

Israel's terrorism*

By Gabriel Ash**

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Gabriel Ash argues that murder and destruction in Lebanon "is not a by-product but the core of Israel's strategy of escalation" and that the Lebanese will conclude "that their only defence against their psychopathic southern neighbour is bigger and badder weapons".

The Middle East is boiling over yet again. Israel is resorting to the one strategy it has perfected since the day it was created: murdering civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure.

The Israeli defence doctrine, old as Israel itself, considers the bombing of civilian targets a means for pressuring "militants" and uncooperative governments. So Israel bombs bridges and villages in South Lebanon, power plants in Gaza, orchards, fields, schools, hospitals, residential neighbourhoods, beach barbecue parties, etc. Everything is a legitimate target. Israeli ministers announce publicly that their chief strategy is to cause civilian suffering. Every day sees its Guernica, and the UN, which proudly displays a reproduction of the painting, is mum in the face of a hundred Guernicas.

To be clear, Israel's actions fit the very definition of terrorism. Doubly so now, since the bombing campaign is a response to attacks on Israeli soldiers, not civilians. The ever more morally bankrupt "international community" sees nothing, hears nothing and says nothing. Don't take my word for it. An aide of the Israeli Prime Minister said recently: "We are acting there [in Gaza] in an unprecedented manner; we're firing hundreds of artillery shells, attacking from the air, sea and land [and the world remains silent](#)."

Having been so encouraged by the world's indifference to the bombing of Gaza, Israel is giving Lebanon the same murderous treatment. Putin and Chirac have managed to assemble some moderate testiness. The rest of the world called for "restraint". When the mission statement is to exact revenge and kill civilians, what's restraint?

According to the EU, Hamas has to renounce violence to become a "responsible government". And Hizbullah has to release the captured soldiers. The Israeli government, on the other hand, although responsible for an unending campaign of terrorism, need not renounce violence, nor release any of its political prisoners. The brotherhood of money and white skin is proving again to be thicker than blood.

Hizbullah's intervention proved again it is the only power that wouldn't stay silent in the face of Israeli barbarism. Since Israel

recognizes neither international laws nor international borders, there was nothing morally wrong in Hizbullah's fighters crossing the border into Israel to raid a military patrol. Israel should not enjoy the defence of principles it doesn't respect. With its latest raid, Hizbullah consolidated its position as the leading popular voice in the Middle East, displaying tactical brilliance, solidarity and a refusal to be bribed or cowered that is putting the rest of the world - the Arab puppet governments as well as Europe's hypocrites -- to shame. To boot, Hizbullah is also putting to shame other Muslim radicals, most notably the Iraqi thugs and Al-Qaeda, both by successfully raiding legitimate military targets and by feeding a broad popular consensus that cuts across the Sunni-Shi'ah divide.

However, courage and legitimacy aside, it is anybody's guess whether the leadership of Hizbullah foresaw that Israel would go postal and open a full-blown air war against Lebanon, [shooting civilians in cars like ducks](#). If they did not, they were certainly shortsighted, and if they did, they were reckless.

Nevertheless, it is far from clear who wins when the dust settles. While guaranteed to suffer severe damage, Hizbullah still has the odds on its side. When Israel invaded Lebanon for the umpteenth time, government officials announced that Israel's goal was nothing less than the disarming of Hizbullah and the setting of "new rules of the game". That pronouncement sounds awfully reminiscent of Sharon's stated goal for invading Lebanon in 1982, to create "a new order in Lebanon". What are the chances that Olmert will have better success than Sharon? Slim. Hizbullah will not disarm wilfully. Who will disarm it? There are three candidates, and none of them looks too promising.

Israel: Israel can reoccupy Lebanon. That would certainly be a setback to Hizbullah, which would lose men, installations and freedom of operation. But can Israel destroy Hizbullah? Note that Israel is unable to destroy Hamas, a much weaker organization, on a much smaller territory. No matter how much violence it used, Israel couldn't prevent Hamas from launching rockets and gaining popularity. Will Israel be more successful in Lebanon?

The "international community": One could see France and the US occupying Lebanon, probably under the guise of some invitation from the Christian minority, or a call for UN "peacekeeping" *a la Haiti*. Assuming Western powers are stupid (or cornered) enough to take the bait, can they achieve in Lebanon what Israel, with a lot more commitment, couldn't? A Western occupation of Lebanon is likely to turn the whole Middle East into one long crusaders versus Muslims crescent. Does the West have the stomach for that? Does it have a reasonable chance of winning?

