

War in Lebanon

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July 30, 2006

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As I write, at the end of July, a full-scale Israeli air war against Lebanon has been going on for nearly three weeks. Israeli tanks and infantry are making cross-border raids and are massed at the border ready for a large-scale invasion. These attacks are a new phase in an ongoing crisis that began with clashes in Palestine and Israel and has now spread.

Two things are notable about the current situation. One is the sheer ferocity of Israel's air war and the fact that it is largely directed at civilians. Israel, whose stated aim is to drive back the Hezbollah militia from border areas so that Hezbollah cannot attack Israel, has chosen to attack the entire civilian population of Shi'a areas in southern and central Lebanon, which support Hezbollah.

Most recently—today, as I write—Israeli missiles twice struck a house full of people taking shelter in the town of Qana, collapsing the building and killing up to 56 people, possibly more. A survivor in hospital in Tyre, Zaineb Shaloub, said, "There's nobody left in our village. Not a human or a stone" (*New York Times* on the Web, July 30).

Israeli planes and gunners have bombed and shelled convoys of civilians fleeing from areas under attack. They have bombed single vehicles displaying white flags. They have bombed Red Cross ambulances. They have shelled a well known, well-marked United Nations building for six hours, killing four UN soldiers, while the UN commander spoke repeatedly by phone to Jerusalem trying to negotiate a ceasefire. They have saturated villages with airdropped leaflets telling residents to leave and then bombed the residents who left. Israel's public security minister defends these acts by saying, "Sometimes from the air you hit the wrong target" (*New York Times* July 25, A10). But when you hit the wrong target nine tenths of the time, it is the target.

Up to 700,000 people, one fifth of Lebanon's population, are now refugees. Entire neighborhoods in Shi'a southern Beirut, in Tyre and other cities, and entire villages in the southern part of the country have hardly a building standing.

Lebanon's prime minister, Fouad Siniora, no radical, asked some pertinent questions: "Is the value of human life less in Lebanon than that of citizens elsewhere? Are we children of a lesser god? Is an Israeli teardrop worth more than a drop of Lebanese blood?" (*New York Times* July 27, A1).

The second notable point is that despite their overwhelming superiority in numbers and weapons, the Israeli forces are not yet winning. Hezbollah fighters, determined and disciplined, have inflicted casualties, sprung ambushes, pinned down Israeli units, and have not yet been dislodged from the areas under attack. Hezbollah has stepped up its own cross-border rocket attacks on Israeli civilians, using new missiles with longer ranges and more explosives.

At first glance the "kill ratio"—as military planners like to call it—looks lopsided. As of July 30, there were between 550 and 750 Lebanese and only 52 Israeli deaths. Twelve or 15 to one.

But the "overwhelming majority" of Lebanese deaths (*New York Times*, July 26) are civilian. No one knows how many. If we assume 80 percent, we can estimate 110 to 150 Hezbollah deaths. The Israeli deaths include 19 civilians and 33 soldiers. So the ratio of military deaths is perhaps between three and five Hezbollah to one Israeli, and that is a sustainable, if brutal, ratio.

Hezbollah's resistance is a major problem for Israel. As one Israeli officer said off the record, "All Hezbollah has to do to win, is not lose" (*New York Times* July 27, A14).

What Possibilities and Justice?

Pulling back from the immediate crisis, I would like to ask, what are the possibilities for peace? What are the possibilities for a just settlement in Palestine and Lebanon? What, too, are the possibilities for Israelis to live in peace? From my viewpoint the central issue is Palestine, not Lebanon. For whatever specific reasons and with whatever calculations by regional powers such as Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah launched its raid into Israel on July 12—which called down the Israeli Armageddon on the Lebanese people—because of events in Palestine: it wanted to help—and perhaps outflank—the Hamas government in Palestine, which was under attack by Israel, with U.S. backing.

I approach this issue from the standpoint of one favoring a Palestinian state achieved by a compromise—one lopsidedly favorable to Israel, but I think worth accepting—in which both Israel and Palestine agree to create two states within the pre-1967 borders, with some adjustments. I am not going to explain and defend this view or its relation to anarchist goals here. Those associated with The Utopian have written frequently on these topics, notably in articles in the magazine's first issue that are still on its website.

