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WATCHING LEBANON

Washington's interests in Israel's war.

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In the days after Hezbollah crossed from Lebanon into Israel, on July 12th, to kidnap two soldiers, triggering an Israeli air attack on Lebanon and a full-scale war, the Bush Administration seemed strangely passive. "It's a moment of clarification," President George W. Bush said at the G-8 summit, in St. Petersburg, on July 16th. "It's now become clear why we don't have peace in the Middle East." He described the relationship between Hezbollah and its supporters in Iran and Syria as one of the "root causes of instability," and subsequently said that it was up to those countries to end the crisis. Two days later, despite calls from several governments for the United States to take the lead in negotiations to end the fighting, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that a ceasefire should be put off until "the conditions are conducive."

The Bush Administration, however, was closely involved in the planning of Israel's retaliatory attacks. President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney were convinced, current and former intelligence and diplomatic officials told me, that a successful Israeli Air Force bombing campaign against Hezbollah's heavily fortified underground-missile and command-and-control complexes in Lebanon could ease Israel's security concerns and also serve as a prelude to a potential American preëmptive attack to destroy Iran's nuclear installations, some of which are also buried deep underground.

Israeli military and intelligence experts I spoke to emphasized that the country's immediate security issues were reason enough to confront Hezbollah, regardless of what the Bush Administration wanted. Shabtai Shavit, a national-security adviser to the Knesset who headed the Mossad, Israel's foreign-intelligence service, from 1989 to 1996, told me, "We do what we think is best for us, and if it happens to meet America's requirements, that's just part of a relationship between two friends. Hezbollah is armed to the teeth and trained in the most advanced technology of guerrilla warfare. It was just a matter of time. We had to address it."

Hezbollah is seen by Israelis as a profound threat—a terrorist organization, operating on their border, with a military arsenal that, with help from Iran and Syria, has grown stronger since the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon ended, in 2000. Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, has said he does not believe that Israel is a "legal state." Israeli intelligence estimated at the outset of the air war that Hezbollah had

roughly five hundred medium-range Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 rockets and a few dozen long-range Zelzal rockets; the Zelzals, with a range of about two hundred kilometres, could reach Tel Aviv. (One rocket hit Haifa the day after the kidnappings.) It also has more than twelve thousand shorter-range rockets. Since the conflict began, more than three thousand of these have been fired at Israel.

According to a Middle East expert with knowledge of the current thinking of both the Israeli and the U.S. governments, Israel had devised a plan for attacking Hezbollah—and shared it with Bush Administration officials—well before the July 12th kidnappings. “It’s not that the Israelis had a trap that Hezbollah walked into,” he said, “but there was a strong feeling in the White House that sooner or later the Israelis were going to do it.”

The Middle East expert said that the Administration had several reasons for supporting the Israeli bombing campaign. Within the State Department, it was seen as a way to strengthen the Lebanese government so that it could assert its authority over the south of the country, much of which is controlled by Hezbollah. He went on, “The White House was more focussed on stripping Hezbollah of its missiles, because, if there was to be a military option against Iran’s nuclear facilities, it had to get rid of the weapons that Hezbollah could use in a potential retaliation at Israel. Bush wanted both. Bush was going after Iran, as part of the Axis of Evil, and its nuclear sites, and he was interested in going after Hezbollah as part of his interest in democratization, with Lebanon as one of the crown jewels of Middle East democracy.”

Administration officials denied that they knew of Israel’s plan for the air war. The White House did not respond to a detailed list of questions. In response to a separate request, a National Security Council spokesman said, “Prior to Hezbollah’s attack on Israel, the Israeli government gave no official in Washington any reason to believe that Israel was planning to attack. Even after the July 12th attack, we did not know what the Israeli plans were.” A Pentagon spokesman said, “The United States government remains committed to a diplomatic solution to the problem of Iran’s clandestine nuclear weapons program,” and denied the story, as did a State Department spokesman.

