

Essay

# Israel: Must the Sword Devour Forever?

Friday 11 October 2024, by [ANZISKA Seth](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2024).

*An Israeli bomb dropped near the airport in southern Beirut, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. Sylvain Rostaing/Le Pictorium via Alamy*

**In June 1982**, Israel launched what it called “Operation Peace for Galilee” to target Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) militants in southern Lebanon who had been launching rockets at Israeli towns. While pledging this incursion would extend only 40 kilometers into the country, Israeli officials in fact intended to reach Beirut and “break the backbone of Palestinian nationalism” in Lebanon. Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon discussed how they might remake Lebanese internal politics in the midst of a wider civil war, propping up Maronite Christian rule and transforming the country into an ally. These ambitious plans were shared in advance with US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who gave the Israelis the go-ahead for a “limited operation”—or in Haig’s unnerving phrase, “a lobotomy.” Yet some US officials already saw the writing on the wall: Special envoy to the Middle East Philip C. Habib, who had attended an earlier meeting in Jerusalem about Israel’s plans, gave President Ronald Reagan and other senior officials a prescient warning about what would happen: “We were going to see American-made munitions being dropped from American-made aircraft over Lebanon, and civilians were going to be killed . . . and the United States—which didn’t look very good in the Middle East anyway at the time, for being so inactive—was going to take a full charge of blame,” Habib’s assistant later recalled in a ten-year retrospective on American involvement in Lebanon.

On June 7<sup>th</sup>, the day after the ground invasion and bombing campaign had begun, the Israeli military’s spokesman unit circulated an internal handbook of talking points to sell the war in foreign media. Its contents, released to me by the IDF military archive, echo through time with familiar justifications. “The terrorists position themselves among the civilian villagers and from there they depart on their terrorist missions,” the handbook noted. Three weeks later, as civilian casualties mounted and the international press began to take notice of the horrendous toll of the war—nearly 20,000 Lebanese and Palestinians would be killed by the end of the summer alone, the vast majority of them civilians—the spokesman’s office made efforts to downplay these figures. A section of the updated handbook entitled “Civilian Losses” said that casualties have been “grossly exaggerated in the media,” declaring that “the IDF took every precaution to avoid harm to civilians, despite the fact that the PLO had placed headquarters, arms depots and training bases within civilian areas.” As part of a longstanding pattern of projecting guilt outwards, officials declared that “the terrorists are responsible for any civilian casualties.”

Forty-two years later, the parallels hardly need to be spelled out. In a departure from the tit for tat violence that has animated the borderland since the aftermath of the October 7<sup>th</sup> attacks, Israeli forces have now unleashed a bombing campaign deep inside Lebanon, from the cities of Tyre and Saida, to the southern suburbs of Beirut, to the capital city’s core. Over 1,000 people were killed by the barrage of Israeli “precision” bombs supplied by the United States—at least 558 on September 23<sup>rd</sup> alone, the [highest single daily death toll](#) among Lebanese citizens since the country’s civil war. The hospitals are beyond capacity to treat the more than 6,000 wounded. Thousands more are sleeping in public parks and on the streets of the capital. Airstrikes on September 27<sup>th</sup> demolished

several residential buildings in Beirut, killing the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah. Telegraphing its aim to completely destroy Hezbollah infrastructure, Israel launched a ground invasion into the country overnight on September 30<sup>th</sup>, ordering the evacuation of villages in the south. Over one million people across the country have now been displaced from their homes. Still, Benjamin Netanyahu hawked his well-worn message of Israeli morality in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly last week. “We don’t want to see a single innocent person die!” he said, as hundreds of innocents were already being prepared for burial.

If both the flawed justifications for what is now unfolding—and their ghastly human toll—hold striking continuities with previous invasions, what has fallen away is even the slightest suggestion of any guardrails or restraint. Consider Reagan and Begin’s first private meeting at the White House on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1982, when the president singled out civilian casualties and stressed that the US could not offer unconditional support to a “military operation which was not clearly justified in the eyes of the international community,” telling the prime minister that “US influence in the Arab world, our ability to achieve our strategic objectives, has been seriously damaged by Israel’s actions.” Where in the past Israel had to at least keep up appearances with the US that its moves were made in the interest of furthering diplomatic aims, today it barely hides its contempt for the prospect of a political resolution to longstanding problems. Israeli officials proudly describe the state’s attacks as unilateral tactical necessities and revel in displays of brute force, while providing no semblance of a strategic endgame beyond Netanyahu’s [empty platitudes](#) of “total victory.” Hubristic fantasies to “[change the face of the Middle East](#)” abound, including zero-sum visions for permanent apartheid over Palestinians and a hegemonic regional role that could facilitate regime change in Iran—“strike the head of the octopus of terror,” in the words of former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

