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Analysis: Phase III - 'War of Destruction'

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Israel's war on Hizbullah has now entered phase III, or what could be called the final phase: to cause maximum damage before the UN Security Council resolution calling for a cessation of hostilities is passed.

Given what appears to be the lack of real military or rather militia targets, Israeli warplanes resumed their attack at the end of last week on a series of bridges north of Beirut, this time well inside the Christian hinterland. Maintaining his sense of humor, a Beirut resident e-mailed this correspondent the following message: "The Israelis are playing bridge," and he proceeded to list the bridges being bombed: "Halat, Maamalatein..." etc.

This war, yet unnamed, should be called the "War of Destruction." The name sounds prophetically close to a famous protest song from the 1960s, "Eve of Destruction," in which singer Barry McGuire laments the senseless slaughter as bodies float down the Jordan River. This time the bodies are in the Litani River.

To date nearly 1,000 Lebanese civilians have been killed by Israeli bombs; thousands more have been injured, many severely, and nearly 1 million people, mainly from the south and the southern suburbs of Beirut, have been rendered homeless. That is an astronomical number in a country of only 4 million people. By comparison, it would be the equivalent of 75 million Americans being forced to leave their homes. Hurricane Katrina forced the evacuation of roughly 1 million.

In retaliation, or maybe the bombing of the bridges was in retaliation - does it really matter anymore who 'retaliates' first? - Hizbullah fired more rockets into Israel. The death toll in Israel stands at 85, including some 43 soldiers.

Meanwhile, an entire country is being systematically destroyed as the world sits idly by, and politicians watch Lebanon burn. All that's missing are the lyres and the crowns of laurel. The fires are plentiful, compliments of the bombs. Lebanese police counted nearly 4,000 Israeli artillery shells being lobbed on the country just this past Saturday.

Noticeably missing is the sense of urgency in demanding an immediate ceasefire to stop the insanity. US President George W. Bush is on vacation in Crawford, Texas, where he will neither hear nor see the candlelight vigils by Lebanese women dressed in black and pacing outside the

White House.

Israel's justification for destroying the bridges in Lebanon is that they were used by Hizbullah to bring in ammunition from Syria, such as the thousands of rockets Hizbullah has fired at Israel since the start of war more than 27 days ago. So far, 71 bridges have been destroyed, according to the Lebanese government.

But as columnist Issa Goraieb points out in Beirut's French daily *L'Orient-Le-Jour*: "Since always, it's by using un-chartered back roads - the local Ho Chi Minh Trail, or as it was known here, the Arafat Trail - that transit on moonless nights all supplies destined for the guerrillas.

"The destruction of Lebanon's bridges," Goraieb writes, "was intended to further isolate individual Lebanese communities from each other."

Andrew Tabler, a fellow at the Institute of Current World Affairs and editor in chief of *Syria Today* magazine who has lived in Damascus for more than four years, believes Hizbullah could be re-supplied through "the smuggler's den that is the 375-kilometer-long (233-mile-long) Lebanese-Syrian frontier."

Israel claims to have destroyed 70 percent of Hizbullah's rockets and infrastructure. Still, the Shia militia does not seem deterred. On Sunday Hizbullah fired a salvo of 70 rockets almost simultaneously. One struck a staging point used by Israeli soldiers awaiting deployment near the town of Kefar Gil'adi, killing 12.

The cadence of Syrian- and Iranian-supplied rockets hitting northern towns in Israel will undoubtedly bring renewed ire from Israel. More bridges will be destroyed and more people will die. Does anyone care anymore? Consider what Gideon Levy wrote in the July 31st issue of *Ha'aretz*:

"The devastation we are sowing in Lebanon doesn't touch anyone here and most of it is not even shown to Israelis. Those who want to know what Tyre looks like now have to turn to foreign channels....

"Since we've grown accustomed to thinking collective punishment a legitimate weapon, it is no wonder no debate has sparked here over the cruel punishment of Lebanon for Hizbullah's actions. If it was okay in Nablus, why not Beirut?"

The writer goes on to say: "Lebanon, which has never fought Israel and has 40 daily newspapers, 42 colleges and universities and hundreds of different banks, is being destroyed by our planes and cannon and nobody is taking into account the amount of hatred we are sowing."

Yonah Alexander, a senior fellow and director at the International Center for Terrorism Studies, believes the war has guaranteed another three generations of terrorists.

"The massacre of some 37 Lebanese Shia civilians in the village of Qana will keep revenge seekers going for the next 100 years," says Alexander.

"Israel is badly stained, a moral stain that can't be easily and quickly removed. And only we don't want to see it," concludes Gideon Levy.

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