

What's Really Behind the Israeli Aggression in Lebanon

An assessment of the current situation for community information. It is a resource for informational purposes only. The views expressed in this document do not represent the views of AMYNA, its representatives, or its members.

July 22, 2006

A popular explanation of the ongoing Israeli aggression in Lebanon that you would hear in the US media is along the following lines: It all started when Hezbollah killed three and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers in the Lebanese-Israeli border area on July 13. The flagrant and indiscriminate bombing that followed was mere retaliation in self-defense by Israel. The real culprit should be the provoker not the provoked, and given that, it does not matter how disproportionate the latter's reaction has been so far. Simplistic as it is, yet, very widespread in the commercial media, underlying most news stories and political commentary of policy pundits and Washington officials.

The implication is obvious. Hezbollah is to be blamed and punished, even for the disproportionate violence that the Zionist regime has inflicted upon Lebanon in the last few days. Moral principles or international laws do not matter in this simplistic explanation. The Israeli aggression has already killed hundreds of Lebanese, injured many thousands, and displaced half a million; most of them were civilians, including women and children. The bombing has indiscriminately targeted civilians from all backgrounds and nationalities, whether they are Shias, Sunnis, Druze, or Maronite Christians, or they are Lebanese, Canadian, American, or any other foreign tourists. Lebanese infrastructure, airports, roads, factories, power plants, and military basis have been systematically destroyed by Israeli bombardment. The UNICEF representative in Lebanon told Agence France-Press that "The situation is both alarming and catastrophic." The current situation in Lebanon is in reality a humanitarian crisis. But none of this matters in this simplistic explanation as long as the emphasis is on the pretext of kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers.

The Bush administration also finds this simplistic explanation very convenient to justify its support for the ongoing Israeli military campaign. Its blanket endorsement is very consistent with the US track record of supporting the Zionist regime. In 2004 alone, the US provided \$2.7 billion dollars aid to Israel; \$2.1 billion was in military aid. It does not matter to this administration if the ongoing Israeli war crimes are in open violation of the US Arms Export Control Act and the US Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibit the use of US supplied weapons and war planes for attacks against innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure. What matters to George W. Bush is that in the name of self defense, Israel should be allowed to do whatever it considers necessary. On July 16, three days after Israel initiated its military aggression, the US blocked a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire. Moreover, according to some sources, the Bush administration is currently rushing a delivery of precision-guided bombs to Israel, which is part of the multimillion dollar arms sell it approved last year.

Truth Matters

Reality, however, is much more complex and subtle than what the Media and the Bush administration may want us to believe. To a critical observer, this simplistic explanation does not explain everything. If the Israeli regime's real target is Hezbollah, why is it bombing all over Lebanon? Why it is systematically targeting infrastructure and civilian facilities? In the words of the Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Israel is acting to destroy "everything that allows Lebanon to stay alive." The French President Chirac also suggested, "One can ask oneself whether there isn't a sort of desire to destroy Lebanon." The statements from Israeli ministers and high officials like the intentions of turning "Lebanon back 20 years" only support the idea that the Israeli aggression is more than mere 'retaliation in self defense'.

Moreover, within the last five years, Israel has violated Lebanese territorial integrity by air, land, and sea routes on more than a thousand occasions according to UN calculations. In the past, Israel has been involved in kidnapping of Hezbollah leaders from the Lebanese territory. Kidnapping is not something new on either side of the current conflict. Moreover, Israel has in the past exchanged soldiers and civilians with Hezbollah. Why then did Israel resort to outright aggression this time without exhausting the possibility of prisoner exchange? Hezbollah clearly offered this exchange for return of its three members from the Israeli prison.

Place the current episode of violence in the historical context of Israeli aggression and it becomes apparent that the ongoing Israeli aggression is anything but mere retaliation. The systematic destruction of Lebanon was clearly well-planned and consistent with the remapping of the disputed region that Israel has been actively engaged in for the last few years. The simultaneous military campaign in Gaza is another reason to believe that. The military campaign in Gaza started after the abduction of two Gaza civilians by Israel followed by Islamic Jihad's abduction of an Israeli soldier. Israeli aggression has killed more than 60 Palestinians and left most of Gaza's 1.4 million people without electricity and basic necessities of life in last few weeks. Seen in this broader context, it becomes apparent that the real intention of Israel is the impairment of the resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon altogether, not just "punishment" for specific acts of kidnapping. The issue of kidnapped soldiers was only a pretext to initiate this military campaign. If not kidnapping, Israel would have found some other excuse.

