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The War of Lies

By Uri Avnery

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Thirty years ago this week, the Israeli army crossed into Lebanon and started the stupidest war in Israel's history. It lasted for 18 years. About 1,500 Israeli soldiers and untold numbers of Lebanese and Palestinians were killed.

Almost all wars are based on lies. Lies are considered legitimate instruments of war. Lebanon War I (as it was later called) was a glorious example.

From beginning to end (if it has ended yet) it was a war of deceit and deception, falsehoods, and fabrications.

The lies started with the official name: "Operation Peace in Galilee."

If one asks Israelis now, 99.99% of them will say with all sincerity: "We had no choice. They launched Katyushas at the Galilee from Lebanon every day. We had to stop them." TV anchormen and anchorwomen, as well as former cabinet ministers, have been repeating this throughout the week. Quite sincerely. Even people who were already adults at the time.

The simple fact is that for 11 months before the war, not a single shot was fired across the Israeli-Lebanese border. A ceasefire was in force, and the Palestinians on the other side of the

border kept it scrupulously. To everybody's surprise, Yasser Arafat succeeded in imposing it on all the radical Palestinian factions, too.

At the end of May, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon met with Secretary of State Alexander Haig in Washington, D.C. He asked for American agreement to invade Lebanon. Haig said that the U.S. could not allow it, unless there were a clear and internationally recognized provocation.

And lo and behold, the provocation was provided at once. Abu Nidal, the anti-Arafat and anti-PLO master terrorist, sent his own cousin to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London, who was grievously wounded.

In retaliation, Israel bombed Beirut and the Palestinians fired back, as expected. The prime minister, Menachem Begin, allowed Sharon to invade Lebanese territory up to 25 miles "to put the Galilee settlements out of reach of the Katyushas."

When one of the intelligence chiefs told Begin at the cabinet meeting that Abu Nidal's organization was not a member of the PLO, Begin famously answered: "They are all PLO."

Gen. Matti Peled, my political associate at the time, firmly believed that Abu Nidal had acted as an agent of Sharon. So do all the Palestinians I know.

The lie "they shot at us every day" has taken such a hold on the public mind that it is nowadays useless to dispute it. It is an illuminating example of how a myth can take possession of the public mind, including even of people who had seen with their own eyes that the opposite was true.

Nine months before the war, Sharon told me about his plan for a New Middle East.

I was writing a long biographical article about him with his cooperation. He believed in my journalistic integrity, so he told me his plan "off the record" and allowed me to publish it — but without quoting him. So I did.

Sharon had a dangerous mental mixture: a primitive mind unsullied by any knowledge of (non-Jewish) history, and a fatal craving for "grand designs." He despised all politicians — including Begin — as little people devoid of vision and imagination.

His design for the region, as told me then (and which I published nine months before the war), was:

1. To attack Lebanon and install a Christian dictator who would serve Israel.
2. Drive the Syrians out of Lebanon.
3. Drive the Palestinians out of Lebanon into Syria, from where they would then be pushed by the Syrians into Jordan.

4. Get the Palestinians to carry out a revolution in Jordan, kick out King Hussein, and turn Jordan into a Palestinian state.
5. Set up a functional arrangement under which the Palestinian state (in Jordan) would share power in the West Bank with Israel.

Being a single-minded operator, Sharon convinced Begin to start the war, telling him that the sole aim was to push the PLO 25 miles back. He then installed Bashir Gemayel as the dictator of Lebanon. Then he let the Christian Phalangists carry out the massacre in Sabra and Shatila in order to terrify the Palestinians into fleeing to Syria.

The results of the war were the opposite of his expectations. Bashir was killed by the Syrians, and his brother, who was then elected by Israeli guns, was an ineffective weakling. The Syrians strengthened their hold over Lebanon. The horrible massacre did not induce the Palestinians to flee. They stayed put. Hussein remained on his throne. Jordan did not become Palestine. Arafat and his armed men were evacuated to Tunis, where they won impressive political victories, were recognized as the “sole representative of the Palestinian people,” and eventually returned to Palestine.