I believe the road to peace—and at least an advance toward independence and security for both peoples—is perfectly clear, but the responsibility for opening the road lies with Israel and the political will to do so is lacking.

Israel and the U.S. must agree to negotiate the peace. The peace, as is common in international diplomacy, must be negotiated before it is declared (Israel and the U.S. cannot ask Palestinians to accept peace terms as a basis for negotiating) and if there is to be a truce before negotiating that too must be negotiated. In particular, Israel and the U.S.

must agree to accept the government headed by Hamas and to negotiate with it. And if the U.S. and Israel had done so in January when that government was elected—or were to do so now—then in my view very probably the present crisis would never have happened or could be damped down now.

Hamas's Election

At least in my view Hamas's election in January, paradoxically, was a step toward peace. This is not how most people saw it, including Bush's secretary of state Rice and Israeli acting (now elected) prime minister Ehud Olmert, who immediately issued a series of preconditions to be met before they would talk to Hamas. Nor the U.S. press, which followed Bush's lead and their own pro-Israel assumptions by running alarmist stories about terrorists coming to power. But—in my estimation—it was such a step. This idea requires a little background.

The Palestine Liberation Organization, its leading party Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah all at one time rejected the legitimacy of Israel. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the PLO called for a "democratic, secular Palestine," meaning a single Palestinian state with no religious basis. Obviously, this would have ended the existence of an Israeli state with an acknowledged Jewish character in one part of what the PLO claimed as Palestine. In the mid-1980s the PLO, under U.S. and European pressure, changed its position to favor a "two-state" policy, that is, Israel within its 1967 borders side by side with a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank—roughly one third

of historic Palestine that had not been part of Israel after the 1948 war but which Israel captured in 1967.

Hamas and Hezbollah continue to reject Israel's existence.

Nonetheless, immediately after the January election, the political leader of Hamas, Khalid Mish'al, who lives in Syria, issued a statement offering a "long-term truce." Mish'al's statement said in part:

Our message to the Israelis is this: we do not fight you because you belong to a certain faith or culture. Jews have lived in the Muslim world for 13 centuries in peace and harmony; they are in our religion "the people of the book" who have a covenant from God and His messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him), to be respected and protected. Our conflict with you is not religious but political. We have no problem with Jews who have not attacked us— our problem is with those who came to our land, imposed themselves on us by force, destroyed our society and banished our people.

We shall never recognize the right of any power to rob us of our land and deny us our national rights. We shall never recognize the legitimacy of a Zionist state created on our soil in order to atone for somebody else's sins or solve somebody else's problem. But if you are willing to accept the principle of a long-term truce, we are prepared to negotiate the terms. Hamas is extending a hand of peace to those who are truly interested in a peace based on justice. (*The Guardian*, London, Jan. 31, 26)

In my opinion, anyone with experience in politics should have been able see the basis of a deal here. What Mish'al was saying, approximately, is that if the rest of the "two state" program can be brought about—the 1967 borders, with some modifications, acceptance in principle of the "right of return" of displaced Palestinians with compensation for those who do not return, and a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem—then Hamas will continue the long term truce and eventually accept Israel's existence in practice. Obviously, recognition of Israel occurs as the result of a peace agreement, not as a precondition.

At the time, there were some hopeful signs. Hamas had maintained a ceasefire, at Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's request, since early 2005. Moreover, whatever Olmert said about not dealing with Hamas, his first response to its election was to redefine Israel's claims in the West Bank so as to include less land than ever before. In a speech Feb. 7, Olmert named three smallish settlements, east, north, and south of Jerusalem, with about 70,000 residents, as the only land Israel absolutely must keep (*New York Times*, Feb. 8, 2006). This means more than 200,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank settlements would eventually have to return to Israel or live in Palestine. These claims themselves are not legitimate, in my view, but the point is that they were a vast reduction in what Israel had previously thought it could hold onto.