These delusions, bred in denial of the implications of a doctrine of force alone, are mirrored in wider Israeli society. Following Nasrallah’s assassination, Israeli newsrooms were pictures of untrammelled glee: The channel 12 journalist Amit Segal [cracked open](#) a bottle of arak on air to toast the occasion; on channel 14, the nightly panel included an [interlude](#) of song, dance, and flag-waving. Across the country, the Israeli government and its supporters basked in their triumph—the orgasmic climax of a frustrated 11-month war against Hamas. Clubgoers in Tel Aviv [danced](#) to the news in bars (“Yalla ya Nasrallah, We will fuck you Inshallah, We will return you to Allah, With all of Hezbollah”); the Ministry of Education called for official celebrations in schools around the country, encouraging gift giving among students and toasts in the teachers’ lounge. Netanyahu, almost universally despised by Israelis since the catastrophic intelligence failures of October 7<sup>th</sup>, has once again seen his popularity surge in the face of the army’s offensive.

In a context where violence has long replaced politics and diplomacy, Washington insiders have themselves presented Israel’s escalations as not merely logical, but *hopeful*—“a new day ahead for the Middle East,” according to a trio of State Department veterans [writing](#) in *Time*. The loss of civilian life goes unremarked, a strategic cost worth paying. In a [post](#) on X, Jared Kushner, a self-proclaimed regional expert “who has spent countless hours studying Hezbollah,” celebrated a Middle East at last ripe for Western interests—the agency of its real human inhabitants be damned: “The Middle East is too often a solid where little changes. Today, it is a liquid and the ability to reshape is unlimited.”

The current inhabitants of the White House appear to share this assessment. President Biden called Nasrallah’s extrajudicial killing “a measure of justice for his many victims”—a sentiment echoed by Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. The administration had [warned](#) against this same assassination effort last October, mindful of the danger to US personnel across the Middle East in the event of a regional war. Even the hawkish Reagan mustered the moral outrage to [phone up](#) Begin in 1982 and order an end to the bombing after seeing a burnt baby with its arms

blown off on television. Biden will do no such thing. Before Nasrallah's assassination, the president [mused](#) on the potential for an "all out war" in the Middle East, sounding more like a weatherman reporting scattered showers than a primary agent of such swelling catastrophe. Despite his lip service to the need for a ceasefire, he now proffers the green light either as a cynical political display of pre-election fealty to Israel or an enthusiastic vote of confidence in this deadly regional transformation. As *Politico* [reported, two leading figures](#) in the administration—presidential adviser Amos Hochstein and Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk—had already privately committed US support to Israel's escalation in Lebanon. Biden's diplomats at the UN likewise worked to [thwart](#) a joint French and British call for a ceasefire in Lebanon at the Security Council. (In this sordid midst, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [posted](#) a beaming photo of herself with Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, lauding the president's intention for "diplomacy [to] once again be at the center of our foreign policy" as a promise fulfilled.) Mid-level bureaucrats, too, have done their part. Mira K. Resnick, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Israeli and Palestinian Affairs at the State Department, has [smoothed the way](#) for the sale of weapons now being deployed in Lebanon, and—alongside US Ambassador to Israel Jack Lew—[ignored clear evidence](#) that Israel is blocking humanitarian aid to Gaza. These are just some of our modern-day merchants of death; they have nothing to offer us but more violence.

One would think that somewhere in the vast halls of the Pentagon there must be some genuine expertise and historical memory about the long-term impact of such an approach, given that the 1982 war helped fuel the emergence of Hezbollah and exerted a significant toll on American life and largesse. At the time, fierce internal debates over troop deployment and the nature of US involvement in the wake of Vietnam drove Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to develop a doctrine on the uses of military power so as not to get involved in wars with no end. Instead, we are now living in a world remade in the image of the cowboy. There are no adults left in the room to consider the consequences of such vigilante violence, that the excision of a leading figure in Shia and Lebanese politics—as detested as he may have been in some quarters given the many victims of Hezbollah over several decades—might engender long-term instability for the entire Middle East and well beyond its borders. If the ballistic missiles from Iran launched across Israeli cities on October 1<sup>st</sup> were not enough to prove that point, one need only to consider the "fight against Hamas" waged in Gaza over the last year to see that the analogous attempt to remove Hezbollah may well end with the leveling of entire countries.