The United States and Israel have shared intelligence and enjoyed close military coöperation for decades, but early this spring, according to a former senior intelligence official, high-level planners from the U.S. Air Force—under pressure from the White House to develop a war plan for a decisive strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities—began consulting with their counterparts in the Israeli Air Force.

“The big question for our Air Force was how to hit a series of hard targets in Iran successfully,” the former senior intelligence official said. “Who is the closest ally of the U.S. Air Force in its planning? It’s not Congo—it’s Israel. Everybody knows that Iranian engineers have been advising Hezbollah on tunnels and underground gun emplacements. And so the Air Force went to the Israelis with some new tactics and said to them, ‘Let’s concentrate on the bombing and share what we have on Iran and what you have on Lebanon.’ ” The discussions reached the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, he said.

“The Israelis told us it would be a cheap war with many benefits,” a U.S. government consultant with close ties to Israel said. “Why oppose it? We’ll be able to hunt down and bomb missiles, tunnels, and bunkers from the air. It would be a demo for Iran.”

A Pentagon consultant said that the Bush White House “has been agitating for some time to find a reason for a preëmptive blow against Hezbollah.” He added, “It was our intent to have Hezbollah diminished, and now we have someone else doing it.” (As this article went to press, the United Nations Security Council passed a ceasefire resolution, although it was unclear if it would change the situation on the ground.)

According to Richard Armitage, who served as Deputy Secretary of State in Bush’s first term—and who, in 2002, said that Hezbollah “may be the A team of terrorists”—Israel’s campaign in Lebanon, which has faced unexpected difficulties and widespread criticism, may, in the end, serve as a warning to the White House about Iran. “If the most dominant military force in the region—the Israel Defense Forces—can’t pacify a country like Lebanon, with a population of four million, you should think carefully about taking that template to Iran, with strategic depth and a population of seventy million,” Armitage said. “The only thing that the bombing has achieved so far is to unite the population against the Israelis.”

Several current and former officials involved in the Middle East told me that Israel viewed the soldiers’ kidnapping as the opportune moment to begin its planned military campaign against Hezbollah. “Hezbollah, like clockwork, was instigating something small every month or two,” the U.S. government consultant with ties to Israel said. Two weeks earlier, in late June, members of Hamas, the Palestinian group, had tunnelled under the barrier separating southern Gaza from Israel and captured an Israeli soldier. Hamas also had lobbed a series of rockets at Israeli towns near the border with Gaza. In response, Israel had initiated an extensive bombing campaign and reoccupied parts of Gaza.

The Pentagon consultant noted that there had also been cross-border incidents involving Israel and Hezbollah, in both directions, for some time. “They’ve been sniping at each other,” he said. “Either side could have pointed to some incident and said ‘We have to go to war with these guys’—because they were already at war.”

David Siegel, the spokesman at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, said that the Israeli Air Force had not been seeking a reason to attack Hezbollah. “We did not plan the campaign. That decision was forced on us.” There were ongoing alerts that Hezbollah “was pressing to go on the attack,” Siegel said. “Hezbollah attacks every two or three months,” but the kidnapping of the soldiers raised the stakes.

In interviews, several Israeli academics, journalists, and retired military and intelligence officers all made one point: they believed that the Israeli leadership, and not Washington, had decided that it would go to war with Hezbollah. Opinion polls showed that a broad spectrum of Israelis supported that choice. “The neocons in Washington may be happy, but Israel did not need to be pushed, because Israel has been wanting to get rid of Hezbollah,” Yossi Melman, a journalist for the newspaper

Ha'aretz, who has written several books about the Israeli intelligence community, said. "By provoking Israel, Hezbollah provided that opportunity."

"We were facing a dilemma," an Israeli official said. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert "had to decide whether to go for a local response, which we always do, or for a comprehensive response—to really take on Hezbollah once and for all." Olmert made his decision, the official said, only after a series of Israeli rescue efforts failed.

