

**The Ethnic Logic of Israel's  
Foreign Policy:  
Implications for South Africa<sup>1</sup>**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: ISRAEL - AN ETHNIC REGIME IN CRISIS

Israel's bombardment of Lebanon, in July and August 2006, has generated a new security landscape in the Middle East. Due to the region's importance to world affairs, the war has also reshaped political and security conditions for the entire international community. Understanding Israel's motives for the attack is, therefore, essential to South African policymakers, who must assess prospects for South Africa's economic growth (related to oil supply and prices) as well as conditions shaping South Africa's future diplomacy, security policies related to the "war on terror", and international trade strategies. However, reasons commonly given for the attack, such as the cross-border incursion by Hizbullah forces on 12 July, fail accurately to appraise Israel's basic motives, which stem directly from its domestic ethnic agenda. Failing this assessment, efforts to find an appropriate and constructive foreign policy toward the region will be ineffectual.

Ironically, the South African government is uniquely qualified to appreciate the problems now crippling efforts at Middle East peace. The Zionist imperative to sustain a Jewish majority within Mandate Palestine has driven not only Israel's policies of ethnic cleansing (through war and occupation) but also its mission to eradicate Palestinian nationalism as a meaningful political force in order to preclude any capacity for Palestinian sovereignty within Mandate Palestine. This mission infuses Israel's foreign policy by logical extension. Just as apartheid South Africa was forced into acts of aggression in southern Africa to defend its domestic racist regime, Israel's domestic ethnic programme requires a regional strategy of belligerence to ensure its latitude to sustain it. Hence Israel's quest to maintain a Jewish majority domestic ethnic strategy will translate into policies of regional aggression, destabilizing to international security and trade, until it is abandoned.

So far, the international community has been politically incapable of bringing the necessary pressure on Israel to alter its domestic racial doctrines and practices. Yet South Africa's own diplomacy regarding Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, cannot evade the onus of action indefinitely. One reason is narrowly realist in nature: Israel's ethnic agenda will reproduce cycles of regional instability as long as it is allowed to endure, and South Africa – like all world states – is implicated in the dangerous consequences for world oil prices and onerous security regimes. But the problem also engages South Africa's own nationalist ethics and its identity in international affairs. Tacitly endorsing a doctrine of ethnic supremacy so closely resonant with apartheid South Africa, rather than insisting on its eradication, weakens South Africa's international profile as a moral authority and is, predictably, inspiring increasing domestic dissent.

This paper first assesses the international context generated by Israel's war in Lebanon within an international relations theoretical framework. The analysis draws partly on realist theory but also on constructivist theory, which permits a better appreciation of how Israel's identity politics, regarding Jewish statehood, informs its foreign policy. This argument is then supported by tracing how Israel's agenda to exclude non-Jewish residents of Mandate Palestine translated into a major military strike on Hizbullah. This analysis is extended to illuminate Israel's aggressive agenda regarding Iran. Parallels with South Africa's experience during apartheid and the transition to democracy are drawn, where useful, to illustrate the argument and to highlight the normative as well as realist motivations for a new South African foreign policy in the region.

## 2. BACKGROUND: IMPLICATIONS OF THE SIXTH ISRAELI-ARAB WAR

In July-August 2006, in a dramatic and unprecedented failure, Israel's sophisticated military - the fifth most powerful in the world - assaulted a neighbouring guerrilla group equipped with vastly inferior weaponry, yet failed either to defeat its enemy nor take any ground. Although Lebanon is in ruins, Israel is seen to have "lost". Hizbullah is seen to have "won" simply by blocking Israel's advance while sustaining its capacity to launch rockets at Israel's northern cities up to the last day of hostilities.

