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War on Lebanon Planned for at least a Year

The Bush Administration's Grand Strategy and the Birth Pangs of Terror

By Juan Cole

07/23/06 "Information Clearing House" -- -- Israeli war planes hit the cities of Sidon, south Beirut and Baalbak on Saturday and Israeli ground troops fought a hard battle to take over the village of Maroun al-Ras, said to be a Hizbullah rocket-launching site. **The Israeli bombing of Sidon** hit a religious complex linked to Hizbullah. The BBC reports that 'The UN's Jan Egeland said half a million people needed assistance - and the number was likely to increase. **One-third of the recent Lebanese casualties, he said, appeared to be children.** '

Matthew Kalman reveals that Israel's wideranging assault on Lebanon has been planned in a general way for years, and a specific plan has been in the works for over a year. The "Three Week War" was shown to Washington think tanks and officials last year on powerpoint by a senior Israeli army officer:

"More than a year ago, a senior Israeli army officer began giving PowerPoint presentations, on an off-the-record basis, to U.S. and other diplomats, journalists and think tanks, setting out the plan for the current operation in revealing detail."

The Israelis tend to launch their wars of choice in the summer, in part because they know that European and American universities will be the primary nodes of popular opposition, and the universities are out in the summer. This war has nothing to do with captured Israeli soldiers. It is a long-planned war to increase Israel's ascendancy over Hizbullah and its patrons.

But since Hizbullah's short-range katyushas can only hit targets 3-4 miles away, and were mainly being fired **at the occupied Shebaa Farms**, why worry about it so much?

1. If Hizbullah forced Israel out of the Shebaa Farms, it might increase pressure for it to give back the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and all of the West Bank-- the other territories stolen by Israel in 1967. The Israelis have their own Domino Theory, which haunts them the way the original haunted Lyndon Johnson-- and just as foolishly.

2. **Some** of Hizbullah's missiles might have been able to hit sensitive Israeli chemical or nuclear sites, or just cause panic by hitting Israeli cities. There was zero likelihood of Hezbollah launching such a strike unprovoked. But this capacity formed at least a slight drag on the Israeli ability to strike Iran and the Palestinians with impunity. The destruction of the Hizbullah arsenal may be the precursor of even more drastic action against the Palestinians and perhaps a bombing raid on Iran's nuclear research facilities near Isfahan.

Israel is a regional superpower, the only nuclear power in the Middle East proper, and possessing the most technologically advanced military capability and the most professional military. Since Egypt opted out of the military struggle for economic reasons and since the US invasion broke Iraq's legs, there is no conventional military threat to Israel. Israel

seeks complete military superiority, for several reasons. One impetus is defensive, on the theory that it has to win every contest and can never afford to lose even one, given its lack of strategic depth (it is a geographically small country with a small population, caught between the Mediterranean and potentially hostile neighboring populations). But the defensive reasons are only one dimension.

There are also offensive considerations. The Right in Israel is determined to permanently subjugate the Palestinians and forestall the emergence of a Palestinian state. This course of action requires the constant exercise of main force against the Palestinians, who resist it, as well as threats against Arab or Muslim neighbors who might be tempted to help the Palestinians. Thus, Iraq and Iran both had to be punished and weakened. Likewise, the Israeli Right has never given up an expansionist ideology. For instance, the Israelis have a big interest in the Litani River in south Lebanon. If and when the Israeli military and political elite felt they needed to add territory by taking it from neighbors, they wished to retain that capability.

The remaining challenges to complete Israeli military superiority and freedom of movement are 1) asymmetrical forces such as Hamas and Hizbullah guerrilla cells wielding rockets and 2) the menace of future unconventional challenges such as an Iranian nuclear weapon (circa 2016 if in fact the Iranians are working on it, which is not proved). Given the alliance of Shiite Hizbullah with Shiite Iran, one capability shielded the other.

That this war was pre-planned was obvious to me from the moment it began. The Israeli military proceeded methodically and systematically to destroy Lebanon's infrastructure, and clearly had been casing targets for some time. The vast majority of these targets were unrelated to Hizbullah. But since the northern Sunni port of Tripoli could theoretically be used by Syria or Iran to offload replacement rockets that could be transported by truck down south to Hizbullah, the Israelis hit it. And then they hit some trucks to let truck drivers know to stay home for a while.

That is why I was **so shaken by George W. Bush's overheard conversation with Tony Blair** about the war. He clearly thought that it broke out because Syria used Hizbullah to create a provocation. The President of the United States did not know that this war was a long-planned Israeli war of choice.

Why is that scary? Because the Israeli planning had to have been done in conjunction with Donald Rumsfeld at the US Department of Defense. The US Department of Defense **is committed to rapidly re-arming Israel and providing it precision laser-guided weaponry**, and to giving it time to substantially degrade Hizbullah's missile capabilities. The two are partners in the war effort.

For the Bush administration, Iran and Hizbullah are not existential threats. They are proximate threats. Iran is hostile to US corporate investment in the oil-rich Gulf, and so is a big obstacle to American profit-making in the region. **Rumsfeld is worried about Iran's admission as an observer to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**, which is to say, that he is worried about a budding Chinese-Islamic axis that might lock up petroleum reserves and block US investments. If Chinese economic and military growth make it the most significant potential challenger to the Sole Superpower in the coming century, a Chinese alliance with the oil-rich Muslim regions, including Iran, would be even more formidable. The Shanghai group has already pulled off one coup against Rumsfeld, successfully convincing Uzbekistan to end US basing rights in that country.