The U.S. government consultant with close ties to Israel told me, however, that, from Israel's perspective, the decision to take strong action had become inevitable weeks earlier, after the Israeli Army's signals intelligence group, known as Unit 8200, picked up bellicose intercepts in late spring and early summer, involving Hamas, Hezbollah, and Khaled Meshal, the Hamas leader now living in Damascus.

One intercept was of a meeting in late May of the Hamas political and military leadership, with Meshal participating by telephone. "Hamas believed the call from Damascus was scrambled, but Israel had broken the code," the consultant said. For almost a year before its victory in the Palestinian elections in January, Hamas had curtailed its terrorist activities. In the late May intercepted conversation, the consultant told me, the Hamas leadership said that "they got no benefit from it, and were losing standing among the Palestinian population." The conclusion, he said, was " 'Let's go back into the terror business and then try and wrestle concessions from the Israeli government.' " The consultant told me that the U.S. and Israel agreed that if the Hamas leadership did so, and if Nasrallah backed them up, there should be "a full-scale response." In the next several weeks, when Hamas began digging the tunnel into Israel, the consultant said, Unit 8200 "picked up signals intelligence involving Hamas, Syria, and Hezbollah, saying, in essence, that they wanted Hezbollah to 'warm up' the north." In one intercept, the consultant said, Nasrallah referred to Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz "as seeming to be weak," in comparison with the former Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak, who had extensive military experience, and said "he thought Israel would respond in a small-scale, local way, as they had in the past."

Earlier this summer, before the Hezbollah kidnappings, the U.S. government consultant said, several Israeli officials visited Washington, separately, "to get a green light for the bombing operation and to find out how much the United States would bear." The consultant added, "Israel began with Cheney. It wanted to be sure that it had his support and the support of his office and the Middle East desk of the National Security Council." After that, "persuading Bush was never a problem, and Condi Rice was on board," the consultant said.

The initial plan, as outlined by the Israelis, called for a major bombing campaign in response to the next Hezbollah provocation, according to the Middle East expert with knowledge of U.S. and Israeli thinking. Israel believed that, by targeting Lebanon's infrastructure, including highways, fuel depots, and even the civilian runways at the main Beirut airport, it could persuade Lebanon's large Christian and Sunni populations to turn against Hezbollah, according to the former senior intelligence official. The airport, highways, and bridges, among other things, have been hit in the

bombing campaign. The Israeli Air Force had flown almost nine thousand missions as of last week. (David Siegel, the Israeli spokesman, said that Israel had targeted only sites connected to Hezbollah; the bombing of bridges and roads was meant to prevent the transport of weapons.)

The Israeli plan, according to the former senior intelligence official, was "the mirror image of what the United States has been planning for Iran." (The initial U.S. Air Force proposals for an air attack to destroy Iran's nuclear capacity, which included the option of intense bombing of civilian infrastructure targets inside Iran, have been resisted by the top leadership of the Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps, according to current and former officials. They argue that the Air Force plan will not work and will inevitably lead, as in the Israeli war with Hezbollah, to the insertion of troops on the ground.)

Uzi Arad, who served for more than two decades in the Mossad, told me that to the best of his knowledge the contacts between the Israeli and U.S. governments were routine, and that, "in all my meetings and conversations with government officials, never once did I hear anyone refer to prior coördination with the United States." He was troubled by one issue—the speed with which the Olmert government went to war. "For the life of me, I've never seen a decision to go to war taken so speedily," he said. "We usually go through long analyses."

The key military planner was Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, the I.D.F. chief of staff, who, during a career in the Israeli Air Force, worked on contingency planning for an air war with Iran. Olmert, a former mayor of Jerusalem, and Peretz, a former labor leader, could not match his experience and expertise.

