

Arab League offers its services to Washington in Lebanon crisis

By Rick Kelly
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The Israeli assault on Lebanon has again demonstrated the perfidious role of the Arab bourgeoisie and the prostration of the Arab League before the US and Israel. As the Zionist state has killed hundreds of Lebanese civilians and driven a million others from their homes, the Arab League's overriding priority has been to head off and defuse opposition to the war from the masses of the Middle East.

The organisation held its first meeting to discuss the Lebanon crisis on August 7 in Beirut—almost a month after Israel began its bombardment. Following Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Seniora's condemnation of Israeli war crimes in his country, the Arab League decided to send a delegation to the UN Security Council, comprised of the League's Secretary-General Amr Moussa, United Arab Emirates' foreign minister, Sheikh Abdullah al-Nahayan, and his Qatari counterpart Sheikh Hamad al-Thani.

The delegation addressed the UN Security Council on Tuesday, and criticised the US-French sponsored draft ceasefire resolution for failing to call for an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and for disregarding the demands of the Lebanese government. "If we adopt a resolution without fully considering the reality of Lebanon we will face a civil war and, instead of helping Lebanon, we will destroy Lebanon," al-Thani warned.

The Arab League's castigation of the Security Council was thoroughly dishonest. Member states, including Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, had initially calculated that a short Israeli offensive in Lebanon could work in their favour by reducing Hezbollah's influence and bolstering their own regional position relative to their rivals in Iran and Syria. They condemned Hezbollah's "adventurism" for initiating the war. Only when it became clear that Hezbollah would not be destroyed in a quick Israeli operation and its resistance was engendering a wave of sympathy throughout the region did the Arab regimes call for a ceasefire.

Even then, the Arab League refused to mount any challenge to Israel and the US. "In a parallel political show, Arab officials, at the highest level, were again privately and publicly blaming Hezbollah for Lebanon's misery," *Al*

Ahram reported from the meeting in Beirut. "We were again affirming their utter opposition to suspending, much less severing, diplomatic ties with Israel or to block oil exports to the West."

The Arab League's intervention at the UN was essentially aimed at assisting the Bush administration's efforts to win support for its proposed ceasefire resolution. The first draft presented by the US and France met with outrage in Lebanon and the Arab world. By making minor modifications, the Bush administration hoped to secure the acquiescence of the Lebanese government and allow for the possible inclusion of Arab troops in the proposed multinational force that would act as a US-Israeli proxy army in southern Lebanon.

Not surprisingly, John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN, welcomed the Arab League's initiative. "I thought if representatives of the Arab League wanted to address the Council it was perfectly appropriate to have them do that and obviously we want to listen to everyone's views," he declared. "And if they think it's important enough to come to New York, then it's important enough for us to listen."

All the essential elements of its first draft will be retained. The Security Council resolution will reduce Lebanon to the status of a semi-colonial US-Israeli protectorate and pave the way for further Israeli aggression. The so-called ceasefire will be in accordance with the criminal character of the war itself, which began when Israel seized upon Hezbollah's capture of two of its soldiers in early July. The ongoing bombardment is aimed at annihilating Lebanon and suppressing all anti-Israeli resistance in the country.

At every stage of the present crisis, Washington has encouraged the Zionist state to step up its military operations. The US views the conflict as part of a wider regional confrontation with Syria and Iran, which is bound up with American imperialism's increasingly reckless drive to dominate the Middle East and control its oil reserves.

None of these issues can be openly acknowledged by the various Arab regimes. Even while the Arab League denounced the Security Council for not calling for an

immediate ceasefire, it said nothing about why this was the case—i.e., because the US has repeatedly blocked demands for a ceasefire. While critical of Israel, the Arab League representatives have made no reference to the criminal role of the Bush administration.

A number of dictatorial governments in the region are in the direct pay of US imperialism, and are dependent on US aid for their ongoing survival. Egypt, for example, receives economic and military aid worth almost \$2 billion every year from Washington. The fortunes of other regimes are inextricably tied to continuing US economic and military domination of the Middle East. Syria and Iran have also made clear that, like Libya, they are eager to come to terms with American imperialism, given the right conditions.

At the same time, all these regimes confront explosive political unrest at home over deteriorating living standards and their anti-democratic methods of rule. The Arab League's actions are driven by the pervasive fear in Arab ruling circles that popular outrage over the Lebanon war could be the catalyst for open revolt. However, the Arab League's manoeuvring is unlikely to appease anyone. Even sections of the heavily-censored Arab media have been critical of its role.

“What is the point of keeping the Arab League when it failed to even hold a high level meeting to discuss a major aggression and total destruction of a member state?” wrote Hasan Abu Nimah in an op-ed piece in the *Jordan Times* on Wednesday. “What is the meaning of the Arab Common Defence Pact when Arab leaders rushed to declare their opposition to risking their own tranquillity by helping other Arab countries under attack? It is an utter shame that the Arab foreign ministers waited for nearly a month before agreeing to meet in Beirut, the capital of a besieged and destroyed Lebanon, to offer support. What kind of ‘support’ is that after so much destruction? What dignity and honour do they have, when their journey could only be possible with permission from Israel, which controls the skies over Lebanon?”

Protestors against the Lebanon war are openly contemptuously of the role of Arab governments. On August 5, the *Guardian* described the situation in Egypt. “The anger in Egypt ranges across the spectrum from the Muslim Brotherhood—which has offered to ‘send immediately 10,000 mujahideen to fight the Zionists alongside Hezbollah’—to business associations. Chambers of commerce and trade unions have organised gala dinners to raise money for war victims and the two mobile operators, MobiNil and Vodafone, have set up a premium-rate hotline whose profits are sent to Lebanon.”

Crowds at one Cairo demonstration chanted: “Egypt! Jordan! Saudi Arabia! [Hezbollah leader Hasan] Nasrallah

has bested you all!” A banner read: “Arab majesties, excellencies and highnesses, we spit on you”.

Demonstrations in Egypt, Jordan, and other countries have condemned government corruption and mounting poverty and inequality. “Domestic issues like the recent surge in commodity prices, corruption, inheritance of power, and the escape of Al-Salam ferry [which sank in February, killing 1,000 people] owner featured prominently,” *Al Ahram Weekly* reported. “The wave of high prices due to the rising price of petrol drew harsh criticism from demonstrators. ‘Neither the World Bank nor the CIA will control us,’ the clamorous crowd yelled.”

State repression has been stepped up in some countries. Riot police have been deployed on numerous occasions in Egypt and many demonstrators have been assaulted and arrested by state security. Authorities in Saudi Arabia have rounded up at least seven protest leaders. In recent weeks, thousands of Shiites, the minority sect in the kingdom, have demonstrated against the Israeli offensive in Lebanon, in defiance of a national ban on public protest.

A number of commentators in the Middle East have warned their governments that such repression may no longer be sufficient to keep a lid on popular hostility. “There is a surging tide of bitterness and alienation,” Khaled Almaena, editor of the Saudi Arabian-based *Arab News*, told the *Guardian*. “It is not simply because of Lebanon, but Lebanon may be the straw which breaks the camel’s back... The Arab world has changed. It has a new breed of young people [who] will not put up with the same old status quo.”

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