Middle East Developments

written by Stephen R. Shalom | January 20, 2010

> "What we're seeing here, in a sense, is … the birth pangs of a new Middle East…."
>
> — Condoleezza Rice, July 21, 2006

THE MIDDLE EAST HAS INDEED undergone some dramatic changes in recent months — in Iraq, the chaos has intensified and U.S. policy is eliciting doubts even from key Republicans; the government of Iran seemingly defies Washington and the European Union; in Lebanon, Hezbollah thwarted the previously invincible Israeli armed forces; and in Palestine, Hamas has taken power and new fighting has erupted in Gaza. But amidst all the changes there are also important continuities. Washington is still pursuing its basic policy of six decades: trying to assure its dominance in a region of stupendous economic and strategic value. And Israel remains committed to the iron fist over diplomacy and continues to refuse Palestinians the same right of self-determination that is exercised by Israeli Jews.

Let me take up each of these four crises in turn.

Iraq

THIS PAST MARCH, HOWARD KALOOGIAN, a rightwing Republican, sponsored a "Truth Tour" to Iraq to "tell the American people about the accomplishments [US troops] are making in Operation Iraqi Freedom and the fight against terrorism." When he returned he posted a picture of downtown Baghdad on his website — showing a peaceful urban setting complete with a couple walking hand-in-hand. Kaloogian explained that

> [W]e took this photo of downtown Baghdad while we were in Iraq {which is} much more calm and stable than what many people believe it to be. But, each day the news media finds any violence occurring in the country and screams and shouts about it — in part because many journalists are opposed to the U.S. effort to fight terrorism(*San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/30/06).

His photograph was pretty dramatic, except for one small detail. It wasn't a picture of Baghdad at all, but of Istanbul.

Kaloogian's propaganda ploy was astounding even half a year ago, but today no one denies that the situation in Iraq is absolutely horrendous. Military officers and Republican officials are speaking publicly about the unfolding disaster. The most careful survey of death rates — using a methodology that is standard in crisis situations and published in the peer-reviewed medical journal, *Lancet* —

suggests a violent death toll of some 600,000 since the beginning of the war. This is far higher than previous estimates, especially those obtained by adding up press accounts, but careful journalists have long known that media reports were likely to grossly undercount the true toll. As journalist Patrick Cockburn noted (*Independent*, 5/23/06), "As Baghdad and Iraq, aside from the three Kurdish provinces, become the stalking ground for death squads and assassins, it is impossible to report the collapse of security without being killed doing so." The *Lancet* figure is also higher than reports from the Iraqi public health system, but there is no reason to expect that system to be functioning reliably in a society in a state of near collapse. It is not surprising, for example, that local officials might issue death certificates for people without carefully recording, tabulating, and passing on the resultant numbers. According to UN officials, for example, the health ministry — controlled by followers of Muqtada al-Sadr — understates death totals under pressure from militias (*Christian Science Monitor* [*CSM*], 5/26/06). That Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has barred the further release of death numbers (*New York Times* [*NYT*], 10/21/06) makes clear how politically these numbers are viewed. Perhaps further research will show the *Lancet* figures to be too high, but even if the toll turns out to be 100,000 instead of six times that number, this is clearly a humanitarian crisis of the first order.

LIFE IN IRAQ IS PRETTY GRIM even for those who manage to avoid death. UNICEF reports that 9 percent of Iraqi children under age five suffer from acute malnutrition, compared to 4 percent in 2002, the last year of Saddam Hussein's rule. (And this is hard to blame on insurgent sabotage because the situation is worst in the South, where the insurgency is more or less absent.) Unemployment estimates run from 25 to 70 percent — no one has any real idea. Earlier this year, the food ration was cut, as part of the free market policies urged by the United States and the IMF (Salman, Iraqi Crisis Report, 3/29/06). Electricity production and oil production are lower than they were before the war. Water treatment capacity is 1/3 of the pre-war level, a figure that overstates the amount of potable water reaching Iraqi households because some 60 percent of water treatment output is lost due to leakage, contamination, and illegal connections, not to mention that leaking sewage sometimes enters the water mains (GAO-06-697T, April 25, 2006, p. 25).

Since February 2006, when the Shiite al-Askari shrine was blown up in Samarra, sectarian violence has escalated to a horrendous scale. True, not everyone thinks this is all bad. Daniel Pipes has commented (*Jerusalem Post* [*JP*], 3/1/06) that "when Sunni terrorists target Shiites and vice versa non-Muslims are less likely to be hurt." But in fact, the insurgency and attacks against coalition troops have not lessened. Average weekly attacks are at an all-time high and twice the rate of spring 2004 (see Brookings' Iraq Index).

Some argue that because of the near civil war in Iraq it is clearer than ever that U.S. troops need to remain. However, the case for withdrawal still makes good sense — and, indeed, better sense than ever.