Only with this perspective can we truly explain the ongoing military campaign in Lebanon and Gaza. The belligerent comments from the Israeli leadership are a testimony to the ulterior Israeli motives. The history of the Zionist regime, its patterns of human rights violation and aggression against other nations are more evidences for these motives. For 18 years, Israel occupied parts of southern Lebanon following its military invasion in 1982. The invasion alone cost 17,000 Lebanese lives. Most of them were civilians. Since then Israel has killed hundreds of Lebanese in the occupied territories under one pretext or another. It has also launched major incursions on a number of occasions in Lebanon, targeting the south as well as Beirut and other northern areas.

The resistance movement of Hezbollah emerged as a result of Israeli aggression. Militant resistance may be a weapon of the weak but given the asymmetry of power and technology and the blanket US support to the Israeli regime, this has proved to be the only effective means against the Zionist occupation. More than 60 UN resolutions have been passed against Israel since its establishment; many others have been blocked by the US. Israel has been repeatedly condemned in international forums for its violation of human rights and territorial integrity. But so far none of them have made much impact on the ambitions and aggressions of the Zionist regime. It was only due to Hezbollah's persistent resistance that Israel was forced to leave the southern territories of Lebanon in May 2000. Israel still occupies the Shebaa Farms area in the south, however. This historical context is important to distinguish the right from the wrong in the current conflict.

It may be useful here to contrast the Zionist aggression with the patterns of Hezbollah's militant resistance. It never sent any suicide mission out of the occupied Lebanese territories into Israel. It has made it a point to always target military personnel and positions, even though sometimes civilians were also killed in its attacks. The contrast is clearly visible in the current episode. Hezbollah shelled Israeli cities with Katyusha rockets only after Israel launched the massive air attacks to reduce the entire country of Lebanon into rubble. The casualties on the Israeli side have been half soldiers, half civilians so far, whereas, on the Lebanese side, they have been mostly civilians. It is therefore, in his speech following the Israeli aggression, Hasan Nasrallah, the general secretary of Hezbollah, reminded people of conscience about Hezbollah's principled resistance and asked them to compare that to Israel's indiscriminate aggression in order to decide who is on the right side of history.

Israeli Objectives in the Bigger Picture

Israel clearly knows that it cannot eliminate Hezbollah, both for the latter's moral superiority and popularity among the more than 1.35 million people in Lebanon alone, as noted by many analysts. Hezbollah has provided schools, jobs, welfare support to the families of victims of Israeli aggression. It is an organization way above Al-Qaeda and its likes, in its adherence to Islamic principles, inclusiveness of different sects and ethnicities in its resistance movement, and its active role in the Lebanese democratic politics. Unlike Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah is very popular among the Arab masses and are considered freedom fighters, who regained dignity for them. The end of Israeli occupation in May 2000 was a clear victory to Hezbollah's movement. The victory also inspired resistance movement in Palestine. It also raised the spirits of Muslim population in the Arab countries, especially in Egypt and Jordan, where popular masses are otherwise very frustrated with their rulers' acquiescence to Israel and the US.

It is in this bigger picture that we can understand the Israeli objectives behind its ongoing military campaign. The purpose of the current aggression is not only "collective punishment" to the Lebanese people for its support to Hezbollah but also to turn the Sunnis, Maronite Christians, Druze, the Lebanese military and the government against Hezbollah. This is probably modeled after the successful Israeli military campaign in Jordan in 1970-71. The senseless bombing and killing by Israelis forced King Hussein to crush PLO, but which was accomplished only after a massacre of thousands of Palestinians in a brief civil war.

The ultimate target of Israeli aggression should be obvious now: To inflict as much damage to Hezbollah as possible, since Hezbollah has proved to be the only effective resistance to the Zionist regime's colonial policies. Ironically, contrary to what Israel was probably hoping, many among the apolitical mass in Lebanon now condemn Israel's aggression and support Hezbollah's movement. It is also highly unlikely that the Lebanese government would seek to confront and disarm Hezbollah. All what Israel can hope for is to inflict as much damage to Hezbollah as possible. In addition to this primary objective, the whole sale destruction of Lebanon by Israel was also to keep its northern neighbor in check. The Lebanese government and army are already very fragile to respond to the Israeli aggression. An economically weak Lebanon would make them even more impotent.

The demands that Israel has put forward to end its military aggression are also very revealing. It is asking for the return of the two kidnapped soldiers (without any guarantees of freeing Lebanese prisoners in Israeli prisons), disarmament of Hezbollah and its withdrawal to the Latani River, 30 miles or so north of the Israeli border deeper into Lebanon. The disarmament of Hezbollah, the only effective resistance to Israel, would be like drinking hemlock for Lebanon. Furthermore, the territorial demands have only raised the profoundest fears among all Lebanese that Israel wants to expand its northern borders into Lebanon and make the water of the Latani River its property, which Israel has coveted since 1948.

