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## A 'Pretext' War in Lebanon

By Robert Parry  
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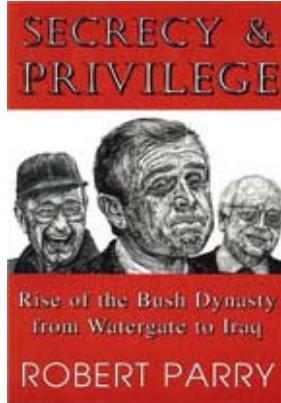
Three days after the May 23 summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and U.S. President George W. Bush, a car bomb killed two officials of Islamic Jihad in the Lebanese city of Sidon.

Immediately, Lebanese officials, including Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, denounced the murder of brothers Nidal and Mahmoud Majzoub and pointed the finger at Israel as the prime suspect. On June 10, a man named Mahmoud Rafeh was arrested for the car bombing and, according to the Lebanese army, confessed that he was a Mossad agent.

Rafeh, a 59-year-old retired police officer, belonged to a “terror network working for the Israeli Mossad,” which had smuggled a booby-trapped door into Lebanon from Israel for use in the assassination, [the Lebanese army said](#).

In retrospect, the Majzoub assassination looks to have been part of a larger U.S.-Israeli strategy – following the Olmert-Bush summit – to encourage a tit-for-tat escalation of violence that would ratchet up pressure on Palestinian and Lebanese militants – and through them their allies in Syria and Iran.

That violence also set the stage for the current Israeli-Lebanese war, which now has raged for almost one month and has claimed the lives of nearly 1,000 Lebanese and 100 Israelis.



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## A Year for War

According to Israeli sources, Olmert and Bush agreed at the May 23 summit to make 2006 the year for neutralizing Iran's nuclear ambitions, while deferring a border settlement with the Palestinians until 2007.

Provoking a wider regional conflict also revived hopes among Bush's neoconservative advisers that they might yet create a "new Middle East" that would be amenable to U.S. and Israeli desires and interests.

In this context, the Israeli-Lebanese war was a confrontation looking for a pretext, not an *ad hoc* response to Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers on July 12. That so-called "kidnapping" has been sold to the American people and many world leaders as the precipitating event for the conflict, but it now appears only to have been a trigger for a prearranged scheme.

Israeli sources indicate that Bush gave Olmert a green light for the conflict at the May 23 summit. The sources said Bush has even encouraged Israel to expand the war by attacking Syria, although Israeli leaders balked at that recommendation because they lacked an immediate justification.

One Israeli source said some Israeli officials considered Bush's interest in an attack on Syria "nuts" since it would have been viewed by much of the world as an act of overt aggression. Bush, however, is said to still hold out hope that reactions by Syria or Iran – such as coming to the aid of Hezbollah – could open the door to a broader conflict.

In an article on July 30, the Jerusalem Post hinted at Bush's continued interest in a wider war involving Syria. "Defense officials told the Post last week that they were receiving indications from the US that America would be interested in seeing Israel attack Syria," the newspaper reported.

Bush pursued a similar "pretext" war strategy in 2003 when he sought a provocation by Iraq that would give legal cover for invading that country.

A leaked British document recounted an Oval Office meeting between Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair on Jan. 31, 2003. Even as Bush was publicly telling the American people that he viewed war with Iraq

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as a "last resort," he had already made up his mind and was scheming to find excuses for justifying an attack on Iraq.

According to minutes written by Blair's top foreign policy aide David Manning, "the U.S. was thinking of flying U-2 reconnaissance aircraft with fighter cover over Iraq, painted in U.N. colours. If Saddam fired on them, he would be in breach."

Regardless of whether a *casus belli* could be provoked, Bush already had "penciled in" March 10, 2003, as the start of the U.S. bombing of Iraq, according to the memo. "Our diplomatic strategy had to be arranged around the military planning," Manning wrote.

As it turned, Bush brushed aside Blair's worries about the legality of an unprovoked invasion of Iraq and went ahead with the assault on March 19, 2003. Though Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein was ousted after a three-week U.S.-led assault, Iraqi insurgents have battled the American occupying army since then in a war that has claimed the lives of almost 2,600 U.S. soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis.

## **New Ambitions**

Many American observers believed that the disaster in Iraq would tamp down Bush's ambition to remake the region. However, with Olmert's ascension to power in Israel in 2006, Bush saw a kindred spirit who believed that military force was the only way to get Islamic adversaries to make necessary concessions.

After the May 23 meeting with Bush, Olmert declared that "this is a moment of truth" for addressing Iran's alleged ambitions to build a nuclear bomb.

In a speech to a joint session of Congress on May 24, Olmert called the possibility of Iran building a nuclear weapon "an existential threat" to Israel, meaning that Israel believed its very existence was in danger.

Two days later, the car bomb killed the Majzoub brothers in Sidon and a new cycle of escalation began. In reaction to the assassinations, Islamic militants fired rockets into Israel, which, in turn, counter-attacked killing one Hezbollah fighter.