Economic Blockade, Failed Civil War, Targeted Killings

As we know, the tentative gestures from both sides in January came to nothing. U.S. secretary of state Rice declared that, as a precondition to negotiations, Hamas must recognize Israel, renounce violence, and agree to all previously negotiated agreements. In the real political world,

acceptance of these conditions would leave Hamas nothing to negotiate with; it would have to accept what the U.S. and Israel doled out. As soon as Hamas rejected the preconditions—which may have been Rice’s goal all along—the U.S. and Israel imposed an economic blockade designed to undermine Hamas and spark a popular rebellion against it. The blockade, started in February and March, included:

- Cutting off all trade.
- Blocking Palestinian taxes due to the Palestine government but collected by Israel—about \$50 million a month.
- Pressuring banks in the Arab world, all of which do business in the U.S. and Europe, not to handle money transfers to Palestine.

In April and May, a series of small-scale clashes between Hamas and Fatah security forces took place. Whatever the two groups’ rivalries, my suspicion is that the U.S. and Israel were behind these fights; both governments were openly talking about a coup in which Abbas would drive Hamas out of power. However, Abbas stopped short of an all-out break and even made some progress toward setting up a joint negotiating stance toward Israel.

During this whole period, February to June, Israel continued its policy of killing members and leaders of Palestinian groups—Hamas, Al Aksa Martyrs Brigade, Islamic Jihad and others—in missile strikes and other raids. By my very incomplete count, these raids killed 45 people, mainly operatives in political groups but also civilians, in at least 16 separate attacks between Feb. 4 and June 9. However I’m sure that in trying to reconstruct this sequence after several months I have missed a number of attacks. During the same period several of these groups, though not Hamas, kept up sporadic missile attacks against Israel, using the inaccurate Kassam rockets. In the same period as well, Israel threatened to kill members of the Hamas government and arrested one cabinet minister briefly.

Finally, on June 9, during a day of heavy shelling against Palestinian targets in Gaza, what was most probably an Israeli shell killed seven civilians at a picnic on a Gaza beach, including six members of one family. On June 10 Hamas announced the end of its ceasefire and fired rockets into Israel. Israeli forces intensified shelling and airstrikes. Two weeks later, June 25, Hamas launched a military raid against an Israeli army outpost, killing two soldiers and capturing a third, Cpl. Gilad Shalit, who is still being held. Israeli operatives then arrested 64 members of the Hamas cabinet and parliament, though not the prime minister. And on July 12, Hezbollah crossed the Israel border, attacked an army post, killed eight soldiers, and captured two; Israeli planes launched air strikes into Lebanon; and we know the rest.

Who and What “Touched Off the Crisis”?

This history is obscured by media presentations in which Israeli actions are invariably said to be in retaliation for some Palestinian action. Palestinian actions may also be described as retaliatory, but only when they first occur; later, they themselves are said to have “touched off the crisis.” One does not read, therefore, that Israel bombed and shelled Gaza in response to the capture of Cpl. Shalit, which was retaliation for Israeli shelling of Palestinian organizations and civilians.

One reads sentences like these:

- The Palestinian prime minister, Ismail Haniya, reiterated the call for an exchange of Palestinian prisoners for Cpl. Gilad Shalit, whose capture by Palestinian militants on June 25 touched off the crisis in Gaza. (*New York Times* July 22, A6)
- The current conflict began when Hezbollah fighters crossed into Israel and captured two Israeli soldiers on July 12 [...] (*Same*, July 18, A8)
- Ms. Rice [...] said any settlement must address the root cause of the conflict, which she described as the Hezbollah attacks [...] (*Same*, July 23, A4)

The reality is quite clear, in my view. What “touched off the crisis” was the U.S. and Israeli refusal to negotiate with an elected government that had proposed a long-term truce, and their effort instead to undermine and destroy it.

What Next?

No one knows what will be the outcome of the crisis that began in Palestine with the U.S. and Israeli attempt to overthrow Hamas and has now spread to Lebanon. I don't know whether the war is about to escalate or whether some kind of temporary stand-down will occur. But I'm willing to venture a couple of slightly longer-term predictions.

First, Hamas and Hezbollah will both survive, and ultimately Israel and the U.S. will be forced to negotiate with them.