Consider first Iraqi public opinion. The views of Iraqis are not decisive in these matters (after all, even if the Mexican people voted for U.S. troops to come in and crush the Zapatistas, the U.S. left shouldn't support such an intervention). Nevertheless, Iraqi opinion is certainly something we should carefully weigh.

In the chaotic conditions prevailing in Iraq, public opinion polls are likely to have many weaknesses. Nevertheless, reasonable surveys with representative samples seem to be possible in Iraq. In September 2006, a poll was conducted for WorldPublicOpinion.org by the well-respected Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, using a nationwide representative sample of 1,150 Iraqi adults.

One question asked "Which of the following would you like the Iraqi government to ask the U.S.-led forces to do?"

	Kurd	Shia Arab	Sunni Arab	Total
Withdraw all U.S.-led forces within six months	11	36	57	37
Gradually withdraw U.S.-led forces according to a one-year timeline	24	38	34	34
Gradually withdraw U.S.-led forces according to a two-year timeline	34	20	7	20
Only reduce U.S.-led forces as the security situation improves in Iraq.	31	5	2	9

The Bush administration's option, which is the last response above — to abide by no timetable at all — was the choice of fewer than one in ten respondents. Seven out of ten want U.S. troops out within a year and more than a third want them out within six months. Responses vary across the main ethnic groups, with Kurds being most in favor of retaining U.S. forces (though note that U.S. troops are not stationed in the three Kurdish provinces); 74% of Shia Arabs and 91% of Sunni Arabs want the U.S. troops out within a year.

BUT AREN'T U.S. TROOPS NECESSARY for security? Not if you ask the Iraqi people. Asked explicitly, "Do you think the U.S. military presence in Iraq is currently a stabilizing force or that it is provoking more conflict than it is preventing?" large majorities of Shia and Sunni Arabs chose the second option.

	Kurd	Shia Arab	Sunni Arab	Total
A stabilizing force	56	17	2	21
Provoking more conflict than it is preventing	41	82	97	78

In March 2006, the U.S. public was asked the same question and, by a 55-43 majority, they too judged U.S. troops to be more of a provocation than a stabilizing force.

The poll further showed that a majority of Iraqis (61% overall; 15% of Kurds, 62% of Shia Arabs, and 92% of Sunni Arabs) approved of attacks on U.S.-led troops. Support for attacks on Iraqi security forces stood at only 7% and on civilians under 1%.

Some of these results are more dramatic than those shown in previous polls, but the pattern could long be discerned. At the end of March 2006 a poll by the International Republican Institute asked respondents whom they trusted for their personal safety. The Iraqi police was the answer of 43%, the Iraqi army 35%, insurgents 6%, armed militias 4%, "other" 3%, and only 1% chose the U.S.-led "multinational forces." In August 2005, a leaked secret British Ministry of Defense poll found that 82 percent of Iraqis strongly opposed the presence of "coalition troops." Those who thought coalition

forces were responsible for any improvement in security constituted less than 1% of respondents, while 67% thought they were less secure because of the occupation.

U.S. troops have been in Iraq for three and a half years now and the longer they've been there, the closer the country has come to civil war. In part this is a result of Abu Ghraib, Haditha, and other well- publicized U.S. abuses of Iraqi citizens. In part it is a result of the main U.S. military tactic of search and destroy, a way of proceeding guaranteed to extend the scope and popularity of the Sunni Arab guerrilla movement. But many U.S. and British military officers have acknowledged that the very presence of foreign troops drives the insurgency. General George Casey, the commander of the "multinational" forces, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee last September that coalition forces, as an occupying force, are part of what fuels the insurgency. "We are creating many, many more enemies than we are ever reducing," declared Lt. Gen. Pete Chiarelli, the number two U.S. officer in Iraq, in June. And the commander of British forces, Gen. Sir Richard Dannatt, told a newspaper that Britain should get its 7,200 soldiers out of the south of the country "sometime soon" because "our presence exacerbates the security problems" (*Seattle Times*, 10/1/05; ABC News, 6/7/06; *CSM*, 10/16/06).

This doesn't mean that Iraqis reject international assistance out of some sort of irrational sense of nationalism. They have very good reason to be suspicious of U.S. intentions. Iraqis know, for example, that

- Washington backed the Baathist coup in 1963, even giving the plotters lists of suspected Communists to kill (Roger Morris, *NYT*, 3/14/03).

- In 1975, Washington betrayed the Kurds it had been supporting, allowing them to be slaughtered ("covert action should not be confused with missionary work," Secretary of State Kissinger explained in secret testimony contained in the leaked Pike Report).

- During the Iran-Iraq war, Washington supported Saddam Hussein despite the fact that he started the war and used chemical weapons.

