

The real aims of the US-backed Israeli war against Lebanon

Statement of the Editorial Board
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As the onslaught against Lebanon enters its tenth day, Israeli troops are poised for a full-scale invasion that has been prepared by murderous aerial bombardment, and the far-reaching imperialist aims of the war have become all too clear.

With the full political, financial and military backing of the United States, the Zionist regime is attempting to transform Lebanon into an Israeli protectorate. This military operation is a continuation and escalation of the imperialist geo-political restructuring of the Middle East and Central Asia that began with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and whose goal is the establishment of US domination of the entire region.

The immediate aim of this war—the elimination of Hezbollah as a military and political force within Lebanon—is directed against all mass resistance to Israeli and American domination of the country. The Bush administration and its allies in Jerusalem see this as an essential step toward: 1) the removal of the Syrian Baathist regime, and 2) the launching of a full-scale war against Iran.

While the Israeli government and the Bush administration endlessly repeat propaganda claims that the attack on Lebanon is an act of “self defense” prompted by the seizure of two soldiers, this assertion enjoys no credibility among knowledgeable observers.

As the *Financial Times* of London wrote in its lead editorial of July 17, “Israel’s massive bombardment of Lebanon by land, sea and air in response to Hezbollah’s cross-border raid last week is now about a great deal more than recovering two Israeli soldiers seized by Islamist guerrillas—and it probably always was.”

Similar assessments have been published in the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as numerous newspapers internationally. They simply state what is by now obvious: the Israeli attack on Lebanon is the realization of a long-planned act of aggression.

Recent events have placed in clearer perspective the significance of the February, 2005 assassination of the Lebanese multi-billionaire and former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Hariri was killed by a massive explosion that destroyed his motorcade in Beirut four months after he resigned his post as prime minister in protest against the decision of Emile Lahoud, an ally of Syria, to extend his term as president of Lebanon. The United States and France, the country’s former colonial ruler, immediately blamed Hariri’s death on Damascus. Their anti-Syrian allies within Lebanon, predominantly based on the more affluent social layers, seized upon Hariri’s killing to launch the so-called Cedar Revolution, which resulted last year in the withdrawal of Syrian troops, which had occupied Lebanon since the 1970s.

If, in fact, the Syrian regime was behind the killing, it carried it out because it had become convinced that Hariri had lent his support to a US-Israeli plan to drive Syria out of Lebanon, in preparation for an assault on the Hezbollah movement, which enjoys mass support among the impoverished Shiite population and dominates the south of Lebanon. It was well aware that this would be followed by an offensive against the Baathist regime in Damascus itself.

It is, on the other hand, eminently possible that the killing was a provocation organized by Israeli or American intelligence agencies for the purpose of creating a pretext for carrying through the same plan.

In either case, the current Israeli offensive is the implementation of

precisely such an operation. The Cedar Revolution itself produced disappointing results in the eyes of the Israelis and Americans. Under the terms of a United Nations Security Council resolution co-sponsored by Washington and Paris, Syria was obliged to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. The power of its Hezbollah ally, however, remained intact.

Indeed, at the height of the anti-Syrian agitation, marked by well-publicized demonstrations in Beirut organized by Maronite Christian forces and other Lebanese parties aligned with Washington, Hezbollah organized far larger counter-demonstrations that brought hundreds of thousands into the streets of the capital. With the specter of a new civil war before it, the government that emerged from the Cedar Revolution felt obliged to make a settlement which included the admission of Hezbollah representatives into the cabinet.

In an article published July 20, the *New York Times* reflected the frustration within the Bush administration and American ruling circles: “Despite the hopes raised by the so-called Cedar Revolution, which ended nearly three decades of Syrian control, the government remains trapped in the sectarian straitjacket of a system that apportions political offices by religion.” (The *Times* has no similar objections to the “sectarian straitjacket” of Lebanon’s neighbor to the south, which not only apportions all political power to representatives of one religion, but defines itself as a “Jewish state”).

This comment points to the real purpose of the current onslaught against the Lebanese people. Its aim is a thoroughgoing political restructuring of the country, in which the fiercely pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli sentiments of the Shiite masses are to be crushed and the power of right-wing, pro-US forces—above all, the Christian Phalange—vastly expanded.

This is an attempt to reverse the outcome of the Lebanese civil war, which raged from 1975 until 1990. The US, Israel and other imperialist powers, notably France, played a central role in inciting that long and bloody conflict and keeping it going, including the introduction of American and French military forces and an Israeli invasion in 1982 that was followed by an 18-year Israeli occupation of the south. Washington’s chief ally was the fascistic Phalange, which headed a coalition of right-wing forces arrayed against an alliance of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Lebanese Left.

Imperialist intrigue and intervention succeeded in driving the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon, but the eventual settlement curtailed the power of the Phalange, on the one hand, and saw the rise of the Iranian and Syrian-backed Hezbollah on the other. This is what Washington is determined to change. Significantly, the current Israeli offensive has enabled the US to move its military forces into Lebanon for the first time since they were withdrawn in the aftermath of the bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut in October of 1983.