In the early discussions with American officials, I was told by the Middle East expert and the government consultant, the Israelis repeatedly pointed to the war in Kosovo as an example of what Israel would try to achieve. The NATO forces commanded by U.S. Army General Wesley Clark methodically bombed and strafed not only military targets but tunnels, bridges, and roads, in Kosovo and elsewhere in Serbia, for seventy-eight days before forcing Serbian forces to withdraw from Kosovo. "Israel studied the Kosovo war as its role model," the government consultant said. "The Israelis told Condi Rice, 'You did it in about seventy days, but we need half of that—thirty-five days.' "

There are, of course, vast differences between Lebanon and Kosovo. Clark, who retired from the military in 2000 and unsuccessfully ran as a Democrat for the Presidency in 2004, took issue with the analogy: "If it's true that the Israeli campaign is based on the American approach in Kosovo, then it missed the point. Ours was to use force to obtain a diplomatic objective—it was not about killing people." Clark noted in a 2001 book, "Waging Modern War," that it was the threat of a possible ground invasion as well as the bombing that forced the Serbs to end the war. He told me, "In my experience, air campaigns have to be backed, ultimately, by the will and capability to finish the job on the ground."

Kosovo has been cited publicly by Israeli officials and journalists since the war began. On August 6th, Prime Minister Olmert, responding to European condemnation of the deaths of Lebanese civilians, said, "Where do they get the right to preach to Israel?

European countries attacked Kosovo and killed ten thousand civilians. Ten thousand! And none of these countries had to suffer before that from a single rocket. I'm not saying it was wrong to intervene in Kosovo. But please: don't preach to us about the treatment of civilians." (Human Rights Watch estimated the number of civilians killed in the NATO bombing to be five hundred; the Yugoslav government put the number between twelve hundred and five thousand.)

Cheney's office supported the Israeli plan, as did Elliott Abrams, a deputy national-security adviser, according to several former and current officials. (A spokesman for the N.S.C. denied that Abrams had done so.) They believed that Israel should move quickly in its air war against Hezbollah. A former intelligence officer said, "We told Israel, 'Look, if you guys have to go, we're behind you all the way. But we think it should be sooner rather than later—the longer you wait, the less time we have to evaluate and plan for Iran before Bush gets out of office.' "

Cheney's point, the former senior intelligence official said, was "What if the Israelis execute their part of this first, and it's really successful? It'd be great. We can learn what to do in Iran by watching what the Israelis do in Lebanon."

The Pentagon consultant told me that intelligence about Hezbollah and Iran is being mishandled by the White House the same way intelligence had been when, in 2002 and early 2003, the Administration was making the case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. "The big complaint now in the intelligence community is that all of the important stuff is being sent directly to the top—at the insistence of the White House—and not being analyzed at all, or scarcely," he said. "It's an awful policy and violates all of the N.S.A.'s strictures, and if you complain about it you're out," he said. "Cheney had a strong hand in this."

The long-term Administration goal was to help set up a Sunni Arab coalition—including countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt—that would join the United States and Europe to pressure the ruling Shiite mullahs in Iran. "But the thought behind that plan was that Israel would defeat Hezbollah, not lose to it," the consultant with close ties to Israel said. Some officials in Cheney's office and at the N.S.C. had become convinced, on the basis of private talks, that those nations would moderate their public criticism of Israel and blame Hezbollah for creating the crisis that led to war. Although they did so at first, they shifted their position in the wake of public protests in their countries about the Israeli bombing. The White House was clearly disappointed when, late last month, Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, came to Washington and, at a meeting with Bush, called for the President to intervene immediately to end the war. The Washington Post reported that Washington had hoped to enlist moderate Arab states "in an effort to pressure Syria and Iran to rein in Hezbollah, but the Saudi move . . . seemed to cloud that initiative."

The surprising strength of Hezbollah's resistance, and its continuing ability to fire rockets into northern Israel in the face of the constant Israeli bombing, the Middle East expert told me, "is a massive setback for those in the White House who want to use force in Iran. And those who argue that the bombing will create internal dissent and revolt in Iran are also set back."

Nonetheless, some officers serving with the Joint Chiefs of Staff remain deeply concerned that the Administration will have a far more positive assessment of the air campaign than they should, the former senior intelligence official said. “There is no way that Rumsfeld and Cheney will draw the right conclusion about this,” he said. “When the smoke clears, they’ll say it was a success, and they’ll draw reinforcement for their plan to attack Iran.”