- When, after the war, Saddam Hussein conducted his ruthless Anfal campaign against the Kurds, including the use of chemical weapons, the administration of Bush senior continued providing Iraq with agricultural credits and even biological agents useful for making biological weapons. The White House blocked the imposition of sanctions against Iraq, not out of any objection to sanctions on principle, but because it wanted to continue supporting Saddam Hussein (see Jentleson, *With Friends Like These,* Norton, 1994).

- During the first Gulf War, U.S. forces intentionally attacked civilian infrastructure, knowing it would cause a health crisis for the Iraqi population (Gellman, *Washington Post* [*WP*], 6/23/91; Nagy, *Progressive*, 9/01). The infrastructure destruction together with more than a decade of punishing economic sanctions would lead to hundreds of thousands of excess deaths (Garfield, "Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children From 1990 through 1998," March 1999).

- Following the first Gulf War, after urging Iraqis to rise up against Saddam Hussein, Washington denied the rebels access to captured Iraqi weapons and allowed Saddam Hussein to use his helicopters to slaughter the insurgents as U.S. aircraft circled overhead.

- In 2003, Washington began its occupation by protecting the oil ministry and oil wells while allowing the rest of the country to be looted.

- The U.S. imposed privatization, sweetheart deals for Halliburton, and other favored U.S. corporations. (See, among many sources, James Glanz's 10/25/06 *NYT* report.)

- U.S. government officials are hard at work securing Iraqi oil for U.S. elites. (See Muttitt, *Crude Design: The Rip-off of Iraq's Oil Wealth*, PLATFORM, 11/05; and various reports by Joshua Holland on *AlterNet*: 5/22/06, 10/16/06, 10/17/06.)

- Despite Rumsfeld's claim that "at the present time" Washington seeks no permanent bases in Iraq, the Pentagon is building what it calls "enduring" bases. (See Sam Graham-Felsen, *AlterNet*, 7/28/05).

ONE DOESN'T HAVE TO CONJURE UP some mythical Iraqi past where everyone got along to realize that whatever conflicts existed between Iraq's ethnic groups would be exacerbated, not reduced, by the presence of U.S. troops. This was so for several reasons. Those who engage in sectarian and anti-civilian attacks hide behind the mantle of opposition to the occupation which has widespread support. If the occupation were to end, these extremists would be more readily isolated. For example, the Association of Muslim Scholars, the leading Sunni organization with ties to the resistance, has said that were a timetable set for withdrawal they would issue a fatwa against any further armed actions.

Moreover, as Nir Rosen, who spent 16 months reporting from Iraq, has observed (*Atlantic*, 12/05), the Shia-dominated government carries the stigma in the eyes of many Sunnis of being collaborators with the occupation; this makes it harder than it would otherwise be for them to recruit Sunnis to any multiethnic police force and army, leading them to depend on militias, which further provokes the Sunnis. With the U.S. out, there would be strong incentives on Iraqis to reach some sort of accommodation.

In calling for a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, we need to make clear that we mean the complete withdrawal of all U.S. troops and bases. At the same time, we must demand that the United States contribute funds for the reconstruction of Iraq — but without U.S. control. This is the very least we owe the Iraqi people.

With present U.S. policy so obviously a failure, there is some possibility that Bush will change course after the midterm elections. Perhaps he will take the advice of John McCain and others to increase the number of U.S. troops. But doing so is unlikely to achieve victory. Moreover, it will impose further strains on the U.S. military, and may be unsustainable without a draft, which would entail serious political costs. Nevertheless, given the stakes for Washington, such an option can't be ruled out. Another possibility is to draw down U.S. troops in Iraq, while resorting to counterinsurgency by airpower, with even worse consequences for Iraqi civilians than we've been seeing, and also unlikely to secure the country for U.S. interests. Perhaps the most likely option is for Washington to support some sort of military coup by Sunni and Shia officers, forcing out the elected Iraqi leaders, and trying to establish the sort of regime Washington always preferred for Iraq: Saddamism without Saddam.

This last option would mean that the Bush administration would have to give up on its proclaimed commitment to democracy in the Middle East. But of course Washington was never serious about this. When U.S. officials complained about the results of one of the few democratic elections in the region — the one that brought Hamas to power in Palestine — their close friend, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, told them: "Of course we always warned against elections, that sometimes they bring results that you don't want. That's why we haven't applied the system yet in Saudi Arabia" (*WP*, 5/18/06).