Of course, this fact is not lost on the people of Lebanon or Syria or Yemen, as dread mounts across the Arab world and in its diaspora, dread that builds on a long-simmering rage in response to the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza. There is a gnawing and nightmarish sense that this latest war emerges as an extension of Gaza—its annihilatory model projected northward, even as the campaign in Gaza is itself an extension of Lebanese wars past. It was the Israeli veterans of these earlier incursions into Lebanon, in 1982 as well as 2006, who [warned](#) of the ethical morass of the state's evolving repertoires of violence. They have spread like a tumor: the saturation bombing of Beirut in 1982 deployed this year in Gaza City and Khan Younis, and now returned to Beirut. The "[Dahiye Doctrine](#)," a blueprint for the application of disproportionate force characterized by the razing of urban neighborhoods to pursue "terrorists" in every corner, was first honed in Lebanon in 2006—it takes its name from the southern suburbs of Beirut—but has since been perfected in Gaza. Lebanon appears as Gaza's prologue and epilogue—the proving ground for the destruction of city life, now a mounting repository of residential rubble where missiles have once again met their intended targets.

These wars have pushed the limits of international humanitarian law, creating dangerous new precedents. The violation of national sovereignty and territorial integrity is now an unremarkable phenomenon. Extrajudicial executions masquerading as targeted assassinations in densely populated neighborhoods claim large numbers of civilian lives, from Gaza's [Nuseirat](#) to Beirut's [Haret Hreik](#);

no one is held accountable. New, indiscriminate technologies of 21<sup>st</sup>-century warfare—from AI programs like [Lavender](#), which generate endless lists of targets by algorithm, to exploding pagers and walkie talkies, which turned alleged Hezbollah members at the pediatrician's office or the greengrocer into human grenades—continue to erase the distinction between combatant and civilian, an erosion of norms that even the permissive theorist of “just war doctrine” Michael Walzer [denounced](#) in the pages of *The New York Times*. The last 12 months may reflect a new chapter in Israeli warfare deployed against Palestinians and Lebanese, but they presage grotesque “innovations” coming to a theater near us all. What is normalized in wartime will shape our collective future.

The Jewish Israeli public does not care, consumed as it is by its totalizing narrative of victimization and its corollary of justified violence. Genocidal language and ideology now [run rampant](#), normalizing the abnormal for generations of young Israeli Jews, addled by an increasingly toxic culture of mass militarization. Yet given historical precedent, this display of force animated by hubris is unlikely to last. Decades of repeated efforts to destroy Palestinian political aspirations through recurring violence have not succeeded in stamping out the liberation struggle, nor has the Israeli army managed to contain Hezbollah absent a reckoning with Palestinian demands for self-determination. On the contrary, militant groups like Hezbollah and Hamas have emerged as byproducts of successive invasions; Israeli violence breeds military resistance like a “cure” producing the “disease.” These cyclical assaults—symptoms of the deferral of political processes in favor of military solutions—in fact diminish Israeli security and make the region and the wider world [less safe](#). But the lessons of the recent past of course go unheeded, as Israel once again talks of preservation through destruction.

This disastrous pattern raises a host of questions that Israel and its American enablers still refuse to confront. Has the sacrifice of the hostages in Gaza for the “destruction of Hamas” achieved any long-term goals toward peace or security? Will supposed “victory” over Hezbollah or Iran answer the Palestinian demand for freedom? When it comes to the conduct of modern warfare, if any action in Lebanon or Gaza is “justified” under the guise of security, what sort of moral red lines are being permanently destroyed? What does this mean for the international order and the right to sovereignty, let alone the fate of victims of the ongoing genocide? And what does it mean for how others in the region should fight? Are Palestinians and Lebanese likewise considered “justified” in responding to Israeli attacks without heed to the distinction between civilian and combatant? How many apartment buildings can be felled in pursuit of Israeli—or American—war criminals?

In pondering these questions, I am reminded of a line from the Book of Samuel, uttered amid brutal battle between the military commanders Avner and Yoav. “Must the sword devour forever?” Avner cries, pursued by Yoav's men even after his army's decimation. “You know how bitterly it's going to end!” That is the question that must be put to all supporters of Israel's unending violence. It also brings to mind the prophetic clarity of Tawfiq Ziad, the Palestinian revolutionary poet and activist who was a member of the Knesset during Begin's march to war in Lebanon. During an early debate over the government's intervention to destroy military installations on the border in May 1981, several opposition parliamentarians warned the prime minister that his aggressive stance was inviting disaster. Begin doubled down: “I will continue with this course. Neither you nor anyone else will teach me national responsibility. Be quiet.” “You want war,” Ziad told the Prime Minister. “You have already decided on war, on bloodshed.” Israel is now a rogue state consumed by a forever war—weak where it appears strong, and dragging a constellation of Western powers with it into a battle of folly. “They say that the most wretched dealer is the one who is addicted to his own drugs,” the Israeli political analyst Orly Noy [wrote](#) recently. “Israel has become addicted to the drug of death, which it has been forcefully injecting into Palestinians for years, and now is injecting itself unconsciously. The next dose will fix us for sure, just wait.”

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• Jewish Currents. October 2, 2024:

<https://jewishcurrents.org/must-the-sword-devour-forever>

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