Normally, events of this magnitude create new diplomatic openings as well as new calculations of realist interests by all sides. Yet the precise direction of events remains unclear. A rational-realist analysis would expect Israel and the United States (US) to seek new alliances to strengthen their position: e.g., through multilateral approaches that can revitalize regional support for the "war on terror" and improve their regional image and influence. To do so, they would need to establish new "peace talks" that would provide at least ideological cover for Arab states to cooperate. Israel might also be expected to seek new talks with Hizbullah, perhaps through the Lebanese government, to reach agreements that would avoid such clashes in the future.

But such measures cannot be expected to alter Middle East security conditions in any meaningful way. As long as Israel's driving motivation in its attack on Lebanon remains unaltered, the likelihood of further aggression remains. As in South Africa, Israel's domestic policy of racial exclusion is leading logically to state aggression. This fusion of domestic and foreign policy logics has steered the now-exhausted Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian "peace processes" and will continue to block meaningful progress until the domestic portion of the equation is resolved.

### 2.1. A brief diplomatic history

A brief summary of the diplomatic history will capture the present dilemma. From 1948 to 1988, a comprehensive regional peace agreement was stalled by Israel's insistence on a one-state solution - i.e., full Israeli sovereignty over Mandate Palestine - in which the Palestinians had no place. After 1989, the Oslo process suggested a two-state solution, on the premise that Israel must remain a Jewish state while the Palestinians must establish a secular-democratic state. Since the Oslo II Accords were signed in 1995, however, the scale of Israel's military repression has greatly intensified, socio-economic conditions for Palestinians have disintegrated, and the grid of Jewish settlements in the West Bank has doubled in population and geographic scope. Today, proposals to revive the peace process cannot attract interest from a disillusioned international community, sufficient to launch it. The conflict at the heart of Middle East peace and stability remains stalemated - "in formaldehyde," as one Israeli government official put it.<sup>2</sup>

This unending failure has inspired numerous erroneous explanations. One error is to attribute the Israeli-Arab conflict to primordial ethnic hatreds or a cultural clash: e.g., Arab anti-Jewish prejudice, Jewish anti-Arab racism, Islamic "rage", or an East-West "clash of civilizations". In a variation of this error, the conflict is traced to vague aggregate political ideologies such as "aggression" and "expansionism" by Israel, and "radicalization" or "Islamofascism" among Arab and

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, Dov Weisglass (then advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon), *Ha'aretz*, 8 October 2004.

Muslim publics. Another error is to attribute the conflict to Israel's occupation of Palestinian land. In this view, calls for "ending the occupation" understand Israeli withdrawal in terms suggested by the Oslo process and the Bush administration's "Road Map": a two-state solution. This solution would grant to Israel the unique privilege of sustaining an openly ethnic nationalist doctrine and legal system in exchange for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

South Africa's system of apartheid suggests two major flaws in this thinking. First, apartheid did not arise from, and was not sustained by, primordial hatreds. Rather, like any racial formation, it arose as a system of juridical and social discrimination designed to consolidate wealth and power to the dominant group - i.e., white society. Underlying the development of apartheid laws, however, was a deeper conundrum facing all modern nation-states. As in Palestine today, the conflict in South Africa reflected the impossibility of making an ethnic or racial nation congruent with a modern state's territorial boundaries. From that dilemma, other social factors - like racialised identities and mutual demonisation - emerge or are imagined into existence to serve state power and majority ethnic or racial rule. From the perceived imperative to sustain the ethnic/racial nation against threats to its "character" (white or Jewish), the state is led to characteristic responses such as militarized domestic security and regional aggression.

Second, diverting South Africa from the path of white supremacy could not be accomplished by territorial partition (Bantustans). It required discrediting the very premise of white rule, in order to unravel the racist logic that generated unjust laws and repression. Similarly, even if it were still possible (which, I argue elsewhere, it is not), Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip cannot neutralize its enmity with Hizbullah and normalize its relations in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Rather, a stable peace in Israel-Palestine requires that the international community confront the founding logic of Israel's belligerent foreign policy: the Zionist doctrine to sustain a Jewish-ethnic majority within Israel's territory. So far, the international community has proved unwilling to tackle this "third rail" of Middle East politics. But until that doctrine is addressed, none of its spin-off effects, including Israel's military ambitions in Lebanon and Iran, can be addressed effectively either.