The Regional Dimension

It is worth noting that it is not just Israel that wants to limit Hezbollah's influence but also certain Arab "status quo" regimes, afraid of the "rising Shia crescent" (as the Jordanian King openly commented after the downfall of Saddam and prominence that Shia groups gained in the Iraqi elections). More specifically, the Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian regimes are afraid of possible mobilization of their Shia minorities and/or other long suppressed resistance groups. In a very telling move, Abraham Foxman, leader of the pro-Zionist organization, Anti-Defamation League, visited the Saudi ambassador Prince Turki al-Faisal in Washington last week to thank him for his country's condemnation of Hezbollah. In his words, "We told that ambassador that this could be a new moment in the relationship, that the neighborhood is changing because the threats that face the Jewish people are also facing moderate Arab states."

There is yet another group that would like a check on growing Shia influence in the region. This is the local variant of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the ex-Baathist rebels that are also against any Shia consolidation of power in the country.

The Israeli check on Hezbollah's influence and popularity among the Arab masses and the resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon would be useful to all of these parties. Despite their largely dissimilar and often conflicting political and ideological interests, all of these parties have found incitement of sectarian tensions to be the most useful tool to dissuade the masses away from the resistance cause in their own countries and elsewhere. In Iraq alone, about hundred people are dying everyday in the name of sectarian differences. Given this background, the shameful silence of many Arab regimes on the current Israeli aggression in Lebanon or their opposition to Hezbollah should come as no surprise.

What Lies Ahead?

Only by ignoring ethical principles and international conventions, forgetting the track record of aggression against other nations by the Zionist regime, and disregarding the larger context of Israeli colonial motives in the region can one call Israel to be the "victim" and the resistance movement for freedom and dignity in Palestine and Lebanon to be the "provoker." The question that is never asked and always taken for granted is Zionism. Without understanding its history and politics, the ineffectiveness of international community against Zionist expansions and aggression, and the origins of resistance movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas, one cannot rightfully determine the right from wrong in the current conflict.

What will happen to Lebanon and Hezbollah in the long run? Professor Juan Cole's analysis (July 19, www.salon.com) seems much realistic in this regard when he says, "There are two most likely outcomes of the war. One is the collapse of the Lebanese government and the creation of another failed state on Israel's border, where desperation will breed terrorism for decades. The other is a strengthened Hezbollah, which will become the leading force in Lebanese nationalism, weakening the reformists. The maximalist option would likely turn Beirut into a poor Shiite city, reinforcing Shiite political power at the center. Destroying a few Katyusha emplacements in the south will not affect either outcome, and in both cases Hezbollah will probably be able to rebuild its arsenal."

What to expect in next few days? If other factors are held constant, that is we do not see any significant shift in the Arab response or the response of the international community in general, or in the political dynamics of Palestine and Iraq, here is what we can expect based on above assessment:

a) The military campaign would end within a few days. During this time, according to a *New York Times* report (published July 18), Israel would continue to bomb Lebanese territories and inflict enough damages to the Lebanese infrastructure and Hezbollah's powerbase. "Then, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would go to the region and seek to establish a buffer zone in southern Lebanon and perhaps an international force to monitor Lebanon's borders to prevent Hezbollah from obtaining more rockets with which to bombard Israel. 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." (*Guardian* published a similar report the same day).

Israel may attempt to create such a buffered zone by itself through limited military aggression. It could also try to accomplish this by creating a specter of a full fledged war on the Lebanese border in order to pressure the international community to force Lebanon into accepting this buffer zone. However, Israel would probably not engage in a full scale war with Lebanon or Syria at this time, nor could its American ally afford that, given the turmoil in Iraq and Afghanistan and the ever growing consensus of international community against the US occupation.

b) An extensive media campaign against Hezbollah would follow the cease fire, blaming the resistance movement for the whole episode of violence, and pressuring it to disarm. The media campaign would also provide more legitimacy for US aid to Israel. Hezbollah's link with Syria and

Iran would be further stressed upon to limit their influence in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, and to prepare grounds for any future military campaigns against these two countries.

c) Sectarian violence in Iraq and possibly elsewhere would continue with the same escalated levels. Even though, the instigators could be any of the abovementioned parties, it is in the interest of all of these parties to weaken the so called "emerging Shia crescent". Saad Hariri, leader of the reformist bloc in the Lebanese parliament, has already warned about Israeli policy of trying to get the Lebanese to fight one another, creating a new civil war through its ongoing military aggression. A weak Lebanon, again, is in the interest of the Zionist regime.

If the above assessments make any sense, what we – the moral activists especially in the Western countries – need to do is find effective means to counter these three possible outcomes. Educating our communities, solidifying our unity, and creating awareness among general public about the current crisis and about the consequences of the US support to Israel would be key to any such efforts.

They devise their plots, but God too plans, and God is the best of the planners. (Quran 08:30)