

Israel, Hezbollah, and the US – and smoke and mirrors at the New York Times



by Lev Tsitrin

“The Intelligence business is a “wilderness of mirrors.”” G. Murphy Donovan recently [informed us](#) on these pages. I wonder whether the same is true of the press leaks, for I cannot understand why the [New York Times published a story](#) on “The effort by top American officials to head off an Israeli offensive on Hezbollah ... [which] reveals anxieties by the Biden administration over the war planning of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his aides, even as the two governments

strive to present a strong united front in public.”

One goal of preventing a conflagration on Israel’s border with Lebanon where Hezbollah operates is rather obvious: the US already has its hands full supplying munitions to Ukraine; so now that it has to replenish Israeli arsenal too, it would like to reduce Israel’s needs to an absolute minimum. Hence, the smaller the fire, the better. And the task is not as simple as it seems – while it was naturally assumed that it was Hezbollah that was spoiling for a fight with Israel at the time Israel was busy clearing Hamas out of Gaza (and hoping to prevent this outcome by opening a second front) – a threat that was to be taken care of by deploying a US aircraft carrier that was already in the Mediterranean to the Lebanon coast as a gesture of deterrence to Hezbollah, and sending another one to reinforce that message, it looks as if the other side is ready for action, too: Israeli military establishment apparently wanted to seize the moment to cripple Hezbollah with a preemptive strike – an idea which Netanyahu has vetoed.

So why report on this internal debate, if the threat of such strike is over?

The goals seem complicated. To judge by the report. It almost seems as if the Biden administration, for its own geopolitical reasons and to curry favor with the Arabs, is trying to restrain Israel from acting decisively in Gaza, and to this end uses the threat posed by Hezbollah (“anxieties still persist over two possibilities: an Israeli overreaction to Hezbollah rocket attacks, and harsh Israeli tactics in an expected ground offensive against Hamas in Gaza that would compel Hezbollah to enter the war”) – and is taken aback by Israel’s willingness to take on Hezbollah, since this lack of fear neutralizes Biden’s argument. Hence, the decision to make the disagreement public, in the hope that this will raise pressure on Israel.

The other possibility is, that this is a message to Hezbollah: if it hopes to restrain Israeli action in Gaza by the threat of opening a second front – well, the Israelis won't be deterred and are quite willing to give back in spades, so it is better not to try.

And there might be a message in this to Palestinians and the Arab countries – the message that America has the interests of Palestinian people at heart and is therefore restraining Israel's action in Gaza by using Hezbollah for, in essence, blackmail.

Be it as it may, I am confused. May be this is the exact point of publishing those leaks – to make heads spin, and not know what to think – and do? Is it to make Hezbollah nervous about an Israeli attack, so it abandons a thought of going on an attack of its own? Is it to make Israel go slow on its Gaza offensive? Is it to make Arabs love America instead of hating her? Or is it all of the above?

A “wilderness of mirrors,” indeed...