

The Qana massacre and the UN Security Council

The role of a Chapter VII resolution or a U.N. peacekeeping force must be to protect Lebanon from Israeli aggression.

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The primary role of any Chapter VII resolution or expanded U.N. peacekeeping force must be to protect Lebanon from Israeli aggression.

TEL AVIV's announcement of a 48-hour suspension of air operations following the international outcry over the massacre of 56 Lebanese civilians — half of whom were young children — is not so much an act of contrition as an attempt to shift the American-Israeli war aims against Hizbollah and Lebanon on to a higher, more effective plane.

The fact that the Israeli authorities are granting this 'grace period' primarily in order to allow the United Nations to evacuate any civilians who wish to leave southern Lebanon is itself a blatant declaration of the Olmert regime's intention to continue bombing residential areas. Serving notice on non-combatants and then flattening their dwellings does not exonerate Israel's commanders from culpability for violating the laws of war. Would Israel protest any less if Hizbollah preceded its barrage of Katyushas with a general warning to all residents of Haifa and northern Israel that they leave the area?

While the announcement of 48 hours breathing space is intended to allow anti-Israeli opinion around the world to settle down a little, its main purpose is to give Washington time to try and impose on the government of Fouad Siniora in Lebanon a NATO-led "international stabilisation force" armed with a 'robust mandate' under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter.

The purpose of such a force would be to put into effect Resolution 1559 — a non-binding resolution of the Security Council passed in 2004 calling on the Lebanese government to disarm Hizbollah and assert its military control over the entire territory of Lebanon. The purpose of the force would certainly not be to facilitate a just political settlement and protect Lebanon from the kind of aggression Israel has regularly been launching since 1978.

Ever since UNIFIL (the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon) was first deployed 28 years ago, Israel has displayed utter contempt for the presence of international peacekeepers across the blue line. In 1996, it bombed a U.N. post at Qana, killing more than 100 civilians. Last week, it "accidentally" killed four peacekeepers and refused to allow the U.N. to join the investigation into the incident. Surely America, France or Britain would not allow the U.N. to probe an incident which occurred on their territory, Dan Gillerman, Israel's Ambassador in New York, argued lamely. Forgetting, conveniently, that the flattened U.N. post at Khiyyam was on Lebanese and not Israeli soil.

Mandate of U.N. force the key

Given its track record, Israel will allow the U.N. Security Council to stay its hand in Lebanon only if this results in the deployment of a well-armed U.S./NATO/European-led force — a force that would complete Tel Aviv's stated war aims for it. This is something that suits the Bush administration too. The U.S. sees Hizbollah as a powerful detachment of "international terrorism" and a tool of Syria and Iran. Thus, getting a 'stabilisation force' on the ground in Lebanon — and on Lebanon's border with Syria, as Condoleezza Rice said on Monday — would be a relatively low-cost alternative to the more direct forms of military pressure on Damascus and Teheran that Washington can ill afford to exert for the moment.

Since the 'war on terror' has been defined by American ideologues as an 'endless war', the U.S. will not deploy in Lebanon unless it is confident of staying there indefinitely. Like Bagram in Afghanistan, Camp Bondsteel in Serbia and the enormous bases coming up all over Iraq, the proposed stabilisation force under the overall control of U.S. Central Command is likely to dig itself in. Therefore, if the Siniora government accedes to the deployment of the kind of force George W. Bush and Tony Blair have in mind, it might as well forget about asserting sovereign control over its "entire territory" for the foreseeable future.

But more dangerous than any symbolic affront to national honour what this will entail is the very real possibility that the 'robust' international force would be no more effective in disarming and defeating Hizbollah than the Israeli armed forces have been in the past two weeks. Eventually, as Anglo-American casualties mount, sectarian militias are likely to be promoted as a conscious military strategy to undermine and contain Hizbollah. If the Lebanese people are lucky, the clock will be turned back to the chaos and mayhem that plagued them in the 1980s. If they are unlucky, they will become the next Iraq.

There is, of course, another alternative, if only the world could find a way to insist that the U.S. and Israel agree to it.

The starting point has to be the Israeli recognition of a simple fact: that it is Israel's legacy of disastrous wars against Lebanon that lies at the root of the present problem. Tel Aviv cannot take refuge under the claim that Hizbollah attacked first. Israel remains in illegal possession of Lebanese territory — the Sheba Farms — and is thus an occupying power. Secondly, there has hardly been a day since its withdrawal from Lebanon two years ago that Israel has not violated Lebanese air space or territorial waters. Thirdly, Israel has refused to provide the Lebanese government with a map of the thousands of landmines it buried throughout its erstwhile occupation zone in southern Lebanon, leading to the death and maiming of Lebanese civilians on an almost monthly basis. Fourthly, it is Israel that first placed civilians, including its own citizens, at risk by indiscriminately bombing Lebanese towns and villages.

Despite these provocations, the Lebanese people and government are entitled to question the wisdom of Hizbollah in unilaterally undertaking a mission to abduct two Israeli soldiers from across the Blue Line. And the seven-point formula presented by Prime Minister Siniora contains within it all the elements necessary for peacefully resolving the ongoing conflict as well as addressing the security concerns of Israel.

In a nutshell, what the Lebanese government and all major parties in parliament (including Hizbollah) are saying is that there should first be an unconditional and immediate ceasefire. A 48-hour suspension of air attacks is not the same thing. The ceasefire would then be followed by a number of steps, including an exchange of prisoners by both sides; the return

by Israel of the Sheba Farms to Lebanon; an independent probe into the indiscriminate bombing Israel launched; the deployment of the Lebanese army all the way down to the border with Israel; the disarming of Hizbollah as an independent militia following national consultations; the provision by Israel of maps indicating the location of its land mines in southern Lebanon; and, finally, the deployment of a U.N.-led blue helmet force, which would help the Lebanese army ensure that Lebanon is never again attacked by Israel.

This is the big package the Security Council must act upon when it meets this week to resolve the crisis caused by Israel's latest aggression. Substituting this package for the one-point agenda of disarming Hizbollah through military means and attempting to dictate a broader political settlement with the Damocles Sword of Israeli air strikes hanging over Lebanon will only make matters worse.

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