

Israeli attack on Lebanon threatens broader conflict

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Israel's war of aggression against Lebanon, launched with land, air, and sea assaults on July 25, has officially sanctioned the law of the mafia in Middle East politics. That this war could break out and escalate rapidly, provoking immense suffering among the civilian population, without any significant deterrent signal or action on the part of powerful nations or international organizations, proves that the strategic rules of the game internationally have become those of the mafia. As one Arab intellectual put it: "This shows there is no United Nations, there is no 'international public opinion.' There is only the lawlessness of the jungle."

Whether or not the United States government and the United Nations hierarchy were privy to Israel's military plans, the actions of both have paved the way for gangster politics worldwide. Two years of U.N. "negotiators' " complicity in the Serbian war of aggression have erased hopes that that institution could act objectively. The decisive turn came on May 22, when the five-power agreement to award Serbian aggression signalled to power-mongers, would-be imperialists, and erstwhile superpowers worldwide that they could wield their military might to assert hegemony over what they consider their spheres of influence, without concern that the United States, the U.N., or Russia would throw obstacles in their paths. Finally, President Clinton's June bombing of Baghdad, on the pretext of "protecting national security" from a perceived "terrorist threat," provided a handy specific pretext for Israel's war in southern Lebanon.

After five days into the war, the question arose, whether anyone would—or indeed could—halt the aggression. The difference between the current context and that of past wars in the region is what Bernard Lewis described in his "Rethinking the Middle East," published in the Council on For-

eign Relations journal *Foreign Affairs* in Fall 1992: "The West would no longer be concerned but would rather remain indifferent to whatever happened, to wars, disasters, and upheavals, as long as the oil continues to flow. . . . The western capacity for turning a blind eye, already manifested in other respects, should not be underrated. In the past, outside powers have sometimes intervened to prevent, to limit, or to halt Arab-Israeli wars. Arabs and Israelis alike would be unwise to count on such interventions in the future."

More precisely, it can be said that the Anglo-American interests for which Bernard Lewis speaks, are quite committed to the perspective of such wars erupting and spreading regionally, cast as ethnic, religious, or tribal wars—or what Samuel Huntington, in a piece in the Summer 1993 *Foreign Affairs*, called "The Clash of Civilizations." Indeed, what is threatening the Middle East right now is the unfolding of a process of wars and related migrations from the eastern Mediterranean across the Mideast proper and the Arabian Gulf, into the Central Asian republics. In other words, the "Bernard Lewis Plan" for destabilizing and depopulating the entire region, under the rubric of "religious" conflict.

Israel's offer you can't refuse

In dubbing the operation "Settling of Accounts," the military command was candidly expressing the gangster mentality behind its moves. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told the Knesset (parliament) that, although "the sight of fleeing civilians is pitiful," he would say to the fleeing Lebanese: "Your government has the power to stop the bombardments of our settlements. You will not return to your homes until they are stopped." He then said, "I call on the Lebanese prime minister to take the initiative and stop the Hezbollah actions." To

be precise, he called on Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, who wields the real power in Lebanon, to do the job.

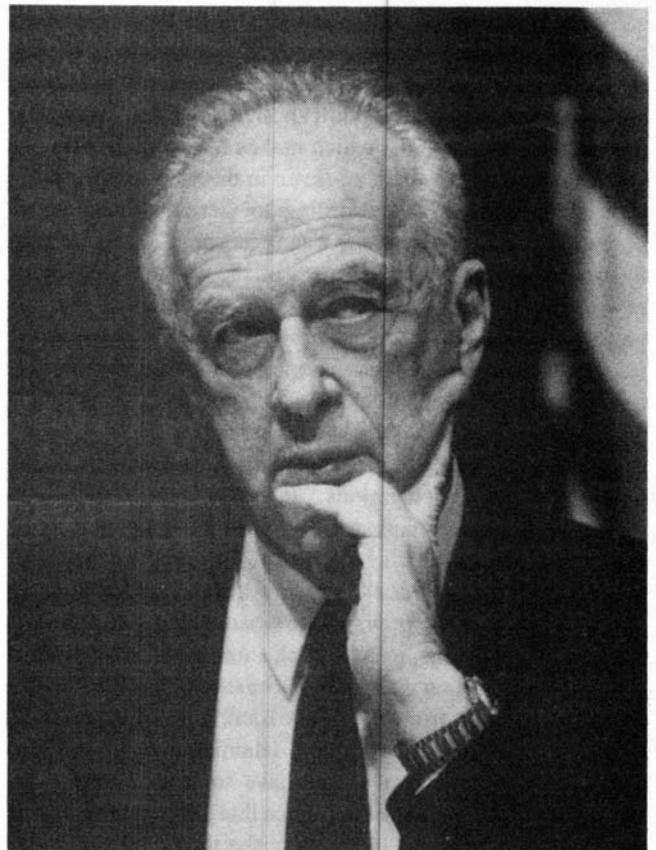
Rabin's argument is that the Iranian-financed and Syrian-backed Hezbollah (Party of God) in southern Lebanon, which rejects Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, constitutes a threat to Israel's security, which the Lebanese, i.e., the Syrians, must be forced to eliminate. Specifically, over the recent weeks, Hezbollah Katyusha rockets had been fired against positions inside Israel's self-proclaimed "security zone" and, following Israeli escalation, had targeted positions in northern Israel.