But though Bush is not serious about democracy in Iraq (or the Middle East generally), that doesn't mean *we* shouldn't care about democracy — real democracy, not the combination of privatization and elite domination that pundits often mistake for democracy. Unfortunately, Saddam Hussein's legacy and Bush's war and occupation have created great obstacles to the achievement of genuine democracy in Iraq, at least in the short run. Though the Iraqi resistance includes many motivated by a nationalist resentment of foreign occupation, the only organized political expression in the insurgency comes from neo-Baathists, Islamic fundamentalists, and Sunni supremacists. Muqtada al-Sadr opposes Saddam Hussein and George Bush, but the religious orthodoxy imposed by his armed followers is frightening. Even Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose nonviolent pressure campaign forced the United States to allow elections in Iraq, posted a fatwa on his website authorizing death for gays (now changed to apply only to lesbians) (see Doug Ireland's report, 10/21/06). One of the great tragedies of Iraq — and there are many — is the extreme weakness of any progressive forces in the country. We should express our solidarity with those that do exist — such as the Basra oil workers' union which has taken a position opposing both the occupation and privatization — but without any illusions as to their current political strength.

Iran

OVER THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF, various analysts (Scott Ritter, Seymour Hersh, Ray McGovern) have reported from inside-the-government sources that Washington or its Israeli ally is about to attack Iran. The attacks have not occurred, and they would be absolutely insane from even the most narrow view of U.S. elite (or Israeli elite) interests. Nevertheless, given U.S. setbacks elsewhere in the region and the disconnect between the Bush administration and reality, such attacks cannot be ruled out. It should also be noted that many signs of preparations for war are consistent not only with an actual intent to launch an attack, but with an intent to intimidate and destabilize Tehran.

Washington's proclaimed justifications for war are Iran's nuclear program and its dictatorial regime. Each of these ought to matter a great deal to anyone concerned about international peace or justice, but is totally hypocritical coming from the U.S. government.

We don't know what Iran is doing with its nuclear research. Though there is no current evidence that it has moved towards developing a nuclear weapon, or gone beyond the civilian nuclear power program to which it is entitled as part of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), Tehran has not been forthcoming with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as its adherence to the NPT requires. The Bush administration, however, has made all sorts of exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims. The Republicans on the House Select Committee on Intelligence issued a report asserting that Iran's nuclear program was being downplayed by the IAEA, leading the IAEA to respond with a letter charging that the report "contains erroneous, misleading, and unsubstantiated information" and that parts of the report were "outrageous and dishonest" (Heinrich, Reuters, 9/14/06). In any face-off between the Bush administration and the IAEA, one should keep in mind that the former was shown to have lied about Iraq's nuclear program before the U.S. invasion in 2003, and the latter had it exactly right. One should note as well that the former bugged the telephone of Mohammad

ElBaradei, the IAEA head, trying unsuccessfully to prove him an Iranian lackey (*WP*, 12/12/04).

Is there cause to be suspicious of Iran's nuclear program? Of course. There is no reason to assume that assurances of peaceful intent by Iranian leaders are any more credible than those of other leaders, especially given the general lack of transparency in Iran. In addition, threats of the sort that have been made against Iran for the past few years provide strong inducement for nations to seek nuclear weapons for their defense. As Israeli military analyst Martin Van Creveld has commented (*International Herald Tribune*, 8/21/04), Iranian leaders "would be crazy" not to be developing a nuclear deterrent.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we should favor an Iranian bomb. Nuclear deterrence is an incredibly dangerous proposition and the possibility of accidental or unintended use or crisis provocation outweighs any defensive benefit the bomb may afford. But the way to reduce the likelihood of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons is exactly the opposite of that pursued by Washington. Heavy-handed threats (coupled with the example of the U.S. invasion of Iraq — which, notably, did not have a nuclear deterrent) make acquisition of a nuclear weapon by Iran more likely rather than less so. Despite dire warnings from Bush, even if we assume the worst about Iran's nuclear intentions, it is still at least five years away from having a nuclear weapon (see, *Washington Times*, 4/20/05, 8/31/06; *NYT*, 9/7/06). There is time for diplomacy, if it is in fact desired.

In the spring of 2003, authorities in Tehran — portrayed by Washington and Tel Aviv as implacably hostile — made an overture that clearly showed a peaceful resolution of the crisis is possible. According to Flynt Leverett, then senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council,

> [T]he Iranian Foreign Ministry sent Washington a detailed proposal for comprehensive negotiations to resolve bilateral differences. The document acknowledged that Iran would have to address concerns about its weapons programs and support for anti-Israeli terrorist organizations. It was presented as having support from all major players in Iran's power structure, including the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.… Unfortunately, the administration's response was to complain that the Swiss diplomats who passed the document from Tehran to Washington were out of line (*NYT*, 1/24/06).

Iran has also agreed to a system of international control of all fissile material, as proposed by ElBaradei, which would prevent diversion of nuclear fuel to a weapons program — and is indeed the only country to have indicated its agreement (see Chomsky & Achcar, *Perilous Power*, Paradigm, 2006, p. 233).

