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Middle East

Aug 5, 2006

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It's about annexation, stupid!

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

Officially, Israel's ground invasion of Lebanon is an act of self-defense against Hezbollah's threat, aimed at creating a security buffer zone until the arrival of a "multinational force with an enforcement capability". But increasingly, as the initial goal of a narrow strip of only a few kilometers has now been extended up to the Litani River deep in Lebanon, the real motives behind Israel's invasion are becoming crystal-clear.

It's about (de facto) annexation, stupid. This is a war to annex a major chunk of Lebanese territory without necessarily saying so, under the pretext of security buffer and deterrence against future attacks on Israel.

Already, since the Six Day War, Israel has annexed the Sheba Farms, considered part of the Syrian Golan Heights, although the

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government of Lebanon has long complained that the 25-square-kilometer area was a part of Lebanon. Now the Israeli army is sweeping the area south of the Litani River as a temporary occupation.

"We have no intention of extending our operation more than 70 kilometers north of our borders with Lebanon," stated Lieutenant-Colonel Hemi Lini on the Lebanese border on July 17, one week after the war's outbreak.

This would put Israel, assuming for a moment that the Israel Defense Forces' operations prove ultimately successful, in control of the Litani River, thus fulfilling



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Israel's founding fathers' dream, stretching back to Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Organization, who in 1919 declared the river "essential to the future of the Jewish national home".

Consequently, contrary to the pro-Israel pundits' reassurances that this war is not about occupation, all the tangible signs indicate the exact opposite, ie, the distinct possibility of a "war of acreage" whereby Israel would expand its territory, acquire a new strategic depth, and simultaneously address its chronic water shortage by exploiting the Litani.

Access to the Litani would translate into an annual increase of water supply by 800 million cubic meters. This in turn might allow Israel to bargain with Syria over the Golan Heights, source of a full one-third of Israel's fresh water. However, a more likely scenario is Israel's continued unwillingness to abide by United Nations Resolutions 242 and 338 calling for its withdrawal from the Syrian territories.

The entire Western media have settled on a naive perspective of the reasons for Israel's invasion of Lebanon, namely as a defensive measure against Hezbollah. Conspicuously absent is any serious consideration of a viable, alternative explanation while focusing on, in essence, the same ingredients as in the 1982 invasion: "deceit and misleading statements" by leaders, "inaccurate announcements" by the military spokesmen, and "gross exaggeration" of threats, to paraphrase a candid reflection of an Israeli general, Yehoshafat Harkabi.

Following this scenario, Israel has dropped leaflets throughout southern Lebanon warning the civilians to leave or risk their lives, as they would be considered "Hezbollah sympathizers" if they refused to leave. Reminiscent of Israel's annexation of Palestinian lands in 1948 and beyond, the present war is causing mass refugees, who in all likelihood will not return to their homes any time soon.

The geostrategic and water dimensions of Israel's quest to possess southern Lebanon notwithstanding, the question is, of course, whether or not the world community will tolerate such a development that would remake the map of the Middle East.

There are plenty of reasons to think that in light of the United States' complicit silence on Israel's violation of the territorial integrity of Lebanon, Israel will somehow manage to ride out the international criticisms and stick to its undeclared plan to annex southern Lebanon. However, what is less certain is that the combined efforts of Hezbollah and the rest of Lebanese society, not to mention other Arab contributions, will prevail over Israel's appetite for a decent part of Lebanon.

With the military balance disproportionately in Israel's favor, we can safely assume that the new Operation Litani will succeed and thus create a "new Middle East" with a "greater" and geographically expanded Israel and a shrunken or diminished Lebanon.

If so, then the chronology of events narrated by future historians will closely follow this line of thought: that Israel deliberately provoked Hezbollah into action, after a six-year hiatus, by pressuring Hezbollah's ally, Hamas, which was subjected to a campaign of terror, financial squeeze and intimidation.

The laying of such a trap by Israel would not have happened in a vacuum of strategic thinking on Israel's part. The fact that Hezbollah fell into the trap is a result of several factors, including an adventurist element lending itself to the "reckless" action of Hezbollah on July 11 with respect to crossing the Blue Line and attacking an Israeli patrol.

Since then, the Israelis have put on the mask of being reluctant warriors, delaying their troops' entry into south Lebanon and thus perpetuating Israel's self-image as disinterested in any imperial

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grand objectives. Yet the facts on the ground speak louder than words and, indeed, what fact is more important than Israeli leaders' announced intention to occupy up to the Litani River?

Again, what is understandably omitted in those announcements, adopted as the real reasons by CNN and other US networks, is Israel's predatory lust after Litani's water sources, as well as for new geographical and strategic depth. This in turn might explain the otherwise inexplicably blatant overreaction of Israel to a border incident with Hezbollah.

Instead of searching for answers in the Israeli collective psyche or in the context of action, we must probe the answer in the writings of Israel's founding fathers, including Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion, commonly yearning for Israel's control of the Litani River. As a timely addition to their old wish, Israel today has a security-related explanation, justifying the territorial takeover in the near future in terms of the lessons of the present war, the main lesson being Israel's dire need to gain strategic depth to avoid rocket attacks.

Indeed, the verdict will soon be out in Israel about the precious lesson of Lebanon War II, that is, how to prevent future rocket attacks in the only feasible way, that is, direct control of southern Lebanon.

Kaveh L Afrasiabi, PhD, is the author of *After Khomeini: New Directions in Iran's Foreign Policy* (Westview Press) and co-author of "Negotiating Iran's Nuclear Populism", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Volume XII, Issue 2, Summer 2005, with Mustafa Kibaroglu. He also wrote "Keeping Iran's nuclear potential latent", *Harvard International Review*. He is author of [Iran's Nuclear Program: Debating Facts Versus Fiction](#).

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