The means of persuasion Israel has chosen is the forced exodus of southern Lebanese civilians out of their homes, and northwards toward the capital of Beirut. The Israelis drew up a list of 70-90 villages in southern Lebanon slated for depopulation and destruction; over the "Voice of Lebanon" radio in "their" security zone, the Israelis would announce which villages would be hit next, giving residents a few hours to pack up vital belongings and leave before the artillery opened fire. By the fifth day of the war, up to 500,000 civilians, about one-sixth of the Lebanese population, had been forced from their homes. The city of Sidon was subjected to heavy fire, as was Tyre, to make sure that the refugees would not halt there, but be forced on to Beirut. One-half million desperate refugees, according to Israeli "demographic engineering" plans, are to flood the capital where there is neither food nor shelter to offer them. This is the "pressure" that Israel is putting on Syria, via Lebanon. "We want to provoke the exodus of the southern Lebanese to the north, to pressure the Beirut government and to disseminate panic among the collaborators of the Hezbollah," said Rabin.

To guarantee that none of the refugees return home, the Israeli air, land, and naval assault has uninterruptedly bombed homes, schools, hospitals, cars, ambulances, and any other form of infrastructure necessary to the regional economy in southern Lebanon. As a spokesman for the Israeli major staff told the French daily *Le Monde*, the plan was to "turn 54 Shiite villages on the border of the security zone into a field of ruins." Israeli artillery commander Gen. Yehosh Dorfman stated: "Now we are at the stage in which we are firing into the villages in order to cause damage to property . . . to destroy the infrastructure, to destroy the villages and the houses of the activists and the locations from which the [Katyusha] rockets are fired." According to U.N. peacekeeping forces on the ground, most of the cities targeted had become ghost towns after the first 48 hours of the war. Not the infrastructure for Hezbollah, which is a numerically tiny force, but the entire economic infrastructure of the region has been destroyed.

Peace through fear?

Asked about the repercussions of the Israeli war on the "peace talks" which have been going on intermittently since December 1991, one Arab analyst in Jordan quoted the



Israel's air, land, and sea assaults against Lebanon demonstrates the "law of the jungle" rules international politics. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (above) dubbed the operation "Settling of Accounts."

adage, "You need a war to force people to understand the need for peace." In other words, the sheer brutality of the Israeli war machine will force reluctant Arab negotiating partners to capitulate further, out of fear.

The diplomatic mission of U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, awaited in the region on July 31, was expected to seal through negotiations what the Israelis by that time were expected to have achieved through force of arms. The Israelis seemed to be thinking along the lines that, although they could not set a precise time limit on the war, they did express their concern that the bloodiest phase be completed before the visit of Christopher.

The White House seemed to be echoing Israeli political objectives, though calling on both sides to cease hostilities. President Clinton, after initially praising Syria for "showing restraint," appealed to Damascus to become "an active participant to try to stop the fighting," i.e., to use its political muscle to discipline, if not eliminate, the Hezbollah. *Le Monde* reported on July 29 that Christopher had talked to his Syrian counterpart, Farouk Charah, and to Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, which conversations led to a reduction in the Hezbollah's rocket attacks.