Some claim that statements from Iranian officials

make clear that as soon as Iran obtains a nuclear weapon it will use it to "wipe Israel off the map." On the contrary, Iranian officials have explicitly stated that Iran would never attack any nation (de Bellaigue, *New York Review of Books*, 4/28/06). (This, obviously, doesn't prove Iranian peaceful intent, but the claim that an intent to attack Israel has been publicly declared is simply false.) And despite the outrageous Holocaust-denying statements from Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the more powerful Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has indicated that Iran accepts the Arab consensus on Israel-Palestine, namely full normalization of relations in return for Israeli

withdrawal to its 1967 borders (see his June 4 speech).

The NPT places various restrictions and obligations on signatories that do not have nuclear weapons. But in article VI it imposes a serious obligation on the nuclear weapons states — and indeed, the have-not nations have made clear that their continued acceptance of the NPT is contingent on the haves abiding by article VI. Article VI states:

> Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.

None of the nuclear weapons states, especially the United States, have met their article VI obligations. If we just look at this past year in the UN General Assembly we get a sense of Washington's commitment to nuclear disarmament. Resolution 60/46, prohibiting the development and manufacture of new types of weapons of mass destruction, was adopted by a vote of 180 in favor to 1 against (United States), with 1 abstention (Israel). Resolution 60/48 on implementing the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace was adopted with three no votes, France, the UK, and the United States. Resolution 60/53 sought effective international agreements to assure non-nuclear weapon States against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons; it was adopted 120-0, with 59 abstentions, including the United States. Resolution 60/54, aiming to prevent an arms race in outer space, was approved 180-2, with only Israel and the United States voting no. Resolution 60/56 on accelerating the implementation of nuclear disarmament commitments was adopted with five negative votes (France, India, Israel, the UK, and the United States). Resolution 60/58 on a nuclear-weapon-free southern hemisphere and adjacent areas was opposed only by France, the UK, and the United States. Resolution 60/65 expressing a renewed determination to totally eliminate nuclear weapons was adopted 168-2-7, with only the United States and India voting no. A resolution on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, 60/92, was opposed only by the United States, Israel, and three tiny Pacific island nations. And resolution 60/95 urging all nations to approve the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty was adopted 172-1-4, with only the United States voting against.

There are many inadequacies in the NPT, but the United States has failed to meet its most basic obligations. That some have-not nations feel it's an unjust system is not surprising. U.S. aggression and threats, together with its failure to meet its disarmament obligations, create an international political climate in which Iran (and others) appear to many inside and outside Iran to have a legitimate reason to acquire nuclear weapons. On the other hand, serious U.S. disarmament efforts and a peaceful and democratic U.S. foreign policy would help to undercut — internally and internationally — the case for Iran going nuclear.

Washington's criticisms of Tehran for its dictatorial practices are likewise the height of cynicism, given that it was Washington that snuffed out democracy in Iran back in 1953 and supported the Shah's brutal dictatorial rule for a quarter of a century. And Washington didn't mind the mullahs' repressive policies either, as long as the victims were the right ones. In 1983, according to the official Tower Commission,

> [T]he United States helped bring to the attention of Teheran the threat inherent in the extensive infiltration of the government by the communist Tudeh Party and Soviet or

> pro-Soviet cadres in the country. Using this information, the Khomeini government took measures, including mass executions, that virtually eliminated the pro-Soviet infrastructure in Iran.

In Iran today, repression is widespread, there are scores of political prisoners, torture is used, there is violence and discrimination against women and minorities in law and practice, freedom of expression is severely curtailed, and during the presidential elections of June 2005 a large numbers of prospective candidates, including all the women who were running, were arbitrarily disqualified. Those leftists who praise Iran's treatment of women or gays or minorities are foolishly allowing Iran's opposition to U.S. policies to excuse very real oppression. This oppression needs to be vigorously condemned. At the same time, however, we should keep in mind, as Gilbert Achcar has noted, that on every measure of democracy, repression, or women's rights Iran is a beacon of enlightenment compared to the Saudi regime, a close U.S. ally. Candidates for president are not disqualified in Saudi Arabia because a presidential election in that country would be unheard of. Not only don't women run for the most minor offices, they are not even allowed to vote.

Those who want to help the expansion of democracy and women's rights in Iran know, as Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of the Center for Defense of Human Rights in Tehran, Sharin Ebadi, put it (*NYT*, 2/8/05), that "for human rights defenders in Iran, the possibility of a foreign military attack on their country represents an utter disaster for their cause." There are independent human rights groups in Iran, and their protests have had some impact, yet, Ebadi notes, "the threat of foreign military intervention will provide a powerful excuse for authoritarian elements to uproot these groups and put an end to their growth." She writes:

> [T]he most effective way to promote human rights in Iran is to provide moral support and international recognition to independent human rights defenders and to insist that Iran adhere to the international human rights laws and conventions that it has signed. Getting the Iranian government to abide by these international standards is the human rights movement's highest goal; foreign military intervention in Iran is the surest way to harm us and keep that goal out of reach.

