

Extraordinary Precision: The Logic of Israel's War on Civilians

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A Sky News newscaster, interviewing British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett on Sunday, July 30 demanded an answer to this paraphrased question: if indeed Israel had precise intelligence that a Hezbollah operative was present in the village of Qana, in South Lebanon, how could it possibly fail to realize that the area was also crowded with civilians?

The question was prompted by Beckett's insistence that while Israeli attacks that victimize uncountable civilians — like that in Qana which killed scores, mostly children — were “appalling”, they resulted from tactical errors, and were never deliberate. In fact, she referred to the “apparent deliberate targeting” — as described by UN secretary Kofi Annan — of the UN peacekeepers compound in South Lebanon and the killing of four unarmed observers, as a “mistake.” e

In effect, Israel is hardly accused — at least in the Western narrative of the Middle East crisis, as exemplified in media coverage and political discourse — of deliberately targeting civilians, even among those who are daring enough to describe Israel's response to Hezbollah's “provocation” — the capturing of two Israeli soldiers on July 12 — as “disproportionate.”

Israel often acknowledges — with “regret” — the high civilian tolls of its war; sometimes it goes as far as apologizing for such unintended “mistakes.” The Israeli government however is adamant that it will continue to carry out such attacks; that it's those who “hide among the civilian population” which deserve the blame, not Israel; that neither Hezbollah nor Palestinian resistance groups seem to care much for the life of Israeli civilians, while Israel does care for Palestinian and Lebanese civilians. In fact, and ironically, according to various Israeli politicians and media pundits, one of Israel's objectives is to liberate its neighbors from the suffocating grip of terrorists. An objective journalist is expected to highlight both narratives, without pointing out the fallacies of one or the other.

Such “objectivity” has served Israel well, since facts on the ground are hardly consistent with its claims.

For example, out of nearly 4,000 Palestinians killed during the Second Palestinian Uprising — in the last 5 years — the overwhelming majority have been civilians, many of whom are children. Such figures are also mirrored in much of the damage inflicted by Israel's military machine against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories: the great majority of the wounded, the destroyed infrastructure, the confiscated land, the razed orchards, the bulldozed homes, etc, have been overwhelmingly civilian. Wednesday, July 26, was hardly a diversion from that norm, as 29 Palestinian civilians, many of whom were children as young as a few

months old, were killed in northern Gaza, all in the span of 24 hours.

As of today, including the Qana onslaught, the number of Lebanese civilians confirmed dead has crossed the 750 mark; more than one third of them are children, according to UN counts. Likewise, the destroyed Lebanese infrastructure, not only in Hezbollah's strongholds in the south, but across Lebanon were built primarily for the benefit of the civilian population.

The handy excuse that Hezbollah and Hamas fighters launch their rockets at Israel from civilian areas, no longer suffices. There is yet to be one shred of evidence, one video or bit of satellite footage — at least in the ongoing war in Lebanon — that confirms such an allegation. In fact, it seems imprudent for Hezbollah's fighters to expose their operations to Israel's informers, while they can safely fire from the numerous orchards dotting the south region and quickly redeploy elsewhere.

Concurrently, the "unintended mistakes" theory, promulgated by Israel's apologists — read the Bush Administration, among others — is utterly inconsistent with claims promoted by Israel and its apologists that Israel is the "most moral army in the world", and that Israel uses the most advanced war technology to avoid harming civilians.

These allegations cannot all be accurate, all at once. If Israel is indeed very "moral", then why does its army continue to repeat the same "unintended mistakes", over and over again, for decades? Is it possible that the killing and wounding of tens of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians as a result of those "unintended mistakes" didn't induce a very moral army to reexamine its tactics and adopt a decisive change in military policy?

Wouldn't that be the "moral" thing to do? (Note that the small village of Qana was bombed by the Israeli air force in 1996, as civilians were seeking shelter in a UN compound, killing over 100 people, including many children and UN peacekeepers.)

The second claim, that Israel strives to obtain high-tech (American) weapon technology to minimize civilian casualties, is also fraudulent. Once again, the numbers indicate the precise antithesis; denoting that either the "fifth strongest army in the world" is so horribly inept, that most of its military strikes result in blunders, or that the killing of civilians is in reality part and parcel of Israel's military strategy. This latter assertion, in my opinion, is the true objective; but why?

Israeli officials may parrot to the media that Hezbollah (like Hamas) is an outsider force that holds no legal legitimacy, and that its true strength arises from its terrorist links to Iran and Syria. Conversely, Israeli conduct on the ground gives evidence to a different conviction: punishing the true party — ordinary Lebanese — that provide Hezbollah with the needed support to sustain such costly military confrontations with Israel, or ordinary Palestinians who elected Hamas to power.

Both Hezbollah and Hamas are homegrown; there should be little contention over this. But they cannot be scrutinized divorced from their immediate surroundings: Hezbollah emerged as a result of Israel's frequent bloodbaths in Lebanon and its members are comprised primarily of victims of Israel's past wars, while Hamas sprung from Palestinian refugee camps in the Occupied Territories and has been sustained with the support of the poorest segments of the population.

Whatever strategic alliance they hold outside — Iran, Syria or whomever else that is willing to acknowledge their right to fight Israel — is out of a desperate need for a safe haven, financial assistance and a political platform.

Israel knows well that “destroying” Hezbollah and Hamas is a losing battle — they’ve tried this time and again, and have failed with each attempt. What is needed now is a concerted effort to deprive the leadership of these movements with the popular support that placed Hamas at the helm of the Palestinian political equation and elected Hezbollah to the Lebanese parliament.

The Israeli tactics, however, are reaping a conflicting outcome, as both Hezbollah and Hamas are emerging more powerful than ever before, widely viewed as the only defenders of Lebanon and Palestine, as conventional Arab governments have finally declared, and without reservation, their military impotence and political bankruptcy.

Regardless of its media utterances, Israel has committed yet another colossal strategic error, comparable in magnitude and consequence to the American debacle in Iraq. Indeed, both governments are fighting two impossible wars, where civilians are killed with extraordinary “precision.”

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