

A MIDDLE-EAST NOTEBOOK

By Michael Ventura

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Turnabout on (and ignorance of) Iran. Before Bush failed to get so much as a censure of Iran from the G-8 participants, word was that “Israeli intelligence officials say they have evidence that the Hezbollah attack was partly ordered by Iran.” [*The New York Times*, July 16, p.WK1]. Clearly, action against Iran was in the works. After Bush found no support for that, the tune changed. For some days Iran was hardly mentioned; then, perhaps to quiet neo-cons demanding blood, U.S. intelligence officials let drop that “available intelligence does not offer proof that Iran inspired or directed kidnappings and rocket launchings that set off the war with Israel.” [*The New York Times*, August 5, p.7] In fact, regarding Iran we don’t know much. A “senior US diplomat” told *Time* magazine’s Joe Klein: “We really don’t have any real idea about what goes on inside that government.” [*Time*, July 24, p.31] For nearly thirty years Iran has been a major player in the region, yet we remain in the dark about how Iran makes decisions. Incredible, isn’t it? And incredibly dangerous, for us and for all who depend upon our judgment.

Deadly wishful thinking. “A week ago, Israeli officials said their military had knocked out up to half of Hezbollah’s rocket launchers and suggested that another week or two would finish the job of incapacitating the Lebanese militia.” [*The New York Times*, July 26, p.1] In the weeks since, little has changed but the death count. “A high level administration official... said the United States and Britain had a plan that would play out over the next several days.” [*The New York Times*, July 29, p.1] Two weeks later, the “plan” has cost hundreds of innocent lives and, as I write, even with a UN ceasefire agreement the fighting has not stopped. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Condoleeza Rice “that Israel needed 10 to 14 more days to complete its war aims.” [*The New York Times*, July 31, p.1] Twelve of those days have passed as I write; Israel’s war aims (“routing” Hezbollah) are far from complete. Condi Rice said a cease-fire could be achieved “this week.” [*The New York Times*, Aug. 1, p.1] Two weeks later, fighting continues. “Mr. Olmert said Hezbollah’s infrastructure had been ‘entirely destroyed,’ and that some 770 command and control centers had been taken out of action. As he spoke, Hezbollah fighters... were showering Israel with the biggest barrage of rockets in the [then] 21-day-old war.” [*The New York Times*, Aug. 3, p.1] Even Hezbollah’s television network remains on the air.

It is now universally acknowledged that the US and Israel utterly misconceived Hezbollah’s military and organizational power. Our leaders don’t know what they’re doing. They improvise on poor information, make grandiose statements, then hope for the best. Meanwhile, “the United Nations estimates a third of the killed are children.” [MSNBC, July 20]

War Crimes. “Article 51 of the first additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions... outlaws attacks that ‘may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life’ which would be ‘excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage.’” [*The Economist*, 7/29, p44] That would describe actions that have “cost 10 times as many Lebanese lives as Israeli ones, and ravaged the country.” [*The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug. 10, p.1] Lebanon’s acting foreign minister, Tarek Mitri, made a telling argument at the UN: “We have heard ad nauseum that in war mistakes are committed. When mistakes become a pattern of behavior they then deserve another word; they qualify as crimes.” [*The New York Times*, Aug. 1, p.1]

Tarek Mitri was attempting to revive a high-profile statement by the UN’s high commissioner for human rights, former Canadian Supreme Court justice Louise Arbour: “The scale of killings in the region, and their predictability, could engage the personal criminal responsibility of those involved, particularly those in position of command and control.” She was supported by the International Red Cross, which stated “Israel violated the principle of proportionality provided for in the Conventions and their protocols.” [*The New York Times*, July 20, p.11]

