Sunni and Druze factions.

It called for the expulsion of US, French and allied interests from Lebanon and restraints on the power of their vassals—some of the Christian parties—and mounted a guerilla campaign against the US and Israel. Using funding from Lebanese business groups and bourgeois figures, the Lebanese diaspora and monies from Iran and Syria, it also provided vital welfare services for the Shiites, who did not have access to the same facilities and social infrastructure as the other religious groups. It combined this with the advocacy of corporatism and paternalism as a counterweight to the class struggle.

This reactionary ideology, combining as it does religious obscurantism with the armed struggle, offers no way forward for the Lebanese masses. Hezbollah was only able to rise to prominence due to the failure of secular Arab bourgeois nationalism and the stifling by Stalinism and its ideological offshoots of a genuinely socialist political alternative for the working class.

Hezbollah's influence grew, especially after the Taif Accords brought Lebanon's civil war to an end in 1990 under Syria's tutelage. It was to eradicate Syria's domination of Lebanon that the US organized the 2005 Cedar Revolution, based on Maronite Christian forces and other Lebanese parties aligned with Washington, Saudi Arabia and France.

The Bush administration used the assassination of the former prime minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005, which it accused Syria of orchestrating, to engineer the removal of the Syrian troops that had occupied the country since 1976 and to form a pro-US government. It designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, long after the group had ceased its kidnapping and assassination of US citizens following the US withdrawal from Lebanon in 1984. Such was the strength of the Hezbollah counter-demonstrations that the new government was obliged to include Hezbollah or its nominees in its cabinet, a situation that has continued to this day.

Israel declared war against Lebanon in July 2006 to try and reverse the limited results of the Cedar Revolution. Despite two years of preparations and the massive use of firepower that destroyed much of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure and killed 1,200 Lebanese compared with just 160 Israelis, Israel was unable to achieve its declared aims of freeing two captured soldiers and stopping Hezbollah from firing rockets into Israel let alone its real objectives: the elimination of Hezbollah as a fighting and political force within Lebanon, the reduction of Lebanon into a vassal of the United States and Israel, and ultimately regime change in Syria and Iran.

Hezbollah was able to mobilise widespread support for the war among the most oppressed sections of the Lebanese population, making it impossible for the IDF to advance or halt the retaliatory bombardment of towns in northern Israel. After a month of war, Israel and the Bush administration were forced to accept a UN Security Council-backed ceasefire that was widely seen as a debacle for Israel.

US war plans in the region

Israel's threats against Lebanon come as the US and the UK have struck over 100 Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force and Iranian-backed militia targets in Iraq, Syria and Yemen since February 2.

The US has targeted operations and intelligence centers, rockets, missiles, drone storage facilities, and "logistics and munition supply chain facilities" of the IRGC and Iranian-backed militia groups.

These strikes follow the earlier spate of attacks by the US and the UK on Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world that has been subject to a devastating war by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, aided and abetted by Washington and London, aimed at reimposing Riyadh's protégé on the country after he was ousted by the Houthis in 2014. In December, the Biden administration announced the start of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a naval operation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden targeting the Houthi in Yemen. It sent an armada of nearly 20 warships to the Middle East, led by two aircraft carrier battle groups.

This is a de facto war against Iran to eliminate Iran's military allies throughout the Middle East, encircle it and provoke retaliatory action against US forces that can be used to justify a full-scale war against Tehran.

Last September, the US State Department diverted \$85 million aid from Egypt, with \$55 million bound for Taiwan and \$30 million for Lebanon's armed forces, saying it is "critical" to support Lebanese armed forces that "assumed responsibilities beyond its normal remit due to security challenges stemming from the compounding crises facing the country." The US army is already involved in helping the reconstruction of Lebanon's Naval Base damaged in the devastating Beirut port explosion in August 2020.

Lest anyone doubt Washington's intentions, it instructive to note that it is building the US's second largest embassy in tiny Lebanon.

Located about eight miles from downtown Beirut and occupying a 43-acre site, the new compound with a reported cost of \$1.2 billion looks like a city, with an airport, entertainment venues, consulate buildings and residential units. Its declared purpose to counter the "Axis of Resistance," like the "Global War on Terror," is a euphemism for the US's plans to control the region.

War is now the preferred instrument of US foreign policy for establishing its supremacy throughout the Middle East. The peoples of the Middle East, including Israeli workers, will pay the bloody price. Combating this threat means drawing fundamental lessons from the failure of all varieties of nationalism and the division of the region into rival nation states to end imperialist domination and raise the working class and oppressed masses out of poverty. It requires the unification of the working class across national, ethnic and religious divisions, forging an alliance with workers in the imperialist centres based on Trotsky's theory of Permanent revolution, in a struggle for a United Socialist States of the

Middle East. Such a movement would drive out the predatory imperialist powers and place the regions fabulous resources at the service of workers and poor peasants. This is the perspective advanced only by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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