Lebanon

THE MONTH-LONG ISRAELI WAR in Lebanon was in many respects a proxy war fought by Washington. When Tel Aviv needed more munitions, including cluster bombs, the United States rushed these to Israel. When Tel Aviv wanted a free hand to attack Lebanon without interference by the UN or any other sort of international pressure, the United States provided the blocking. As Israel killed some 1,200 civilians, and destroyed 130,000 housing units, along with bridges, factories, schools, hospitals, and much of the country's electrical network, the Bush administration stalled any ceasefire resolution. Press accounts indicate that Israel officials shared their war plans with Washington long before July 2006, and in any event it is certainly unlikely that Israeli officials would have gone to war without coordinating with their American ally.

For the Bush administration, this was not simply a matter of doing a favor for a friend. Given the close ties between Hezbollah and Tehran, Washington hoped that crushing Hezbollah would not just destroy an anti-American organization, but eliminate one of Iran's chief means of retaliation in the event of an attack (the other being its ability to cause mischief in Iraq).

Though planned in advance, the Israel assault needed a Hezbollah provocation and the organization provided that with its cross-border raid of July 12 resulting in the capture of two

soldiers and the killing of several others. Israel argued that it had no choice but to go to war to stop Hezbollah missile attacks against its population, but in fact these attacks were a response to, not the cause of, Israel's massive bombardment of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure. From the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in May 2000 until July 12, 2006, there was not a single Israeli killed by a Katyusha rocket fired from Lebanon. And from 2000 to May 28, 2006, there was not a single confirmed rocket fired at civilians by Hezbollah (see my "Lebanon War Question and Answer," *ZNet*, 8/7/06). On this latter date, small arms fire that wounded an Israeli soldier led to a major exchange of fire in which the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) used air strikes, artillery, mortar, and tank fire, wounding two Lebanese civilians, and Hezbollah "responded with rocket, mortar and small-arms fire," in the words of the UN observers. The IDF ordered Israeli civilians in the north "to take to the safety of bomb shelters — some so out of use that it was difficult to locate the keys" (*JP*, 6/1/06).

Hezbollah's cross- border raid of July 12, 2006 was accompanied by diversionary rocket fire. Israeli press accounts report that these wounded several civilians, though Hezbollah officials told Amnesty International (AI, ENGMDE020252006, 9/14/06) that no civilian was targeted on 12 July. In any event, Israel could have easily stopped any rocket fire at its cities and towns by accepting Hassan Nasrallah's offer to cease its rocket attacks if Israel stopped its air-raids (Cody, *WP*, 8/4/06).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported "a systematic failure by the IDF to distinguish between combatants and civilians." Israeli apologists have argued that Lebanese civilian deaths were unfortunate collateral damage resulting from Hezbollah's policy of placing military targets in civilian areas, but in none of the specific cases investigated by Human Rights Watch were Hezbollah's weapons or fighters near civilian areas targeted by Israel. Moreover, the broad Israeli definition of military targets makes an intermingling of military and civilian activity inevitable: Israel defines as legitimate targets the private residences of Hezbollah political leaders, Hezbollah political offices, and Hezbollah's TV station — all of which, not surprisingly, are in civilian areas. Further, Israel directly and intentionally targeted civilian infrastructure, as Israeli officials acknowledged (for example, the warning of Israeli army chief of staff Lt.-Gen. Dan Halutz that if the captured soldiers were not returned, the IDF "would target infrastructure and 'turn back the clock in Lebanon by 20 years'" (*Independent* 7/13/06). As Amnesty International reported,

> The evidence strongly suggests that the extensive destruction of public works, power systems, civilian homes and industry was deliberate and an integral part of the military strategy, rather than 'collateral damage' — incidental damage to civilians or civilian property resulting from targeting military objectives (MDE 18/007/2006, 8/23/06).

Hezbollah, too, engaged in war crimes — in particular its indiscriminate rocket fire into Israel, including cluster munitions (HRW report, Oct. 19, 2006) — though the scale of its crimes as measured by the civilian death toll was 1/25 that of Israel's.

WAR WAS NOT A NECESSARY RESPONSE to Hezbollah's cross-border raid of July 12. The prisoner issue and the various border issues all could have settled peaceably without the horrible human costs of the war and the further poisoning of attitudes.

Many Lebanese were critical of Hezbollah's provocative July 12 raid, but the brutality of the Israeli response caused most Lebanese to end up assigning primary responsibility to Israel for the catastrophe that befell their country. Hezbollah's tenacious resistance to the Israeli onslaught has greatly enhanced their reputation. However, Hezbollah's resistance and its mass base among the

Shiite population of Lebanon (based on its communal social welfare programs and relative lack of corruption) should not lead us to view Hezbollah as a progressive force. It is a fundamentalist political organization — though because the Shia are not even a majority of Lebanon's population, Hezbollah no longer calls for turning the country into an "Islamic Republic" — with socially backward views as well as supporting the neoliberal agenda. It achieved its dominance among Lebanon's Shia population in part by using violence against progressive forces (see Achcar, *Z Magazine*, 10/06). (There was some ill-considered excitement on the left when a supposed interview with Nasrallah was published indicating leftist sympathies, but that interview has been shown to be a forgery.)