Tensions rose further when fighting between Israelis and Palestinians resumed in Gaza. On the night of June 23, Israeli commandos crossed

into Gaza and seized Osama and Mustafa Abu Muamar, two sons of Hamas activist Ali Muamar. [[BBC, June 24, 2006](#)]

Early on the morning of June 24, Hamas militants snuck into Israel via a tunnel from Gaza and attacked an Israel patrol, killing two soldiers and capturing Corporal Gilad Shalit as a part of a demand for a prisoner exchange. Israel is reported to hold about 10,000 Palestinian prisoners.

On June 27, as these tensions mounted, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was still working to advance a possible peace settlement with Israel. Abbas coaxed the more radical Hamas, which controls the Palestinian parliament, into endorsing a document proposing a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Abbas's success represented a potential breakthrough in a border settlement with Israel, since Hamas implicitly was accepting Israel as a neighbor next to an independent Palestinian state.

But the next day, June 28, Olmert sent the Israeli army crashing into Gaza to avenge the "kidnapping" of Shalit, a phrasing that the U.S. news media immediately adopted in blaming Hamas for instigating the crisis.

As the Israeli army overwhelmed scattered Palestinian resistance and began "detaining" – not "kidnapping" – Hamas legislators, tensions were also mounting on the Israeli-Lebanese border. On July 12, Hezbollah forces attacked an Israeli border outpost, killing three soldiers and capturing – or "kidnapping" – two others, also seeking a prisoner exchange.

The July 12 incident opened up the floodgates of violence. Israel launched a broad air-and-ground offensive aimed at crushing Hezbollah by blasting apart its strongholds in south Lebanon and destroying much of Lebanon's economic infrastructure, from roads to communications. Hezbollah launched hundreds of Katyusha rockets into northern Israel.

Besides the almost 1,000 Lebanese who have died, an estimated one million – or about one-fourth of Lebanon's population – were displaced from their homes. The Israeli death toll, both military and civilian, stood at about 100.

While many international leaders called for an immediate cease-fire to stop the bloodshed in July, Bush staunchly defended Israel's actions as

a legitimate act of self-defense against “terrorists.”

In an unguarded moment during the G-8 summit in Russia on July 17, Bush – speaking with his mouth full of food – told Blair “what they need to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit.”

Not realizing that a nearby microphone was turned on, Bush also complained about suggestions for a cease-fire and an international peacekeeping force. “We’re not blaming Israel and we’re not blaming the Lebanese government,” Bush said, suggesting that the blame should fall on others, presumably Hezbollah, Syria and Iran.

Meanwhile, John Bolton, Bush’s ambassador to the United Nations, suggested that the United States would only accept a multilateral U.N. force if it had the capacity to take on Hezbollah's backers in Syria and Iran.

“The real problem is Hezbollah,” Bolton said. “Would it [a U.N. force] be empowered to deal with countries like Syria and Iran that support Hezbollah?” [NYT, July 18, 2006]

### **‘Cease-Fire’**

By early August, as rage throughout the Middle East rose to a boil, the Bush administration finally put forth a cease-fire plan. But it read as if it were designed to further stir Arab anger and extend the conflict.

While demanding that Hezbollah stop fighting and effectively disarm, it would allow Israeli forces to remain in south Lebanon and only require Israel to cease “offensive” operations. A multinational force would then replace the Israeli army and police a buffer zone carved entirely out of south Lebanon.

Bush said his cease-fire goal was to strike at the “root cause” of the conflict, the existence of Hezbollah as an armed militia inside Lebanon.

“By taking these steps, it will prevent armed militias like Hezbollah and its Iranian and Syrian sponsors from sparking another crisis,” Bush said at [an Aug. 7 news conference](#) in Crawford, Texas.

“The loss of life on both sides of the Lebanese-Israeli border has been a great tragedy,” Bush said. “Millions of Lebanese civilians have been caught in the crossfire of military operations because of the unprovoked

attack and kidnappings by Hezbollah. The humanitarian crisis in Lebanon is of deep concern to all Americans, and alleviating it will remain a priority of my government.”

But the reality appears to be quite different. Much as Bush told the American people that he considered war with Iraq “a last resort” long after he had decided to invade, Bush is now saying his goal is to relieve a humanitarian crisis when he actually hopes to expand the conflict and force a showdown with Syria and Iran.

While U.S. officials have been careful not to link the Lebanon conflict to any possible military action against Iran’s nuclear facilities, they have spoken privately about using the current conflict to counter growing Iranian influence.

Only days after the Lebanon-Israel conflict began, Washington Post foreign policy analyst Robin Wright wrote that U.S. officials told her that “for the United States, the broader goal is to strangle the axis of Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and Iran, which the Bush administration believes is pooling resources to change the strategic playing field in the Middle East. ...

“Whatever the outrage on the Arab streets, Washington believes it has strong behind-the-scenes support among key Arab leaders also nervous about the populist militants – with a tacit agreement that the timing is right to strike.” [Washington Post, July 16, 2006]

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Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at [secrecyandprivilege.com](http://secrecyandprivilege.com). It's also available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'*

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