Insisting that conflict resolution in Lebanon must confront Israel's commitment to Jewish statehood might seem counterproductive. The purpose here is not to engage in moral or ideological contest, but to illuminate how Israel's foreign policy derives from its identity politics. Realist and rational-choice theory assume that material benefits (power, wealth) ultimately drive state behaviour in international relations. This lens brings focus to our attention on Israel's desire to eliminate Hizbullah's capacity to attack it over its northern border or its need for security guarantees before it agrees to peace talks with the Palestinian Authority. However, a constructivist approach allows us to consider how a national-identity discourse informs Israeli state conceptions of the national interest and, in turn, foreign policy.

In Israel, the paramount mission of preserving Israel as a "Jewish state" - understood to necessitate a Jewish majority within the state's territory - shapes Israel's regional strategy regarding land, water, sovereignty, and security in ways that authorize or even mandate the aggressive tenets of its foreign policy. The parallels to South Africa's confrontation with the frontline states are

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<sup>3</sup> My analysis of why we cannot anticipate Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories is detailed in chapters two and three of *The One-State Solution* (2005).

obvious: domestic ethnic oppression translates directly into the need to control - or, preferably, eradicate - any opposition from outside its borders that strengthens domestic opposition. (The comparison to South Africa also highlights the ultimate futility of this effort.) Understanding Israel's domestic ethnic agenda is, therefore, integral to understanding the foreign policies that logically derive from it.

### 3. ISRAEL AS ANACHRONISM: RACIAL NATIONALISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Often treated as *sui generis*, deriving from the unique experience of Jews in Europe and especially the Holocaust, Israel's ethnic nationalism - expressed partly in its militant commitment to sustaining a Jewish-ethnic majority in the country - is actually an anachronism, tracing to the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Equating ethnicity (then understood as race) with nationhood was universal to nationalist ideologies during that period, as the new "nation-state" concept and the racial pseudo-sciences intersected to propose an organic (racial, cultural, and spiritual) quality to nations. Drawing on European racial pseudo-sciences that propounded the importance of racial purity, nation-builders also believed that ethnic or racial homogeneity was essential to healthy and viable nation- and state-building. This premise led state-builders globally to seek various coercive methods, whether assimilationist, ethnocidal, or genocidal, to achieve such homogeneity on whatever terms made local social and political sense. For Zionist architects like Ben Gurion, this imperative was understood both to necessitate and legitimate ethnic cleansing: i.e., expulsion of the non-Jewish Arab population from their cities and villages in what became Israel, and then refusal to allow the refugees to return.<sup>5</sup>

Of relevance now is that, for the international community, the horrors of Nazi and Japanese racial nationalisms thoroughly discredited the ethno-racial premise for nationhood, even as it stoked Zionist commitment to it. Today, legalized discrimination is abjured (or concealed) as violating norms of racial and ethnic inclusivity and non-discrimination. While nationalist narratives typically sustain ethnic *mytho-moteurs*, and immigration quotas and citizenship criteria may sustain open or concealed ethnic bias, the tension with secular liberal democracy or over-arching ideologies like Islam, requires that laws and formal policies affirm the juridical equality of all citizens within the state.<sup>6</sup>

Israeli law and Zionist discourse are therefore unique in continuing openly to laud and defend the state's founding Jewish-ethnic premise with full early-twentieth-century ardour. One manifestation of this ardour is the complex of laws that confirm Jewish-national advantage and a Jewish majority in the country. Another is the ubiquitous debate within Israel about the so-called *demographic threat*: the possibility that Arabs may someday constitute a majority in Israel and vote Jewish statehood - i.e., the body of laws that secures Jewish-ethnic privilege in Israel - out of existence. Since Jewish-ethnic statehood and "Israel" are considered the same thing in Zionist discourse, this "threat" is perceived as a threat to Israel's "survival". This rhetorical twist converts easily, for propaganda

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<sup>4</sup> Zionism is a complicated doctrine with many internal currents, some of which have contradictory implications for land policy and governance, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this article: see bibliography and discussion in the author's *The One-State Solution* (2005), 131-182.