The failure of Israel to achieve its aims in this war represented a critical defeat. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert disagrees, revealingly declaring (*Haaretz*, 9/5/06) that "The claim that we lost is unfounded. Half of Lebanon is destroyed; is that a loss?" But Israel's image of invincibility has been decisively shattered. One hopes that this will encourage Israelis to seek peaceful resolutions to their conflicts with Palestinians and others, respecting the rights of everyone involved, but, unfortunately, it may propel Israeli leaders to seek an opportunity to restore their military dominance.

Israel-Palestine

IN JUNE 2006, AN UPSURGE OF VIOLENCE erupted in Gaza. Israel claims its military escalation was a response to the abduction on June 26 of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants. This claim neglects some crucial context.

Gaza is Israeli occupied territory. Israel argues that in September 2005 it had unilaterally withdrawn from Gaza, thus ending the occupation, but as John Dugard, the UN's respected special rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, noted:

> Statements by the Government of Israel that the withdrawal ended the occupation of Gaza are grossly inaccurate. Even before the commencement of 'Operation Summer Rains,' following the capture of Corporal Shalit, Gaza remained under the effective control of Israel. This control was manifested in a number of ways. Israel retained control of Gaza's air space, sea space and external borders. Although a special arrangement was made for the opening of the Rafah border crossing to Egypt, to be monitored by European Union personnel, all other crossings remained largely closed.... The actions of IDF in respect of Gaza have clearly demonstrated that modern technology allows an occupying Power to effectively control a territory even without a military presence. (General Assembly document A/61/470, 9/27/06)

At the same time, Israel has been constructing a separation "wall" in the West Bank — declared illegal in an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice — in a transparent attempt to seize as much valuable land and resources as possible. Whatever term Israel gave for its policy — '"unilateral disengagement," "convergence," or "realignment" — the intent, Dugard noted, was clear: "the unlawful annexation of large portions of Palestinian territory. The euphemisms used to describe this policy should not be allowed to obscure the hard truth." On the West Bank, settlements continued to grow, and the number of checkpoints, including roadblocks, earth mounds and trenches, increased from 376 in August 2005 to over 500 a year later. For example, the city of Nablus is now completely surrounded by checkpoints. "In effect, Nablus has become an imprisoned city." Dugard noted that Israel justifies the checkpoints on security grounds, but it is "difficult to accept this justification" for many of the checkpoints, whose main purpose "is in fact to make

Palestinians constantly aware of Israeli control of their lives and to humiliate them in the process."

Living conditions in the Occupied Territories were horrible, and especially so in Gaza. After Hamas won the January 2006 Palestinian elections, however, Israel moved to impose economic strangulation on the Palestinians and conditions deteriorated sharply. Israel withheld funds owed to the Palestinian Authority, and international donors, particularly the United States and the European Union, cut their financial support. Unemployment increased to 40 per cent, and the Palestinian public sector workforce, accounting for almost a quarter of total employment, is employed but unpaid because of Israel's withholding of funds. By June more than half of all Palestinians were deemed by the World Food Programme to be "food insecure," unable to meet their food needs without assistance, a 14 percent increase over the previous year.

In these abysmal conditions, and with hopes of Palestinian sovereignty so dismal, it's not surprising that some Palestinian militants were firing homemade Qassam rockets from Gaza into the nearby Israeli village of Sderot. Israel, in addition to the targeted assassinations with their innocent civilian casualties, was responding by firing artillery shells into Gaza. As always, the number of innocent Palestinian civilians killed far outnumbered the innocent Israelis killed.

On June 24, Israeli commandos launched a raid into Gaza seizing two men. Israel characteristically said they were terrorists, but no evidence was given. (Among its 10,000 Palestinian prisoners, Israel holds a thousand who have not been charged. Thus, as Norman Finkelstein has noted, the claim that Israel only arrests terrorists can clearly be no more than an article of faith.) The next day, Palestinian militants killed two Israeli soldiers and captured a third one. Israel's response was ferocious.

Israel began military incursions into Gaza and unrelenting shelling and bombing. In addition, Israeli F-16s flew low and broke the sound barrier over Gaza, causing sonic booms as loud as the actual bombardments, causing widespread terror among the population, particularly children. Israel seized eight Hamas Cabinet ministers and 26 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council and, later, took other key Palestinian officials into custody. Israel declared that these individuals were being arrested for terrorism, but clearly they were being held as hostages.