Second, the U.S. will emerge with its power reduced. If one puts the events of January to July in context, one sees that U.S. and Israel actions reveal an element of fantasy, specifically the fantasy that the U.S. can dictate any results it likes and that the situation in the Middle East has not changed since 2003. In 2003 Bush gambled that the U.S. could easily overturn Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq and quickly reconstruct Iraq as a stable U.S. satellite. If true this victory would have basically changed the balance of power in the Middle East. It would have given the U.S. a stranglehold on politics in the area and the ability to dictate war, peace, and policy on its own terms. These hopes, I believe, were Bush's reasons for launching the war. But of course, Bush's war victory did not lead to the desired result.

Every day in Iraq shows the U.S. less in control of events. This situation has its own effects outside Iraq. The Hamas victory was one sign of these effects. Hamas is not any more fundamentally anti-U.S. than Abbas, but it is more militant and independent than the U.S. wants, and its victory against U.S. wishes showed the limits of U.S. power in a post-Iraq world. The Hamas victory among other events showed that the U.S. is no longer strong enough to dictate its own terms in the Middle East, and its survival so far shows the same. But, on the other hand, the U.S.'s power is far from defeated.

Third, the worst and most lasting fallout from Israel's actions in Lebanon, in my view, is likely to be a loss of empathy for Jews, Judaism, and the historical Jewish holocaust, and the growth of an anti-Israel rage in much of the world that does not distinguish between anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism. One already sees this in the July 28 attack on the Jewish Federation of Seattle, reportedly by a Muslim American who told a 911 dispatcher, “These are Jews and I'm tired of

getting pushed around and our people getting pushed around by the situation in the Middle East” (*New York Times* July 30, 22). Similarly there has been a rise in incidents like defacing Jewish cemeteries in France, random attacks against Jews, and so on. Some of these have been carried out by traditional right-wing anti-Semites but some by oppressed North African youths. In my view one has to see such actions as horrific “collateral damage”—the term military planners use for killing civilians—from the events in the Middle East, most recently in Lebanon. The lesson in my view is simple and brutal: if you want people to respect what happened to your grandmothers, stop killing their mothers.

National Rights

Pulling back even further from the current situation, one can see that the crisis I have described as starting in January with the refusal to acknowledge Hamas’s victory really began many years ago with the refusal to acknowledge national rights. I do not support Hamas as a political entity, nor is an independent Palestinian state my final goal. I don’t support Hamas politically, first, because I don’t support armed actions against ordinary citizens, terrorism; second, because Hamas believes in an Islamic society while I believe in a nonsectarian society; and third, because I believe in superseding and dismantling state structures, national borders, and all bars to the free life and movement of the world’s people; I don’t support anyone whose program and practical approach is to set up any kind of state.

But saying one is not in favor of a state is not the same as saying people don’t have the right to an independent national existence, so far as that is possible in an imperialized, “globalized” world. On balance I do think an independent Palestine—even in a fraction of rightful Palestinian land, and even under various forms of outside financial and diplomatic control, all of which should be fought—is a worthwhile goal. It’s a goal I support for its own sake, separately from any support for Hamas or any other Palestinian group. Thus, to state the obvious, Palestinians have national rights that must be respected.

Further—again to state what is obvious to the whole world except Bush, Rice, and Olmert—Lebanon has national rights. People in Lebanon have the right to live on their own land, free from terror, and not be bombed from the air like rats. Lebanon has the right to peace and security, regardless of the fact that it was created as a sphere of influence by France in the 1920s and has always been regarded as a plaything by the so-called “great” powers—great only in arrogance and violence—and by regional power hopefuls. As was written so long ago: “But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid” (Micah 4.4).

Finally, Israel too has national rights; Israelis too have the right to live without fear. But Israel is living on conquered land and its rights, in my view, begin from that fact. Israel’s rights are conditional on its readiness in actual fact to reach an agreement with Palestinians allowing them, in turn, an independent country (with full rights) on the one third of geographical Palestine that Israel had not already occupied in 1967. These national rights lie at the root of the war crisis and others before it and—I am afraid—after it. Their recognition is not a sufficient, but a necessary precondition for advancing toward the kind of world we would like to see.

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