<sup>5</sup> On these logics, see especially Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> On ethno-nationalist *mytho-moteurs*, see Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Blackwell, 1986).

purposes and within the psychology of many Zionists, into equating full non-racial democracy in Israel with physical Jewish-Israeli extermination.

Cynical or not, the Israeli government has translated this equation into a realist imperative for Israel's foreign policy: that Israel's *security*, in a military-strategic sense, requires a regional environment that secures its latitude to pursue whatever domestic policies are deemed necessary to sustain the state's Jewish "character". From a theoretical perspective, the case is absorbing: although many states express domestic anxieties about the national character through policies like immigration quotas and naturalization law, no other state defends an agenda of domestic ethnic engineering to the point of regional war-making. From a humanitarian perspective, and for those concerned with its implications for international stability, Israel's demographic imperative is alarming. The precise link between that imperative and Israel's foreign policy in Lebanon is traced in the next section.

#### 4. CONNECTING POLICY TO PRACTICE

Israel's demographic imperative shapes its policies regarding the territory under its control. About 4.5 million Palestinians now live inside the boundaries of Mandate Palestine, which holds about the same number of Jews.

##### 4.1. The democratic threat

Averting the demographic threat necessitates Israel's full control and ultimately, cantonization of historic Palestine into ethnic enclaves. As some land-for-peace agreement will be fundamental to any general peace agreement, Israel must postpone such an agreement until cantonization can be completed and "facts on the ground" (settlements and the Wall) dictate a territorial division that preserves its Jewish majority. This, in turn, requires sustaining a climate of hostilities that, domestically (and for successive US governments), legitimizes the absence or failure of talks. Still, Israel's strategy regarding the land and people has seen several shifts of direction and has been transformed yet again by the war with Hizbullah.

Within Israel, debates have indeed been continual about what policies will best avert the demographic threat. Some leftist-liberal thought has held that the best means is to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and consolidate Israel's permanent borders within the 1948 boundaries, which would secure a roughly 75-percent Jewish majority within Israel.<sup>7</sup> However, this plan has run afoul of several currents of Zionist thought (religious, secular-nationalist, and security-focused), which view withdrawal from the West Bank as an anathema. Assembled into a "neo-Zionist" alliance, these currents have dominated Israeli policy by steering its retention of the West Bank, including Greater Jerusalem, while excluding its Arab population.<sup>8</sup> (Withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 is consistent with this policy because the Strip lacks the West Bank's ideological significance to Israel and because the Jewish population there was very small.)

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<sup>7</sup> The last Israeli census found that 19.5 percent of Israelis were Arab. Another 4 percent were non-Jewish and non-Arab. Studies of the one-million Russian immigrants suggest that as many as 70 percent may be non-Jewish. If just half (about 500,000) are non-Jewish, then the non-Jewish population of Israel is closer to 35 percent.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of these alliances in neo-Zionist politics, see especially Uri Ram, "From Nation-State to Nation-----State" (2003) and Ilan Pappé, "The Square Circle: The Struggle for Survival of Traditional Zionism".

Here Israel's 'solution' to the demographic threat between 1948 and 1989 was a one-state solution: to retain all the land while excluding Palestinians politically and suppressing their economic development, in the expectation that they would eventually emigrate. This strategy has, of course, demonstrably failed. After 1990, the means was a two-state solution, suggested (although not specified) by the Oslo Accords, in which Palestinians would form a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Always a chimera, popular belief in the two-state option collapsed under the weight of settlement expansion and the renewed Palestinian resistance that it triggered.

