

How Washington Goaded Israel

By Stephen Zunes | August 21, 2006

There is increasing evidence that Israel instigated a disastrous war on Lebanon largely at the behest of the United States. The Bush administration was set on crippling Hezbollah, the radical Shiite political movement that maintains a sizable block of seats in the Lebanese parliament. Taking advantage of the country's democratic opening after the forced departure of Syrian troops last year, Hezbollah defied U.S. efforts to democratize the region on American terms. The populist party's unwillingness to disarm its militia as required by UN resolution—and the inability of the pro-Western Lebanese government to force them to do so—led the Bush administration to push Israel to take military action.

In his May 23 summit with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, President George W. Bush offered full U.S. support for Israel to attack Lebanon as soon as possible. Seymour Hersh, in the August 21 *New Yorker*, quotes a Pentagon consultant on the Bush administration's long-standing desire to strike “a preemptive blow against Hezbollah.” The consultant added, “It was our intent to have Hezbollah diminished, and now we have someone else doing it.”

Israel was a willing partner. Although numerous Israeli press reports indicate that some Israeli officials, including top military officials, are furious at Bush for pushing Olmert into war, the Israeli government had been planning the attack since 2004. According to a July 21 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Israel had briefed U.S. officials with details of the plans, including PowerPoint presentations, in what the newspaper described as “revealing detail.” Political science professor Gerald Steinberg of Bar-Ilan University told the *Chronicle* that “[O]f all of Israel's wars since 1948, this was the one for which Israel was most prepared. In a sense, the preparation began in May 2000, immediately after the Israeli withdrawal ...”

Despite these preparations, the Bush administration and congressional leaders of both parties tried to present the devastating attacks, which took as many as 800 civilian lives, as a spontaneous reaction to Hezbollah's

provocative July 12 attack on an Israeli border post and its seizure of two soldiers.

Some reports have indicated that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was less sanguine than Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, or President Bush about the proposed Israeli military offensive. Rumsfeld apparently believed that Israel should focus less on bombing and more on ground operations, despite the dramatically higher Israeli casualties that would result. Still, Hersh quotes a former senior intelligence official as saying that Rumsfeld was “delighted that Israel is our stalking horse.”

The recent announcement of a shaky ceasefire may represent only a minor speed bump in U.S. plans. After all, the attack on Hezbollah was only the first stage of what the Bush administration apparently hopes will be a joint redrawing of the Middle East map.

On to Iran and Syria?

On July 30, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that President Bush pushed Israel to expand the war beyond Lebanon and attack Syria. Israeli officials apparently found the idea “nuts.”

This idea was not exactly secret. In support of the Israeli offensive, the office of the White House Press Secretary released a list of talking points that included reference to a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed by Max Boot,



senior fellow for national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. The article, “It’s Time to Let the Israelis Take Off the Gloves,” urges an Israeli attack against Syria. “Israel needs to hit the Assad regime. Hard,” argues Boot. “If it does, it will be doing Washington’s dirty work.”

Iran, too, was in the administration’s sights. The Israeli attack on Lebanon, according to Seymour Hersh, was to “serve as a prelude to a potential American preemptive attack to destroy Iran’s nuclear installations.” But first, the Bush administration needed to get rid of Hezbollah’s capacity to retaliate against Israel in the event of a U.S. strike on Iran, which apparently prompted Hezbollah’s buildup of Iranian-supplied missiles in the first place.

Starting this spring, according to Hersh, the White House ordered top planners from the U.S. air force to consult with their Israeli counterparts on a war plan against Iran that incorporated an Israeli pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah. Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, the chief of staff of the Israeli military and principal architect of the war on Lebanon, worked with U.S. officials on contingency planning for an air war with Iran.

The Bush administration’s larger goal apparently has been to form an alliance of pro-Western Sunni Arab dictatorships—primarily Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—against a growing Shiite militancy exemplified by Hezbollah and Iran and, to a lesser extent, post-Saddam Iraq. Though these Sunni regimes initially spoke out against Hezbollah’s provocative capture of the two Israeli soldiers that prompted the Israeli attacks, popular opposition within these countries to the ferocity of the Israeli assault led them to rally solidly against the U.S.-backed war on Lebanon.

In Israel’s Interest?

In the years prior to Israel’s July 12 bombing of Lebanese cities, Hezbollah had become less and less of a threat. It had not killed any Israeli civilians for more than a decade (with the exception of one accidental

fatality in 2003 caused by an anti-aircraft missile fired at an Israeli plane that violated Lebanese airspace). Investigations by the Congressional Research Service, the State Department, and independent think tanks failed to identify any major act of terrorism by Hezbollah for over a dozen years.

Prior to the attack, Hezbollah’s militia had dwindled to about 1000 men under arms—this number tripled after July 12 when reserves were called up—and a national dialogue was going on between Hezbollah and the government of pro-Western prime minister Fuad Siniora regarding disarmament. The majority of Lebanese opposed Hezbollah, both its reactionary fundamentalist social agenda as well as its insistence on maintaining an armed presence independent of the country’s elected government. Thanks to the U.S.-backed Israeli attacks on Lebanon’s civilian infrastructure, however, support for Hezbollah, according to polls, has grown to more than 80%, even within the Sunni Muslim and Christian communities.

Even Richard Armitage, a leading hawk and deputy secretary of state under President Bush during his first term, noted that “[T]he only thing that the bombing has achieved so far is to unite the population against the Israelis.”