In the White House, especially in the Vice-President’s office, many officials believe that the military campaign against Hezbollah is working and should be carried forward. At the same time, the government consultant said, some policymakers in the Administration have concluded that the cost of the bombing to Lebanese society is too high. “They are telling Israel that it’s time to wind down the attacks on infrastructure.”

Similar divisions are emerging in Israel. David Siegel, the Israeli spokesman, said that his country’s leadership believed, as of early August, that the air war had been successful, and had destroyed more than seventy per cent of Hezbollah’s medium- and long-range-missile launching capacity. “The problem is short-range missiles, without launchers, that can be shot from civilian areas and homes,” Siegel told me. “The only way to resolve this is ground operations—which is why Israel would be forced to expand ground operations if the latest round of diplomacy doesn’t work.” Last week, however, there was evidence that the Israeli government was troubled by the progress of the war. In an unusual move, Major General Moshe Kaplinsky, Halutz’s deputy, was put in charge of the operation, supplanting Major General Udi Adam. The worry in Israel is that Nasrallah might escalate the crisis by firing missiles at Tel Aviv. “There is a big debate over how much damage Israel should inflict to prevent it,” the consultant said. “If Nasrallah hits Tel Aviv, what should Israel do? Its goal is to deter more attacks by telling Nasrallah that it will destroy his country if he doesn’t stop, and to remind the Arab world that Israel can set it back twenty years. We’re no longer playing by the same rules.”

A European intelligence officer told me, “The Israelis have been caught in a psychological trap. In earlier years, they had the belief that they could solve their problems with toughness. But now, with Islamic martyrdom, things have changed, and they need different answers. How do you scare people who love martyrdom?” The problem with trying to eliminate Hezbollah, the intelligence officer said, is the group’s ties to the Shiite population in southern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and Beirut’s southern suburbs, where it operates schools, hospitals, a radio station, and various charities.

A high-level American military planner told me, “We have a lot of vulnerability in the region, and we’ve talked about some of the effects of an Iranian or Hezbollah attack on the Saudi regime and on the oil infrastructure.” There is special concern inside the Pentagon, he added, about the oil-producing nations north of the Strait of Hormuz. “We have to anticipate the unintended consequences,” he told me. “Will we be able to absorb a barrel of oil at one hundred dollars? There is this almost comical thinking that you can do it all from the air, even when you’re up against an irregular enemy with a dug-in capability. You’re not going to be successful unless you have a ground presence, but the political leadership never considers the worst case. These guys only want to hear the best case.”

There is evidence that the Iranians were expecting the war against Hezbollah. Vali Nasr, an expert on Shiite Muslims and Iran, who is a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and also teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California, said, “Every negative American move against Hezbollah was seen by Iran as part of a larger campaign against it. And Iran began to prepare for the showdown by supplying more sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah—anti-ship and anti-tank missiles—and training its fighters in their use. And now Hezbollah is testing Iran’s new weapons. Iran sees the Bush Administration as trying to marginalize its regional role, so it fomented trouble.”

Nasr, an Iranian-American who recently published a study of the Sunni-Shiite divide, entitled “The Shia Revival,” also said that the Iranian leadership believes that Washington’s ultimate political goal is to get some international force to act as a buffer—to physically separate Syria and Lebanon in an effort to isolate and disarm Hezbollah, whose main supply route is through Syria. “Military action cannot bring about the desired political result,” Nasr said. The popularity of Iran’s President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a virulent critic of Israel, is greatest in his own country. If the U.S. were to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities, Nasr said, “you may end up turning Ahmadinejad into another Nasrallah—the rock star of the Arab street.”

Donald Rumsfeld, who is one of the Bush Administration’s most outspoken, and powerful, officials, has said very little publicly about the crisis in Lebanon. His relative quiet, compared to his aggressive visibility in the run-up to the Iraq war, has prompted a debate in Washington about where he stands on the issue.