## 4.2. The convergence plan

Israel's *convergence* plan was the third, unilateralist alternative, formalized by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and connected to his Kadima Party. This plan was to aggregate the smaller outlying West Bank settlements into a few large settlement blocs that would cut across the West Bank highlands, retain the entire Jordan Valley (except for an enclave around Jericho), and allow autonomous Palestinian governance in the remaining highland enclaves and the Gaza Strip.

The plan was premised on the assumption that sealing 3.5 million Palestinians behind the "security barrier" (Wall) in disarticulated chunks of territory called a "state" would satisfy Palestinian political aspirations and allow Israelis to live peacefully within settlement cities annexed to Israel, such as Ariel and Ma'ale Adumim. The Wall would then prevent the two populations from mixing and so permit Israel to remain "Jewish and democratic". On the other side of the Wall, Palestinians were expected eventually to normalize their society, economy and politics, probably by reorienting these toward Jordan. Demographic separation would be ensured by watch towers and electronic surveillance, for which Palestinian authorities would also be held responsible.

## 4.3. Hizbullah

Removing or neutralizing Hizbullah became integral to the convergence plan as it became plain to Israel's leadership that it could not be implemented without violent repression of the Palestinians, who are losing land, livelihoods, and social cohesion to it and therefore continue to resist it. A general collaboration is one problem: Hizbullah and Hamas routinely share intelligence and resources. Although direct aid from Hizbullah inside the Palestinian territories is limited, it still provides crucial support, frustrating Israel's attempts to strangle Hamas financially. Hizbullah is also positioned to lob Katyushas and larger missiles at Israel as conditions in the Palestinian territories deteriorate. Although for the past decade this threat has been latent (Hizbullah has restrained its attacks to retaliating against Israeli incursions into Lebanon), Hizbullah's capture of two Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2006 was suggestive of this solidarity. The Gaza Strip had then been under several weeks of a concerted Israeli attack, which included the destruction of Gaza's only power plant, and was intended to terminate the ineffectual but (for Israelis) demoralizing stream of home-made Hamas missiles regularly lobbed from northern Gaza into Israel's southern communities. Some reports have confirmed an agreement between Hamas and Hizbullah to "warm up" the northern border and take pressure off Hamas (the scale of Israel's response was clearly not anticipated).<sup>9</sup> A truly free hand for Israel regarding its occupation policy, therefore, requires that Hizbullah's capacity to attack Israel be eliminated.

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<sup>9</sup> The Bush administration's strategy regarding Lebanon is detailed in Seymour Hersh (2006b).

However, the second factor was far more important for the Israeli government: Hizbullah's demonstration effect. Jewish-Israeli support for the convergence plan relied on public belief that a unilateral "sacrifice" of West Bank territory would ultimately result in a stable peace. Hizbullah's capacity to launch rockets into Israel raised the spectre that some Hizbullah-like resistance force would also take shape in Palestinian areas of a partly evacuated West Bank.

Jewish-Israeli faith in the convergence plan was already imperilled by the aftermath of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. Most Jewish Israelis had seen Israel's withdrawal of its Gaza settlements as a similar "sacrifice", justified only by the promise of peace. But Israel retained control of Gaza's borders and cut off both trade and monetary transfers, generated prison-like conditions in which Palestinian social conditions deteriorated rapidly and Palestinian resistance continued. Among other measures, Hamas militants regularly fired primitive rockets from the Gaza Strip into proximate Israeli towns. Ineffectual in damaging Israel directly, these symbolic attacks nevertheless indicated that unilateral withdrawal from ghettoized territories would not pacify Palestinian militancy. Hence, Israel began to prepare its attack on Hizbullah as much as a year before the border incident provided a pretext.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, the convergence plan - considered vital to Israel's goal of averting the demographic threat - also necessitated Israel's attack on Hizbullah. Hence Israeli's failure to eliminate Hizbullah spelled the ruin of the convergence plan. On the same grounds, however, it also discredited leftist arguments for withdrawing from the West Bank completely. The only remaining option is for Israel to retain all the land of Mandate Palestine, while excluding the Palestinian residents from citizenship. The Wall is designed to keep Jewish and Arab populations apart. But how Israel will contain Palestinian unrest and resistance to this entrapment, in the present mosaic of West Bank Jewish and Arab cities and towns, remains unfathomable.