The "Cedar Revolution": The most promising alternative, for the West, is to empower some local stooges that would rule the new Lebanon colony for Western and Israeli interests. That is the West's favourite strategy, currently tried in many places around the globe. But Shi'is are a poor, radical, bitter and armed majority in Lebanon. It would take more than a few Starbucks customers to subdue them. The anti-Hizbullah coalition is small and weak. Its unity is doubtful and its willingness to fight far

from evident. Hizbullah, on the other hand, will have not only well-disciplined cadres and massive popular support, but also the support of Syria and Iran.

Israel could seek to cause as much damage as possible to Hizbullah's infrastructure with aerial assaults, then call it victory. But the blow to Hizbullah would not be enough to put an end to its operations, probably leaving Olmert in the unpleasant position of having to declare impotence. Hence the scenario of a full-blown war is extremely plausible. Such a war will eventually involve an Israeli invasion seeking to severely weaken Hizbullah, followed by an international peacekeeping force that replaces Israel and nurtures a government of Lebanese collaborators. In the rosiest scenario, that government eventually gains the ability to repress the majority of the Lebanese population with only Western financial support. At that point the "peacekeepers" withdraw and Lebanon joins the dubious fraternity of Egypt and Jordan, safe Western puppet regimes.

A not-so-slight complication of this classic colonial scenario is the fact that Hizbullah is not an isolated resistance movement; rather it enjoys the international support of Iran and Syria, as well as strong ties with the Iraqi Shi'ah militias, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, in the context of a growing resource conflict between the superpowers, Iran could eventually receive covert support from Russia and/or China, in ways reminiscent of the support the Afghan Mujahidin (and Bin-Laden) received from the USA. Thus, a successful repression of Hizbullah is likely to require at some point dealing a severe blow to Syria and Iran, and such a blow could require a proxy war between the US, Russia and China.

To put it differently, the Israel-Hizbullah war can remain contained, or it can end in a decisive manner. But it cannot both remain contained and end in a decisive manner.

(In light of this, one must read sceptically [Western editorials](#) calling on Israel to exercise caution, avoid overreaching and limit itself to targeting Hizbullah only as a miserable attempt to defend Israel while keeping up the pretence of opposing the targeting of civilians. The fact is that the "collateral damage" is not a result of Israel's failure to "minimize the damage to civilian bystanders". Since Israel can only achieve its aims by widening the scope of the war and forcing other parties to get involved, "damage to civilians" is not a by-product but the core of Israel's strategy of escalation. The longer other parties fail to get involved, the more civilians will die. The *New York Times* is right that such indiscriminate murder strengthens Hamas and Hizbullah, but the problem is not one that Israel can rectify by changing its tactics. The problem is Israel itself and its true goals.)

The long war scenario, which is the only scenario that has a slightest chance of achieving Israel's goal of disarming Hizbullah, is similar to the US strategy in Iraq, where success is getting ever more elusive. It is also similar to the original Sharon plan for Lebanon in 1982, which failed. Why would this scenario be more successful in today's Lebanon? The odds are that it won't. But there are good reasons to believe that it will be tried. Three reasons, to be precise:

First, the post-colonial Western imagination is limited. This scenario is the well-understood way of dealing with subject populations in troubled corners of the world. It worked many times in the past, and even if its effectiveness is on a downward curve, there isn't any alternative short of giving up power and compromising.

Second, even if final success is elusive, war buys time, for Israel as well as for the US, for the politicians as well as for the interests they represents. For the latter, losing in a decade is still better than compromising today. Raymond Aaron called politics "the art of making things last". That holds true even when what is being made to last is misery.

Third, in international politics it is often true that "it's not the destination that counts, it's the journey". For many Israeli and American interests, war has value, in some cases hard cash value, regardless of final outcome.

One aspect of the intrinsic value of war is that both the leaders and the public in Israel truly believe that all Arabs will surrender if enough force is applied. It never worked. But that racism is too deep to be inconvenienced by facts. The second Lebanon war won't be the first war fought for the sake of maintaining illusions.

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and Defence Minister Peretz are both lacking in the most important social capital in Israel, military rank. They therefore need to prove - to the public as well as to themselves - that their manhood is the longest in the Middle East (in Israel this is called "deterrence"). Within the macho culture Israeli leaders have cultivated for decades, justice and compromise are for sissies. Real men murder civilians. The government has therefore little choice but to escalate the military conflict or risk losing its political credibility.