The historical background

Israel has a long history of attempting to transform Lebanon, through a combination of military pressure and political alliances with right-wing forces in that country, into a virtual protectorate.

In March 1978, in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, Israel sent military forces across the border into Lebanon, 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 one Major Saad Haddad.

Four years later, in 1982, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and his defense minister, Ariel Sharon, set into motion a far more ambitious plan to take political control of all Lebanon and expel the PLO from the country. Once again, a convenient 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 used the event as a pretext to invade Lebanon. In an operation entitled, with consummate cynicism, "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 thousands of Palestinian refugees by Lebanese fascist militiamen.

The United States also became involved in the subjugation of Lebanon, with the Reagan administration stationing Marines in Beirut. But direct US participation in attacks on the poorer neighborhoods of Beirut (which were shelled by American naval vessels) created deep hostility, leading to the suicide bombing in which nearly 250 Marines were killed. The Reagan administration decided to cut its losses and withdraw from Lebanon.

The Israeli regime, however, 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 powerful military and political force. The guerrilla war conducted by Hezbollah eventually forced Israel to withdraw its forces in 2000.

Israeli military tactics

The current war is not only about wiping out Hezbollah, but destroying any resistance within Lebanon to US and Israeli domination. This desired end goes a long way in explaining the means that are being employed. Israel is carrying out an indiscriminate bombardment of the south, the home of the poor Shiite population and the main base of support for Hezbollah. The Israeli military is deliberately targeting the entire civilian population, destroying whole villages and making the entire region uninhabitable.

The *Washington Post* reported Thursday that Israel has ordered all Lebanese living in the southern sector below the Litani River to evacuate the region within 24 hours.

The goal is to turn south Lebanon into a no man's land so as to prepare the ground for the entry of either Israeli troops or a combination of Israeli and American forces, with perhaps other national contingents operating as an "international peace keeping force" with the imprimatur of the United Nations.

The Israeli offensive is above all a war against the Lebanese poor. The more affluent residential neighborhoods of Beirut and other parts of the country have been largely spared. This is in keeping with US and Israeli policy during the civil war, when they were allied with the Phalange against the Shiite masses and the Palestinian refugee population.

The unleashing of death and destruction against southern Lebanon is combined with a bombing campaign aimed at the Shiite southern suburbs of Beirut and against airports, ports, roads, bridges and power

stations in the rest of the country. The objective is to wreck the country's infrastructure. In order to remake Lebanon politically, it first must be gutted physically. This gives some idea of what US imperialism and its junior partner, Israel, have in store for the people of Syria, Iran and beyond.

Nor is there any reason to believe Israel's disavowals of plans for a full-scale ground invasion. The more Israeli leaders discount such a move, the more likely it becomes. While the scale of the bombing in south Lebanon is sufficient to kill many thousands of people, it will not achieve Israel's aims of destroying Hezbollah as a military and political force, and converting Lebanon into a Zionist protectorate.

Citing the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, NBC's evening news program reported Thursday that several thousand Israeli troops have begun crossing the border into southern Lebanon.

The role of the United States

The United States is playing a decisive role in the war. It sanctioned the war in advance and is working in the closest collaboration with the Israeli military's US-made and American-financed war machine to carry it out.

On the diplomatic level, the Bush administration is openly aligning its moves with the military objectives and political calculations of the Israeli government. Washington is coordinating US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's impending visit to the region with Israel to give the Israeli military all the time it wants to inflict maximum possible destruction in south Lebanon. As the *New York Times* reported on July 19, "American officials signaled that Ms. Rice was waiting at least a few more days before wading into the conflict, in part to give Israel more time to weaken Hezbollah forces."

There is no precedent for the US government's open opposition to a ceasefire. The *Wall Street Journal*, in a fairly frank assessment of US policy published July 19, began by recalling Washington's diplomatic role when the last major conflict erupted between Israel and Hezbollah:

"Ten years ago, when Hezbollah and Israeli forces engaged in a multiweek bloodbath, President Clinton sent Secretary of State Warren Christopher to the region for six days of intensive shuttle diplomacy between Damascus and Jerusalem. In the end, he won a cease-fire deal that ended the fighting, at least temporarily.

"Today, the Bush administration has a starkly different approach."

The US is fully and openly legitimizing war as an instrument of foreign policy. This is a continuation of its military aggression in Iraq, and an anticipation of future aggression against Syria, Iran, and other countries. It is bound up with the Bush doctrine of "preemptive war," which has been embraced by the entire American political establishment and both parties of American imperialism—the Democrats as well as the Republicans.

Washington's determined effort to allow Israel to continue the slaughter in Lebanon underscores that the current war is part of US imperialism's drive, by any and all means, to establish American supremacy throughout the Middle East.

Whether this reckless and criminal military adventure will, in the short term, further this objective or lead Washington into an even deeper debacle in the region remains to be seen.

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