#### 4.4. The Connection to Iran

Israel's demographic policy informs a second and much more dangerous project: to attack Iran. The US and Israel have been planning to attack Iran, and seeking political cover for doing so, for the past year.<sup>11</sup> US interests in this plot are mixed. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein and dissolution of Iraq's army, Iran has emerged as the sole regional power capable of contesting unfettered US hegemony in the world's richest oil region. The US, therefore, seeks regime change in Iran for classic realist reasons. Installing a pro-western Iranian government is also a long-standing goal for neoconservatives in the Bush administration, whose vision of a "new Middle East" is informed by a conflation of corporate interests, imperialist militarism, Zionism, and recidivist nineteenth-century notions that the US must play a vanguard role in the West's anti-Muslim civilizing mission.<sup>12</sup> For the past two years the White House has been consulting with Pentagon and Air Force advisors about how to destroy Iran's

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<sup>10</sup> Early reports were revealed by Kelman (2006) and substantiated by Hersh (2006b).

<sup>11</sup> Some administration officials have urged this attack since the 1990s; Israeli planners have urged this since the 1980s. See discussion in Tilley (2005), 111-113.

<sup>12</sup> The nature of this worldview is suggested by President Bush's fondness for biographies about Theodore Roosevelt, who presided over the US imperialist expansion into Latin America and the Philippines. It is also articulated by Daniel Pipes, principal intellectual architect of the neocon lens on the Middle East.

nuclear facilities, partly in the belief that such a strike would trigger domestic outrage, revolution, and ascension of a pro-western regime.<sup>13</sup>

For the Israeli government, Iran is the primary supporter (in arms, training, and some finances) of Hizbullah and Hamas. Moreover, if Iran develops a nuclear weapon, it would present a rival to Israel's present uncontested military hegemony in the Middle East. Iran also runs its supply lines through Syria, the only frontline state not to have made peace with Israel, constituting a geopolitical "arc" of anti-Israeli networks.<sup>14</sup> Installing a pro-western regime in Iran would eradicate this arc, allowing Israel to pursue regime change in Syria as well. Iran is, therefore, the last linchpin for Israeli and US plans to consolidate a uniformly compliant Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

A unilateral or "pre-emptive" attack on Iran requires a compelling reason, however, as the UN Charter limits such attacks to conditions of "imminent threat". For the past year, the US and Israel have been attempting to whip up the necessary security profile through a disinformation campaign which has exaggerated intelligence about Iran's intentions and capacity to develop nuclear weapons. The US has already successfully pushed the Security Council to pass a resolution calling on Iran to abandon its uranium enrichment programme (on the apparent expectation that Iran will refuse to do so). A second tactic has been to disseminate mistranslations of President Ahmadinejad's speeches that falsely cast him as openly threatening to "destroy Israel" or "wipe Israel off the map".<sup>16</sup> Coupled with the nuclear scare, these statements are argued to signify an imminent nuclear attack on Israel. The diplomatic and disinformation campaigns signal that, while using the UN mantle of legitimacy to lay the groundwork, the US is planning a unilateral strike that will, in fact, violate the UN Charter.

(Although not our focus here, we may note briefly that Ahmadinejad's statements have actually indicated a desire for - or even just a fatalistic expectation of - regime change in Israel, not plans for a military attack. However, the fusion noted above - of Jewish statehood and Israel's material survival - serves Israeli propagandists, as they can argue that destroying Israel's "occupation regime" equates with "destroying Israel". In fact, Iran could not attack Israel with any kind of weapons without devastating retaliation, since Israel has several hundred nuclear bombs, so the effort would be suicidal. Israeli and US propagandists attempt to counter this obvious impediment by arguing that 'Islamofascism' is steered by an irrational hatred of western culture and Jews, and so is immune to normal realist logics).<sup>17</sup>

Eliminating Hizbullah became essential to this US-Israeli plot in several ways. First, any US attack on Iran is likely to trigger an attack by Hizbullah on Israel's northern cities. Second, the Bush administration has needed to convince US generals that an air strike will be effective. The US Air Force has run scenarios of various bombing strategies (including, at White House request, a nuclear option), but Pentagon generals have remained sceptical. Israel's bombing campaign therefore offered

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<sup>13</sup> Seymour Hersh (2006a) provides the most recent interviews on this question.