Rumsfeld also believes, contrary to all available evidence, **that Iran is actively destabilizing Iraq and is conniving with Syria and Hezbollah to do so.**

(In fact, the Iraqis had shaped charges in their depots and did not need to learn about them from Iran or Hezbollah). At some points, the Pentagon has even tried to blame Iran for the radical Sunni Arab violence in Iraq, which makes no sense at all (and thus that propaganda campaign has been put on the back burner).

Rumsfeld is so eager to stop what he believes is an Iranian nuclear weapons program that **he reportedly has considered using tactical nuclear weapons against it** preemptively. After all, a nuclear-armed Iran would forestall American gunboat diplomacy in the oil-rich Gulf.

Iran also supports Syria, and Rumsfeld believes that Syria is helping destabilize Iraq, and is also a patron for Hizbullah.

Clearly, if one could get rid of Iran and Hezbollah, in Rumsfeld World, Iraq is much more likely to turn out a delayed success than an absolute disaster. And then the stalled-out rush to Bush's vision of "democracy" (i.e. Big Private Property) in the region could proceed. In fact, the instability in Iraq mainly comes from Sunni Arab guerrillas, who hate Iran and it is mutual.

The Bush administration's perceived economic and geopolitical interests thus overlap strongly with Israel's perceived security interests, with both benefitting from an Israeli destruction of Hizbullah. It is not impossible that the US Pentagon urged the Israelis on in this endeavor. They certainly knew about and approved of the plan.

What is scary is that Cheney and Rumsfeld don't appear to have let W. in on the whole thing. They told him that Bashar al-Asad of Syria stirred up a little trouble because he was afraid that Iraq the Model and the Lebanese Cedar Revolution might be such huge successes that they would topple him by example (just as, after Poland and the Czech Velvet Revolution, other Eastern European strongmen fell). (Don't fall down laughing at the idea of Iraq and Lebanon as Republican Party success stories; people in Washington, DC, cocoon a lot and have odd ideas about the way the world is.) So, Bush thought, if that is all that is going on, then someone just needs to call al-Asad and reassure him that we're not going to take him out, and get him to rein in Hizbullah. And then the war would suddenly stop. No one told Bush that this war was actually an Israeli war of choice and that al-Asad had nothing to do with it, that, indeed, it could only happen because al-Asad is already irrelevant.

That is why Administration hopes **of using the Israeli attempt to destroy Hezbollah** as a wedge to convince Syria to give up rejectionism and detach itself from Iran are crazy.

Syria is not going to give up its stance toward Israel unless it at the very least gets back the occupied Golan Heights. That is non-negotiable for Damascus. Since the Israeli Right is diehard opposed to making that deal, Israel will go on occupying part of Syrian soil. Syria cannot accept that outcome. Likewise, **the Alawi regime** in Syria faces a powerful challenge from the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. The high Baath officials would be afraid that if they made peace with Israel and got nothing out of it for Syria, there would be a mass popular Islamist uprising. A separate peace that leaves the Palestinians to the Israelis' tender mercies would also stick in the craw of the Syrian public. The administration plan will fail.

Because of their fetish for states, the Neoconservatives of the Bush administration are unable to see that the Levant and points east are now the province of militia-parties that dominate localities and wield asymmetrical paramilitary force in such a way as to stymie states, whether local host states, local adversaries, or imperial Powers. Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas and other groups in Gaza and the West Bank, al-Qaeda/ radical Bedouins in the Sinai, the Muslim Brotherhood in some Sunni areas of Syria, the tribes and gangs of Maan in Jordan, the Peshmerga of the Kurds, the guerrilla groups of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq, the Mahdi Army, Badr Corps and Marsh Arabs of the Iraqi Shiites, the Basij and Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Iran, the party-tribes of Afghanistan--whether the Tajik Jami'at-i Islami or the Pushtun Taliban--and the biradaris and ethnic mafias of Pakistan, are all arguably as significant actors as states, and often more significant.

By its assault on Middle Eastern states, whether it takes the form of military confrontation or of "pressure" to "democratize, Neoconservatism in Washington and Tel Aviv has increased the power and saliency of militia rule throughout the region. The transition under American auspices of Iraq from a strong if odious central state to equally odious militia rule and chaotic violence is only the most obvious example of this process. More people have been killed in terror attacks in Iraq **every month** since February than were killed on September 11, 2001 in the US, and since Iraq is 11 times less populous than the US, the 6,000 killed in May and June are equivalent to 66,000 killed in civil war violence in the US. **Condi Rice echoes the old Neocon theory of "creative chaos"** when she confuses the Lebanon war with "the birth pangs" of a "new" Middle East. The chief outcome of the "war on terror" has been the proliferation of asymmetrical challengers. Israel's assault on the very fabric of the Lebanese state seems likely to weaken or collapse it and further that proliferation. Since asymmetrical challengers often turn to terrorism as a tactic, the "war on terror" has been, at the level

of political society below that of high politics and the state, the most efficient engine for the production of terrorism in history.

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