The military plan went awry right from the beginning, no less than the political one. Since the war was celebrated in Israel as a glorious military victory, no military lessons were drawn from it — so that Lebanon War II, some 24 years later, was an even greater military disaster.

The simple fact is that in 1982, no unit of the army reached its goal at all, or certainly not on time. Valiant Palestinian resistance in Sidon (Saida) held the army up, and Beirut was still out of reach when a ceasefire was declared. Sharon simply broke it, and only then did his troops succeed in encircling the city and entering its Eastern part.

Contrary to his promise to Begin (repeated to me at the time by a very senior coalition partner), Sharon attacked the Syrian army in order to reach and cut the Beirut-Damascus road. The Israeli units on that front never reached the vital road, and instead suffered a resounding defeat at Sultan Yacoub.

No wonder. The chief of staff was Rafael Eitan, called Raful. He was appointed by Sharon's predecessor, Ezer Weizman. At the time, I asked Weizman why he had appointed such a complete fool. His typical answer: “I have enough IQ for the two of us. He will execute my orders.” But Weizman resigned and Raful remained.

One of the most significant and lasting results of Lebanon War I concerns the Shi'ites.

From 1949 to 1970, the Lebanese border was the quietest of all our borders. People crossed by mistake and were returned home. It was commonly said that “Lebanon will be the second Arab state to make peace with Israel,” not daring to be the first.

The mostly Shi'ite population on the other side of the border was then the most downtrodden and powerless of Lebanon's diverse ethnic-religious communities. When King Hussein, with the help of Israel, drove the PLO forces out of Jordan in the "Black September" of 1970, the Palestinians established themselves in South Lebanon and became the rulers of the border region, which was soon known in Israel as "Fatahland."

The Shi'ite population did not like their overbearing new Palestinian lords, who were Sunnis. When Sharon's troops entered the area, they were actually received with rice and candies. (I saw it with my own eyes.) The Shi'ites, not knowing Israel, believed that their liberators would drive the Palestinians out and go home.

It did not take them long to perceive their mistake. They then started a guerrilla war, for which the Israeli army was quite unprepared. The Shi'ite mice quickly turned into Shi'ite lions. Faced with their guerrillas, the Israeli government decided to leave Beirut and much of South Lebanon, holding on to a "security zone," which duly became a guerrilla battleground. The moderate Shi'ites were replaced by a much more radical new Hezbollah ("Party of God"), which eventually became the main political and military force in all of Lebanon.

To stop them, Israel assassinated their leader, Abbas al-Musawi, who was promptly replaced by a vastly more talented assistant — Hassan Nasrallah. At the same time, Sharon's clones in Washington started a war that destroyed Iraq, the historic Arab bulwark against Iran. A new axis of Shi'ite Iraq, Hezbollah, and Alawite Syria became a dominant fact. (The Alawites, who rule Assad's Syria, are a kind of Shi'ite. Their name derives from Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, whose descendents were rejected by the Sunnis and accepted by the Shi'ites.)

If Sharon were to wake up from the coma that has been his lot for the last six years, he would be shocked by this result — the only practical one — of his Lebanon War.

One of the victims of the war was Menachem Begin. Many legends have been woven around his memory, blowing it out of all proportion.

Begin had many excellent qualities. He was a man of principle, honesty, and personal courage. He was also a great orator in the European tradition, able to sway the emotions of his audience.

But Begin was a very mediocre thinker, completely devoid of original thought. His mentor, Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, treated him with disdain. In his way, he was quite naive. He let himself be easily misled by Sharon. Being single-mindedly devoted to defeating the Palestinians and extending the rule of the "Jewish" state to all of historical Palestine, he did not really care about Lebanon, Sinai, or the Golan.

His behavior during the Lebanon War bordered on the ridiculous. He visited the troops and asked questions that became the butt of jokes among the soldiers. In retrospect, one wonders whether by that time he was already mentally affected. Soon after the Sabra and Shatila massacre, which

shocked him to the core, he retreated into deep depression, which lasted until his death 10 years later.

The moral of the story, relevant today as ever: Any fool can start a war; only a very wise person can prevent one.