<sup>14</sup> 'Blair Warns of 'Arc of Extremism'', BBC News website, 2 August 2006: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/5236862.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/5236862.stm).

<sup>15</sup> This argument traces from Vladimir Jabotinsky, whose writings were very influential for Ariel Sharon and the line of political leaders that created the Likud Party: see Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, op cit.

<sup>16</sup> See my 'Putting Words in Ahmadinejad's Mouth', Counterpunch (28 August 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Numerous White House statements have reiterated this argument: see, e.g., The White House, "President Bush and Secretary of State Rice Discuss the Middle East Crisis".

a dry run or “demo” regarding the military technology. US Vice President Cheney's office especially hoped that Israel's attack on Lebanon would demonstrate that an attack on Iran would be effective.<sup>18</sup>

Eradicating Hezbollah's military capacity is even more important if Israel itself attacks Iran. Striking Iran is difficult for the US to do directly, as its occupation forces in Iraq would be vulnerable to the impassioned anti-US (and anti-British) guerrilla campaign that would immediately erupt.<sup>19</sup> Hence the US and Israel might already have agreed that the Israeli Air Force should strike Iran instead. This effort would require collaboration already indicated in recent events, noted above: first, through a favourable Security Council resolution, and second, by fostering international belief that Iran is threatening a direct attack on Israel. Hence the Israeli government may claim the right of self-defence in taking unilateral pre-emptive action against an “imminent threat” by a state already declared to be in breach of UN directives. Israel has certainly been preparing for this option. In recent years, Israel has purchased thousands of new “bunker-busting” missiles, a fleet of new F-16 fighter jets, and five leading-edge German Dolphin submarines— i.e., the appropriate weaponry for striking Iran's nuclear installations and deterring its retaliation. In 2005, the *Times of London* reported that Israel had constructed a mock-up of Iran's Natanz facility in the desert and was conducting practice bombing raids.<sup>20</sup> In recent months, Israeli officials have openly stated that if the UN fails to take action, Israel will bomb Iran.

Hezbollah's successful resistance, therefore, has seriously impeded US and Israeli plans regarding Iran. First, it has discredited White House arguments that the US Air Force will be successful, using similar tactics and weaponry, in destroying Iran's vastly larger and deeper nuclear complexes. The failed air campaign also demonstrated the need for a corollary land invasion, which Pentagon generals would never approve (knowing the impressive scale of Iranian military ground capacity). Israel's flank remains vulnerable to retaliation by Iran's regional ally, making it dangerous for Israel to attack Iran. By galvanizing collective Lebanese loathing for Israel, the failed air campaign further demolished arguments by the Bush administration that a military assault on Iran will trigger an internal coup or revolution and install a pro-western “democratic” government. In short, Hezbollah's successful resistance has damaged Israeli and neoconservative hopes to create a “new Middle East” uniformly vulnerable to US and Israeli military prerogatives.

Still, this dilemma only raises the stakes. With the costs of occupation rising and repression of Palestinian resistance becoming increasingly more difficult, and the Bush administration losing standing in US polls, Israel's urgent need to accomplish the regional agenda that will secure Jewish statehood is cresting.

## 5. CONCLUSION

For the past five decades, the international community has sought peace in the Middle East through a myriad of UN resolutions and successions of peace talks, yet has failed to make any meaningful progress. The Palestinian problem continues to plague the region, by fostering popular outrage,

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<sup>18</sup> See Seymour Hersh (2006b).