Despite U.S. encouragement that Israel continue the war, Israel’s right-wing prime minister has come under increasing criticism at home, with polls from the *Haaretz* newspaper indicating that only 39% of Israelis would support the planned expansion of the ground offensive. Meretz Party Knesset member Ran Cohen, writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, called earlier moves to expand the ground offensive “a wretched decision.” Yariv Oppenheimer, general director of Peace Now, which had earlier muted its criticism of the attacks on Lebanon, noted that “[T]he war has spiraled out of control and the government is ignoring the political options available.”

Not only have a growing number of Israelis acknowledged that the war has been a disaster for Israel, there is growing recognition of U.S. responsibility for getting

them into that mess. A July 23 article in *Haaretz* about an anti-war demonstration in Tel Aviv noted that “this was a distinctly anti-American protest” that included “chants of ‘We will not die and kill in the service of the United States,’ and slogans condemning President George W. Bush.”

Members of Congress who have unconditionally backed Israel’s attacks on Lebanon have responded to constituent outrage by claiming they were simply defending Israel’s legitimate interests. In supporting the Bush administration, however, they have defended policies that cynically use Israel to advance the administration’s militarist agenda.

Who’s Anti-Semitic?

One of the more unsettling aspects of the broad support in Washington for the use of Israel as U.S. proxy in the Middle East is how closely it corresponds to historic anti-Semitism. In past centuries, the ruling elite of European countries would, in return for granting limited religious and cultural autonomy, established certain individuals in the Jewish community as the visible agents of the oppressive social order, such as tax collectors and moneylenders. When the population threatened to rise up against the ruling elite, the rulers could then blame the Jews, channeling the wrath of an exploited people against convenient scapegoats. The resulting pogroms and waves of repression took place throughout the Jewish Diaspora.

Zionists hoped to break this cycle by creating a Jewish nation-state where Jews would no longer be dependent on the ruling elite of a given country. The tragic irony is that, by using Israel to wage proxy war to promote U.S. hegemony in the region, this cycle is being perpetuated on a global scale. This latest orgy of American-inspired Israeli violence has led to a dangerous upsurge in anti-Semitism in the Middle East and throughout the world. In the United States, many critics of U.S. policy are blaming “the Zionist lobby” for U.S. support for Israel’s attacks on Lebanon rather than the Bush administration and its bipartisan congressional allies

who encouraged Israel to wage war on Lebanon in the first place.

Unfortunately, most anti-war protests in major U.S. cities have targeted the Israeli consulate rather than U.S. government buildings. By contrast, during the 1980s, protests against the U.S.-backed violence in El Salvador rarely targeted Salvadoran consulates, but instead more appropriately took place outside federal offices and arms depots, recognizing that the violence would not be taking place without U.S. weapons and support.

Israel is no banana republic. Even those like Hersh who recognize the key role of the Bush administration in goading Israel to attack Lebanon emphasize that rightist elements within Israel had their own reasons, independent of Washington, to pursue the conflict.

Still, given Israel’s enormous military, economic, and political dependence on the United States, this latest war on Lebanon could not have taken place without a green light from Washington. President Jimmy Carter, for example, was able to put a halt to Israel’s 1978 invasion of Lebanon within days and force the Israeli army to withdraw from the south bank of the Litani River to a narrow strip just north of the Israeli border. By contrast, the Bush administration and an overwhelming bipartisan majority of Congress clearly believed it was in the U.S. interest for Israel to pursue Washington’s “dirty work” for an indefinite period, regardless of its negative implications for Israel’s legitimate security interests.

Domestic Political Implications

Given the lack of success of the Israeli military campaign, U.S. planners are likely having second thoughts about the ease with which a U.S.-led bombing campaign could achieve victory over Iran. However, the propensity of the Bush administration to ignore historical lessons should not be underestimated. A former senior intelligence official told Hersh that “[T]here is no way that Rumsfeld and Cheney will draw the right conclusion about this. When the smoke clears, they’ll say it

was a success, and they'll draw reinforcement for their plan to attack Iran." Indeed, on August 14, President Bush declared that Israel had achieved "victory" in its fight against Hezbollah.

The outspoken support of congressional Democrats for Bush's policies and Israel's war on Lebanon portends similar support should the United States ignore history and common sense and attack Iran anyway. Both the Senate and House, in backing administration policy, claimed that, contrary to the broad consensus of international opinion, Israel's military actions were consistent with international law and the UN Charter. By this logic, if Israel's wanton destruction of a small democratic country's civilian infrastructure because of a minor border incident instigated by members of a 3000-man militia of a minority party is a legitimate act of self-defense, surely a similar U.S. attack against Iran—a much larger country with a sizable armed force whose hard-line government might be developing nuclear weapons—could also be seen as a legitimate act of self-defense.

Ironically, political action committees sponsored by liberal groups such as MoveOn.org, Peace Action, and Act for Change continue to support the election or re-election of Congressional candidates who have voiced support for Washington's proxy war against Lebanon despite massive Israeli violations of international humanitarian law, its serving as a trial run for a U.S. war against Iran, and its being against Israel's legitimate self-interests. And, unfortunately, on the other extreme, some of the more outspoken elements that have opposed America's proxy war against Lebanon frankly do not have Israel's best interest in mind.

As a result, without a dramatic increase in protests by those who see Washington's cynical use of Israel as bad for virtually everyone, there is little chance this dangerous and immoral policy can be reversed.

Stephen Zunes is Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy In Focus Project. He is a professor of Politics and the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism (Common Courage Press, 2003).

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