Israel's main target was the Palestinian population (who had had the audacity not to vote the way Israel wanted). Between June 26 and September, some 260 Palestinians (at least half of whom were civilians) were killed, including 58 children. (In this same period, one Israeli was killed — a soldier.) The Israeli Air Force destroyed the only domestic power plant in Gaza, cutting electricity as well as the daily water supply. The borders were closed. The Israeli navy prevented Palestinian fishing along the coast. As Dugard noted, "In effect, the Palestinian people have been subjected to economic sanctions — the first time an occupied people have been so treated. …[The] Palestinian people, rather than the Palestinian Authority, have been subjected to possibly the most rigorous form of international sanctions imposed in modern times."

Just as with the Lebanon war, Israeli aggression was enabled by the United States. On July 12, 2006, the Security Council considered a resolution dealing with the crisis in Gaza. The resolution received ten affirmative votes, four abstentions, and one negative vote, but because that "no" vote came from the United States, with veto power, under undemocratic Security Council rules, the resolution failed.

U.S. Ambassador John Bolton explained his "no" vote on the grounds that the resolution was unbalanced and "placed demands on one side, while not placing reciprocal demands on the other side in the Middle East conflict" (SC/8775, July 13, 2006). In fact, the resolution meticulously condemned violence on both sides. Its key preambulatory clauses read:

> *Condemning* military assault being carried out by Israel, the occupying Power, in the Gaza Strip, which has caused the killing and injury of dozens of Palestinian civilians, and the destruction of Palestinian property and civilian infrastructure, notably Gaza's main power station, and *condemning also* the detention of democratically elected Palestinian and other officials,
>
> *Condemning also* the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel and the abduction of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian armed groups from Gaza, and the recent abduction and killing of an Israeli civilian in the West Bank,
>
> *Condemning* all acts of violence, terror and destruction.

The operative clauses included "1. *Calls for* the immediate and unconditional release of the abducted Israeli soldier," "5. *Calls upon* the Palestinian Authority to take immediate and sustained action to bring an end to violence, including the firing of rockets on Israeli territory," and "6. *Urges* all concerned parties to abide by their obligations and respect in all circumstances the rules of international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949 and refrain from violence against civilian population."

Bolton further charged that the resolution "would have undermined the Council's and the international community's stated support for a two-State vision for peace in the Middle East." On the contrary, the resolution explicitly stated:

> 9. *Stresses* the importance of, and the need to achieve, a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace in the Middle East, based on all its relevant resolutions including its resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), the Madrid terms of reference, the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the League of Arab States Summit in March 2002 in Beirut and the Road Map.

Thus, with the U.S. veto blocking this modest Security Council effort at ending the crisis, Israel was given a free hand to continue its assault on the people of Gaza and the occupied territories generally. One can understand why Israel's UN Ambassador, Dan Gillerman, jokingly told a meeting of B'nai Brith International back in May that Bolton was "a secret member of Israel's own team at the United Nations." The Israeli delegation, he said, was really not just five diplomats. "We are at least six including John Bolton" (*Haaretz*, 5/23/06).

WASHINGTON AND TEL AVIV ASSERT that their strangulation of Hamas was justified because Hamas is committed to Israel's destruction and the use of terror and opposed to negotiations. There is no doubt that Hamas has been responsible for serious acts of terror, and the left surely must reject its Islamic program. But it is equally clear that Hamas has given many indications that it is prepared to accept a long term "truce" while negotiations on a two-state settlement proceed (see Ahmed Yousef, *NYT*, 11/1/06; also Jennifer Lowenstein, "Setting the Record Straight on Hamas," *CounterPunch,* 6-12-06). But because Hamas is less corrupt than the old Palestinian Authority leadership, it's less likely to be bought off, selling out Palestinian interests. From Israel's point of view, this makes it not a suitable "partner for peace"; better for Israel to impose its own solution, backed up by U.S. support.

One can't do better than end with the summary of John Dugard:

> Israel is in violation of important norms of human rights and international humanitarian law. While it is readily conceded that Israel faces a security threat and is entitled to defend itself, it must not be forgotten that the root cause of the security threat is the continued occupation of a people that wishes to exercise its right of self-determination in an independent State.

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As one surveys the Middle East, one sees immense suffering. Fortunately, Washington and Tel Aviv have been thwarted in their maximal goals, but alas, there is little to inspire hope for the immediate future and reason to fear even worse to come. Only the emergence in Israel, the Occupied Territories, Iraq, Iran, and throughout the region of mass movements for democracy, peace, and social justice offers any real chance to reverse the grim reality. It is hard to be optimistic, but in the United States solidarity with the seeds of these movements and opposition to our own government's aggression, brutality, and anti-democratic policies are the first step.

Nov. 1, 2006

Footnotes