

# The generals' war

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In victory or in defeat, the military leaders who dominate Israeli politics can't lose

Last week I argued that Israel's attack on Lebanon was premeditated. Hizbullah's capture of two soldiers gave the government the excuse to launch an assault it had been planning since 2004. Both Bush and Blair knew that it would happen and gave it their approval.

I was, of course, denounced by supporters of Israel's government as an anti-semitic and an apologist for terror. But on Sunday this hypothesis was confirmed by an article Seymour Hersh published in the New Yorker. Israel, his informants told him, "had devised a plan for attacking Hezbollah – and shared it with Bush Administration officials – well before the July 12th kidnappings." One US government consultant revealed that Israeli officials visited Washington earlier in the summer "to get a green light for the bombing operation and to find out how much the United States would bear."

One obvious question then arises. Why? Given that the invasion has cost Israel far more in terms of both lives and international standing than the status quo could have done, why did Ehud Olmert's government choose to attack?

The motives of the US administration are easy to understand. The neocons believe that, by attacking Hizbullah, Israel is helping them to confront Iran. Its bombing raids could even be a wet run for an assault on Iran's nuclear facilities. While a full-scale invasion of that country is impossible, fighting the guerillas they regard as Iranian proxies is the next best thing. As Bush's grip on reality weakens, he really does seem to believe that he is seeking a final showdown with the forces of evil, which will result in a triumph for "freedom and democracy" as definitive as the second coming of the

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Lord (in either case an apocalypse is involved). But why would Israel allow itself to be used as his battering ram?

The obvious answer is that it thought it would win. If so, this suggests a failure to learn even from recent history. In 1996, Hizbullah, the Shi'ite force which formed to fight the Israeli troops occupying southern Lebanon, had been firing Katyusha rockets into northern Israel. Shimon Peres, hoping – like Olmert – to show the electorate that he was as tough as any of the generals, decided to clear the civilians out of southern Lebanon by means of heavy bombing and then destroy Hizbullah. He received the support of the United States, drove 400,000 people from their homes, but failed to defeat the enemy. The guerillas continued to send their rockets into Israel, while Israeli shells killed 102 civilians taking refuge in the village of Qana. The resulting outrage forced the US government to support a ceasefire. Ten years later, the whole fiasco – including the killing of civilians in Qana – spools past like a repeated film.

I am not suggesting that Olmert's administration believed it would lose. But it seems to me that to be quite so blind to the lessons of 1996 it must have had a powerful incentive to attack. Is it possible, as some have claimed, that Israel is pursuing a territorial claim?

The Israeli columnist Tanya Reinhart reminds us that David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state of Israel, believed that its borders should be “natural” ones: the Jordan in the east, the Suez Canal and Sharm el-Sheikh in the south-west and south, and the Litani river (30km inside Lebanon) in the north. In his book *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, the historian Avi Shlaim describes Ben-Gurion's “fantastic plan” for annexing southern Lebanon and turning the rest of the country into a Maronite state. In 1956 he explained this scheme to the British and French governments at the secret talks in Sevres which launched the Suez invasion. His chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, planned to sponsor a Lebanese officer who would “declare himself the saviour of the Maronite population”, then “enter Lebanon, occupy the necessary territory, and create a Christian regime that will ally itself with Israel. The territory from the Litani southward will be totally annexed to Israel, and everything will fall into place.”

There are plenty of articles on the internet – including Reinhart's – suggesting that this ambition has been revived. I don't believe it.

The evidence I presented last week suggests that the soldiers planning this assault envisaged an operation lasting for three weeks. They would storm into Lebanon, eliminate Hizbullah and storm out again. Since the attack began, Israel has been pressing for someone else – the “multinational force” – to patrol southern Lebanon on its behalf. Though the government is incapable of learning from 1996, it still seems to remember the lesson of May 2000, when the Israeli armed forces discovered that an

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occupation of southern Lebanon was impossible to sustain. I have not been able to find any evidence that Ben-Gurion's successors contemplated annexation. Even Ariel Sharon, who engineered Menachem Begin's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, envisaged not a land grab but the establishment of a puppet government and the destruction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, in the hope that the West Bank – not southern Lebanon – could be incorporated into Israel. This is not an attempt to seize more territory.

But you cannot read any account of Israeli politics without being struck by the extraordinary domination of the generals. We are familiar with military dictatorships. But Israel is unique in being a military democracy. An electoral system much fairer than our own repeatedly places the country in the hands of warriors, and sometimes (I am thinking of Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon) war criminals. Even when civilians are elected, they are pushed around by the generals. To sustain their position, the warrior chiefs seek to ensure that Israel is constantly on the verge of war. As Moshe Dayan observed, military retaliation is a "life drug". Avi Shlaim summarises Dayan's argument thus. "First, [retaliation] obliged the Arab governments to take drastic measures to protect their borders. Second, and this was the essence, it enabled the Israeli government to maintain a high degree of tension in the country and in the army".

The warriors in Israel have almost always been empowered by armed action. Even while planning the biggest political disaster in Israeli history – Suez – Ben-Gurion was able to depose his peace-seeking foreign minister, Moshe Sharett. Their interests are best served by escalation, however inappropriate. After the latest attack on Lebanon began, the generals demanded to intensify it. At the cabinet meeting of July 27th, when it had already become clear that the assault was turning into a strategic and political disaster, they insisted that they be allowed to mount a full-scale ground offensive.

Who loses from this war? The people of Lebanon and northern Israel, of course, and maybe – one day – the rest of us. The civilians in the Israeli government, perhaps including Ehud Olmert. But not Hizbullah, who are now proclaimed as heroes in Muslim nations across the Middle East. Not Bush or Blair, for whom every attack by terrorists – even those motivated by opposition to their policies – is a further vindication of their war on terror. And not the Israeli Defence Forces. Faced with emboldened enemies, they can demand more resources and greater powers. The generals did not intend to lose, but even this disaster has done them no harm. It has made the Israeli people less secure, and therefore more inclined to vote for those who promise to defend them.