After those statements a clearly marked UN post well known to all -- it’s been there for 57 years -- was blasted to hell by the Israelis, with 4 UN deaths. Broadcast news covered this as

another “mistake”; print news was more specific. “No Hezbollah activity was reported in the area,” and while the UN “protested for 6 hours” the site was “subjected to 21 strikes, 11 of them aerial bombardments and at least 6 artillery rounds.” [*The New York Times*, July 27, p.14] That’s no mistake. In addition, after Ms. Arbour’s statement UN observers were subjected to “145 ‘close firings’... with several patrol bases taking direct hits.” [Ditto] “Although [UN observers are] in constant contact with the Israeli military, informing them of the movement of their convoys, they have not been spared from the onslaught.” [*The Christian Science Monitor*, July 20, p.6]

The United Nations got the message. If it didn’t want unarmed UN observers to die, best shut up about Israeli war crimes. It shut up. I’ve seen no further official UN charges. As for the International Red Cross, every news outlet has reported clearly-marked ambulances blown off the roads. The Red Cross, too, has gone mum. But some brave souls are still talking. Human Rights Watch observer Peter Bouckaert’s eye-witness study concluded: “In many of these [Israeli] strikes there is no military objective anywhere in the vicinity. Day after day we are documenting these strikes where they clearly hit civilian targets.” [*The New York Times*, Aug. 3, p.10]

Why flatten Lebanon’s infrastructure? In war as in politics, follow the money. Lebanon’s president, Emile Lahoud, says it’s “because Lebanon is a very big competitor of Israel, from the tourist point of view and with anything -- regional trade, finance. So the Israelis don’t want Lebanon to prosper.” [*The New Yorker*, Aug. 4, p.10] Ramzi El Hafez, publisher of Lebanon Opportunities magazine: “Lebanon had begun attracting long-term investment. Lebanese banks were lending both at home and throughout the Middle East. The Beirut Stock Exchange began 2006 with \$4.91 billion in capitalization, coming off a record 2005, when both volume and value of trading tripled.” [*USA Today*, Aug.8, p.7] The same article noted that “Abbas Safieddine, a partner in PlastiMed, maker of disposable medical supplies, says he wants to know why Israelis targeted PlastiMed’s factory near the coastal city of Tyre. The plant...was demolished in an air strike two weeks ago.” Also hit, a Pepsi bottling franchise. Etc. The United States is in an increasingly shaky position financially, with many predicting a recession next year. [*The Economist*, Aug. 5, p.14]; this means Israel’s financial situation is also shaky, dependent as it is upon the US. A major economic rival on its border, competing for capital and trade, could hurt Israel’s economy at a time when the US economy is less reliable as a supplement. Now it will take Lebanon years to rebuild; Israel no longer has a local economic rival.

Children and ceasefires. John R. Bolton, US ambassador to the UN, calls the notion of a ceasefire “simplistic.” [*The New York Times*, July 20, p.11] Bush says a ceasefire must be “real,” and not just something “that will make us all feel better.” [CNN, July 27] Condi Rice says that before there can be a ceasefire, “there have to be certain conditions.” Nicholas Burns, third-ranking official in the State Department: “We want to avoid a situation where we essentially put a Band-Aid on something.” [*The New York Times*, July 31/p.1] In spite of civilian casualties Bush continues to resist a ceasefire while claiming that “they [Hezbollah] have a different tool to use than we do... they kill innocent lives to achieve objectives.” [CNN, July 28] In blocking a ceasefire we are using the same terrorist “tool.” Remember: “There are more children that have been killed than combatants.” [CNN’s Jim Clancy, Aug. 8]

Translate the formal statements on all sides into plain English. Hezbollah and Hamas: “We have good reasons for killing children and unarmed civilians.” Israel and the United States: “We have better reasons for killing children and the unarmed, and we can kill more of ‘em.” Bush and Rice: “We see no ‘real’ reason *not* to kill children and the unarmed, unless we get what we want.” Bolton: “It’s ‘simplistic’ not to kill children and the unarmed.” Hezbollah, Hamas, Israel, and the United States: “If they kill children, we gotta too.”

Theirs is the banter of sociopaths. Dressing it up in diplomatic jargon makes it no less insane. No less cruel. Since July 24, the day we rejected an immediate ceasefire, civilian deaths have more than doubled. That ceasefire not “real”? It would have been real enough for them.

As of this writing, the killing continues.

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