Some current and former intelligence officials who were interviewed for this article believe that Rumsfeld disagrees with Bush and Cheney about the American role in the war between Israel and Hezbollah. The U.S. government consultant with close ties to Israel said that “there was a feeling that Rumsfeld was jaded in his approach to the Israeli war.” He added, “Air power and the use of a few Special Forces had worked in Afghanistan, and he tried to do it again in Iraq. It was the same idea, but it didn’t work. He thought that Hezbollah was too dug in and the Israeli attack plan would not work, and the last thing he wanted was another war on his shift that would put the American forces in Iraq in greater jeopardy.”

A Western diplomat said that he understood that Rumsfeld did not know all the intricacies of the war plan. “He is angry and worried about his troops” in Iraq, the diplomat said. Rumsfeld served in the White House during the last year of the war in Vietnam, from which American troops withdrew in 1975, “and he did not want to see something like this having an impact in Iraq.” Rumsfeld’s concern, the diplomat added, was that an expansion of the war into Iran could put the American troops in Iraq at greater risk of attacks by pro-Iranian Shiite militias.

At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on August 3rd, Rumsfeld was less than enthusiastic about the war’s implications for the American troops in Iraq. Asked whether the Administration was mindful of the war’s impact on Iraq, he testified that, in his meetings with Bush and Condoleezza Rice, “there is a sensitivity to the desire to not have our country or our interests or our forces put at greater risk as a result of

what's taking place between Israel and Hezbollah. . . . There are a variety of risks that we face in that region, and it's a difficult and delicate situation."

The Pentagon consultant dismissed talk of a split at the top of the Administration, however, and said simply, "Rummy is on the team. He'd love to see Hezbollah degraded, but he also is a voice for less bombing and more innovative Israeli ground operations." The former senior intelligence official similarly depicted Rumsfeld as being "delighted that Israel is our stalking horse."

There are also questions about the status of Condoleezza Rice. Her initial support for the Israeli air war against Hezbollah has reportedly been tempered by dismay at the effects of the attacks on Lebanon. The Pentagon consultant said that in early August she began privately "agitating" inside the Administration for permission to begin direct diplomatic talks with Syria—so far, without much success. Last week, the Times reported that Rice had directed an Embassy official in Damascus to meet with the Syrian foreign minister, though the meeting apparently yielded no results. The Times also reported that Rice viewed herself as "trying to be not only a peacemaker abroad but also a mediator among contending parties" within the Administration. The article pointed to a divide between career diplomats in the State Department and "conservatives in the government," including Cheney and Abrams, "who were pushing for strong American support for Israel."

The Western diplomat told me his embassy believes that Abrams has emerged as a key policymaker on Iran, and on the current Hezbollah-Israeli crisis, and that Rice's role has been relatively diminished. Rice did not want to make her most recent diplomatic trip to the Middle East, the diplomat said. "She only wanted to go if she thought there was a real chance to get a ceasefire."

Bush's strongest supporter in Europe continues to be British Prime Minister Tony Blair, but many in Blair's own Foreign Office, as a former diplomat said, believe that he has "gone out on a particular limb on this"—especially by accepting Bush's refusal to seek an immediate and total ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. "Blair stands alone on this," the former diplomat said. "He knows he's a lame duck who's on the way out, but he buys it"—the Bush policy. "He drinks the White House Kool-Aid as much as anybody in Washington." The crisis will really start at the end of August, the diplomat added, "when the Iranians"—under a United Nations deadline to stop uranium enrichment—"will say no."

Even those who continue to support Israel's war against Hezbollah agree that it is failing to achieve one of its main goals—to rally the Lebanese against Hezbollah. "Strategic bombing has been a failed military concept for ninety years, and yet air forces all over the world keep on doing it," John Arquilla, a defense analyst at the Naval Postgraduate School, told me. Arquilla has been campaigning for more than a decade, with growing success, to change the way America fights terrorism. "The warfare of today is not mass on mass," he said. "You have to hunt like a network to defeat a network. Israel focussed on bombing against Hezbollah, and, when that did not work, it became more aggressive on the ground. The definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result."