One objective of the Israeli war is to force the Arab participants in the "peace negotiations" to guarantee the security of Israel's borders, which, as the current assault shows, are subject to significant modification. More importantly, the massive military assault, which makes the 1982 invasion of Lebanon pale by comparison (even in the view of then military chief Eytan who, according to German radio, complained that Rabin's new war was "gruesome"), sends a mafioso message to all the partners of the talks. To Syria, it says, "Play the game as we call it, or we can do the same to you that we are doing to your proxy Lebanon"; to the PLO, it says: "You should be happy; we are eliminating that faction which opposes the negotiations which you have supported." "By the way," continues the Israeli message to the Palestinian delegation, "if you leave the talks now, you will be abandoned by the Arab delegations." If the Jordanian delegation, closest to the Palestinians, were to leave the talks, that could bring on a political crisis in Amman. Furthermore, says the Israeli mafioso *sotto voce*: "See how quickly and efficiently we can transfer entire populations when we put our minds to it." To the Jordanians, it says, "Take note of what happens in Beirut, and reflect on what could occur were the Palestinians abruptly expelled from the West Bank"; and furthermore: "make sure you rein in your own Islamists who oppose the peace talks, otherwise we may have to lend a hand." To Egypt, not much has to be said, since that government, which has "made peace" with Israel, is in the throes of a terminal internal crisis.

Messages are being sent to persons far beyond those periodically gathered around the Washington peace talks table. And the messages are not being sent only from Israel, but also from Washington and from the hallowed halls of the U.N. Immediately after the Israeli artillery opened fire Sunday, the Lebanese government, seconded by the Gulf states, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab League, demanded the immediate convocation of a U.N. Security Council session. Sir David Hanney saw fit to bide time, calling a meeting only the evening of July 28, during which the predictable "condemnation of the spiral of violence," etc., was issued, and nothing done. No one took note of the fact that Israel, even had it not fired a shot, has been in violation of Security Council Resolution 425, demanding it leave southern Lebanon. The U.N., indeed, does not exist as a law-enforcing agency, except insofar as it enforces the double standard applied to countries under its jurisdiction.

Geopolitics means war

The loudest message sent out beyond the Arab world was addressed to Iran; Israel has been the most vocal in the last two years in waving the specter of the "Iranian-backed Islamic fundamentalist threat" and calling on the West to snuff out Iran's alleged nuclear capability. Israel has all but offered to do the job, along the lines of its 1981 bombing mission against an Iraqi nuclear plant, if no one else will. The current

war allegedly against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah can be seen also as a prelude to a hit on Teheran in the more distant future.

The Israeli combination behind this war may think it will be able to force through a "peace" settlement, by holding a pistol to the temple of the Arab negotiating partners and by demanding that the United States cock the trigger. No one in the region is blind to the fact that Israel is a nuclear power. It might even get the signatures on the respective pieces of paper, although the current war has rendered that highly unlikely. Even if it did, this would mean nothing. Not only because the terms of the "peace process" as discussed so far could never establish the basis for peace, but, more importantly, because by its action against Lebanon, Israel has ignited a spark of aggression which is bound to turn into brush fires which will spread.

First, and most obviously, the Iranians, acknowledged backers of the Hezbollah, will not take this sitting down. Both political and Shiite religious authorities have called on "believers to mobilize against the Israeli aggression" and "to prepare to die for the cause of the resistance." Retaliation by the Hezbollah cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, in the same period when the Israeli aggression commenced, Iran made known again that it would not relinquish claims to the strategically placed islands it contests with the United Arab Emirates. Tensions between Iran and Iraq have not abated, and some regional analysts do not exclude the possibility of a new flare-up of military conflict between them, a perspective which would fit hand-in-glove with the United States' "dual containment" policy of the Gulf giants.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, tensions are high because of fears among the American-client sheikhdoms like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, that any relaxation of sanctions against Iraq may destabilize the precariously low oil price. Politically, enormous pressure is building up inside the conservative Gulf states, from a population enraged at the Israelis for their devastation of Lebanon.

Egypt, primed for an explosion due to a long-term process of economic destabilization, could be ignited, were the United States to return Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, a "new Khomeini," to the country; any ensuing disturbances could have repercussions in Algeria as well. None of the Arab states is stable. Each is living in its own form of a pressure cooker, some with the cover more tightly screwed on than others. But the temperature is rising, and actions like those of Israel are only calculated to turn up the heat.

The only way stability could be introduced into the region would be through a radical change in strategic policy, coming first and foremost from the United States. Only if Washington were to abandon geopolitical manipulations, to pursue a policy of enduring peace, through fostering long-term economic development among sovereign states (which includes the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state), could the fire that has been ignited by the crazy Israelis be extinguished.