<sup>19</sup> Informed Comment, 14 August 2006: available at <http://www.juancole.com/2006/08/israel-kills-38-civilians-on-eve-of.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See Mahnaima (2006).

aggravating tendencies toward militarism and extremist politics, confusing domestic efforts at democratization (and so helping to prop up unrepresentative and corrupt regimes) and stalling much-needed institutional reforms essential to economic development. At this writing, this long-standing conflict is intersecting with a burgeoning civil war in Iraq, where regional refugee flows and expanding insurgency and terrorism networks are connecting ideologically and logistically to the Palestinian struggle. For the international community, the urgency of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has never been greater.

Israel's own foreign policy is an intrinsic component of this unrest, driving six wars since the country's founding and now its aggressive posture toward Iran. At this writing, the international community has been enlisted afresh to solve these conflicts: the first, through Resolution 1701; and the second, through an assortment of measures toward containing Iran's nuclear energy program. Yet these responses address the symptoms of the problem, not its cause. Israel continues to argue that its geostrategy is entirely defensive: that it seeks merely to fend off Arab and Muslim threats stemming from hostility to western culture and/or the Jewish-national presence. Yet this paper has demonstrated that threats to Israel, while genuine, actually derive from Israel's own domestic ethnic agenda. The problem is not merely that the Arab and Muslim worlds are deeply offended by Israeli occupation policies. Rather, Israel's domestic demographic imperative – to preserve an overwhelming Jewish majority – requires it to attack its neighbours in order to preserve its domestic prerogatives regarding demography, land partition, and related repression of Palestinian resistance.

South Africa's experience of apartheid suggests a possible future trajectory for Israel. For both apartheid regimes, frontline states became havens and staging grounds for organized resistance. At first, both believed they could suppress this resistance through occasional military incursions, political assassinations, and surrogate guerrilla forces: e.g., UNITA in Angola, RENAMO in Mozambique, and the Israeli-supported Southern Lebanese Army (dismantled only in 2000, when Israel withdrew). Eventually, such tactics became exhausted as resistance movements found new sources of support and surrogate forces stalled because of their lack of domestic legitimacy. In Israel, as in apartheid South Africa, a pivotal military failure has now triggered sharp internal bickering in government, while costs mount.

The South Africa comparison also fails, however, in several respects. Most obviously, apartheid South Africa did not have the unqualified support of a global superpower to provide major military and economic subsidies as well as staunch diplomatic cover. Also, Israel does not have the racially mixed economy of apartheid South Africa, where white dependence on black labour leveraged compromises that led to democracy. (Israel indeed has sought to avoid the South African "trap" of democracy by expelling Palestinian labourers, a measure that has greatly aggravated Palestinian poverty but has helped to sustain the illusion that demographic mixture can be permanently averted.) Especially, unlike the PLO, the ANC never capitulated to the government's demand that it accept the Bantustans and assume the task of policing the black population into obedience to government dictates. An artefact of the Oslo Accord II, the "Palestinian Interim Governing Authority" now comprises a quisling agency whose mandate forestalls any redirection of Palestinian national strategy toward endorsing a shared state.

However, these differences do not change the basic problem for Israel: that ethnic statehood, being intrinsically unstable, shapes Israel's future just as certainly as it forced South Africa's

transition to democracy. But they do reduce the likelihood that Jewish Israelis can collectively face the need to democratize without a profound change in their immediate conditions. The only stable outcome for any racially mixed society is democracy, but this does not signify a peaceful transition. Resisting democratization may inspire Israel to seek drastic alternative strategies, such as ethnic cleansing. Yet such extreme measures always entail human rights abuses and, in the Middle East, would so seriously destabilize the already volatile region that they cannot be tolerated. The question then - for South Africa as for the entire international community - is not whether but *how* the political will and capacity to confront Israel's commitment to apartheid can be gathered. If that effort fails, all other efforts will only contribute to possible catastrophe.

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