The Israeli military, which pushed for the recent escalation in both Gaza and Lebanon, taking advantage of the weakness of the political echelon, itches for war. At stake is repairing the psychological damage that "asymmetric warfare" inflicts on the Israeli military (Ilan Pappé, "[What does Israel want](#)"). But beyond psychology, there are also crucial economic interests. Israel was in the middle of a debate over military expenditures, which the latest budget would cut significantly. The new war will certainly serve as the needed excuse for cancelling or otherwise evading the cuts.

Beyond the tangible budget numbers, there is the central position of the army, and the economic interests behind it, within the Israeli economy and politics. The stalemate in Gaza and Hamas's electoral victory are revealing the hollow core of Israel's military dominance, Israel's inability to reduce the Palestinians to a hopeless and obedient subject population. Escalation masks this fatal weakness because Israel is undoubtedly the more powerful party. As long as fighting goes on, Israel has the upper hand, its army looks powerful and above all, useful. The moment the fighting ends, the limits of military power reassert themselves. Continuing military escalation therefore protects the military establishment and Israel's war economy from internal challenges.

Finally, Israel has no hope of a decisive outcome without the US

fully backing it against Iran. And while there are many sane voices calling for the US to dissociate itself from Israel and seek a diplomatic compromise with Iran, there are also powerful US interests itching for a global war. The neo-conservative argument is that a global war is necessary for the maintenance of US dominance, not only in the face of rising local challenges such as Iran, but also to curb the rise of China as a global force. (As an aside, I tend to agree that war is necessary to US global dominance. I doubt, however, that it is also sufficient.) And behind the neo-cons' arguments loom the interests of the US military-industrial-complex. Incidentally, the US economy seems to be moving towards a potentially dangerous recession. While this is still early, there should be no doubt that, as the US economy deteriorates, the economic appeal of military conflict will increase.

Given his low poll numbers and public dissatisfaction with Iraq, Bush is probably unable to initiate a war against Iran. The generals are opposed and the GOP [Grand Old Party - the Republican Party] is likely to be hammered in the mid-term elections. But if the war is initiated by Israel and the US is perceived to be "dragged" into it unwillingly, Bush and the GOP would benefit again from the popular glow of patriotism that war baths leaders in, especially given that Democrats will not criticize a war fought "to protect Israel", whose crony capitalists, like Haim Saban, pay for their election campaigns. An Israeli escalation in Lebanon can, therefore, serve as the necessary trigger for a global conflict that US neo-cons desire.

A larger war will thus serve the short-term interests of the leadership in both Israel and the US. It may delay their inevitable decline, but the chances are that it won't restore their power. Both have reached the double climax of military power and loathsomeness, a point at which they can win any war, but can impose no peace. Since the Islamist leaders of Hamas and Hizbullah tend to take the long view of history, whereas the leaders of the US and Israel are driven mostly by concern for the near future of corporate balance sheets, an escalating conflict might just give both sides the kind of victory they most crave.

One wished that saner voices prevailed; the slide towards war can be stopped by determined international pressure on Israel to accept a ceasefire. That would save many lives, but it will also be a blow to Israeli and US dominance. Therefore, unfortunately, help is definitely not on its way. The people of Lebanon are now being taught a lesson many of them had wanted to forget, that their only defence against their psychopathic southern neighbour is bigger and badder weapons. Rest assured that the lesson will be learned, and that bigger and badder weapons will be used, perhaps against Israel, perhaps half a globe away. Nothing breeds murderers better than silence in the face of murder. Israel's unquenchable bloodlust was forged in the furnaces of the Holocaust and galvanized by the silence of the world. Bin-Laden said he was inspired to blow the Twin Towers by the sight of Beirut burning in 1982, "and the whole world saw and heard but it didn't respond". Who knows whom and to what the latest mayhem will inspire. There is no real justice in this ever-unfolding sickness, but for those who are content with the poetic kind of justice, there is a plenty.

Perhaps a liberal rephrasing of Robert Frost can sum up the stakes:

Some say world domination ends in fire, Some say in ice. From knowing Olmert's and Bush's desire, I hold with those who favour fire. But if our leaders go for ice, I think they are enough despised, so that for their destruction ice, is also great, and would suffice.

- ***This article was first published in [Dissident Voice](#) on 18 July 2006.**
 - ****Gabriel Ash is an activist and writer who writes because the pen is sometimes mightier than the sword and sometimes not. He welcomes comments - you can email him [here](#).**
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