

Lebanon and Gaza: The Politics of Proportionality

Israel used the capturing of 3 Israeli soldiers as a pretext to wage a larger war

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Global Research, July 19, 2006

19 July 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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For many Americans, the recent assault on Gaza and Lebanon makes perfect sense. Two attacks on Israeli soldiers by groups in Gaza and Lebanon, and the subsequent capture of three Israeli prisoners, were “unspeakable provocations,” but a sordid feeling overcomes all those who have been closely watching the events unfold in the Occupied Territories and Lebanon. The Israeli government, reinforced by American steadfastness and the international community’s capitulation, set the rules for the one-sided catastrophe. Israel can freely pound Gaza, batter south Lebanon, and hammer Beirut, but if Hezbollah, Hamas, Fatah or any other Palestinian or Lebanese civilian lifts a finger to defend themselves or their country against Israeli military aggression, it is tantamount to crimes against humanity.

The “reaction” against Hezbollah and Hamas has involved an intense bombing campaign—targeting civilian infrastructure and the innocent population. In the past six days, more than 230 Lebanese have perished at the hands of Israeli forces, nearly all of whom were civilians. The scene in Gaza is equally bleak. Since the start of the month, the Israeli Occupation Force (IOF) killed nearly 100 Palestinians. The damage in Lebanon is already estimated to be in the billions—a staggering sum for a nation with a 2005 Gross Domestic Product of 20 billion dollars. The economic blockade imposed on the Occupied Territories has driven up the rates of poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment.

Israel used the capturing of the three Israeli prisoners as a pretext to wage a larger war on the inhabitants of the Occupied Territories and Lebanon. Still bitter about Hezbollah forcefully driving the Israeli military out of south Lebanon in 2000 and emboldened by Hamas’ election sweep in January, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reaffirmed that Israelis “will not be held hostage to terror.” But Israelis, as Olmert maintains, “will fight with all the strength we are capable of,” which includes the use of terrorism against civilian populations. At no point is it appropriate for a United Nation’s member state, a signatory to the Geneva Conventions, and a self-proclaimed “moral democracy” to act in this manner.

Suppose Israel didn’t occupy the Shebaa Farms and it didn’t frequently incite and intimidate the Lebanese population with military operations, sonic booms, border attacks, and the abduction of Lebanese civilians: Israel’s recent attacks would still constitute war crimes. Under no circumstance is a nation allowed to attack another sovereign nation’s civilian population with the use of physical force, economic strangulation and collective punishment due to a “provocation” caused by a non-government entity—particularly when the aggressor state is accusing other nations of orchestrating the attacks. While 23 members of Hezbollah are representatives in the Lebanese parliament, Hezbollah is not the Lebanese government, nor does Israel claim it to be. Furthermore, many critics are condemning Israel for its

“disproportionate use of force.” While many of these critics astutely recognize the brutality inherent in Israel’s offensive, it is necessary to note that proportionality does not apply to the endangering of civilian life and the collective punishment of the civilian population; civilians must *never* be targeted.

Some Israelis now fear the bombing of Lebanon will have an adverse effect on the public relations of Israel. Their concern is valid. Just as the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut was a moral stain on the Israeli state, the image of innocent dead Lebanese on the front page of the New York Times and TV clips of bloodied women and children being carried away on stretchers is having a significant impact on American society. The American mind has become accustomed to witnessing scenes of Israelis running for cover, but now the images are of Lebanese—Arabs—and Americans are finding themselves coming to the same horrific conclusion: *this is wrong*. The first sign of American disapproval came a few weeks ago when the US media aired a video which showed a little girl on a Gaza beach hysterically searching for her family after an Israeli attack. American minds will start to change if they are consistently exposed to the atrocities inflicted upon the Palestinian and Lebanese people. This is Israel’s greatest fear. Israel’s force is maximized by its ability to constantly buttress the notion that it is a nation of victims. The longer Israel indiscriminately attacks Lebanon—the further support for Israel will wane. This is not to infer, however, that the US media is providing equal coverage of the conflict now consuming Lebanon. Yet, these glimpses into the suffering of populations that the American mind has been trained into believing as foreign, as non-human, and as the “enemy,” provides a possibility for change.

Although European support for the Palestinian people is overstated in America, Europeans tend to be more understanding of Arab issues, given their large Arab and Muslim populations. Furthermore, many European media outlets are more balanced in their coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the greater Arab/Israeli conflict than the outlets in the US. Nevertheless, an unbiased picture of the conflict in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories has yet to emerge in the Western press. Some European leaders have been outspoken in their criticism for Israel’s “disproportional force” against Lebanon. Their diplomatic effectiveness, however, has been hindered by the US administration’s unwavering support for the state of Israel.

Over the last few weeks, a number of protests condemning Israel’s assault on Gaza have induced many Arab-Americans and supporters of human rights to come out of the woodwork. On July 18, more than a thousand people came out to protest Israel’s destruction of Lebanon and the Occupied Territories at the Israeli Mission to the UN, dwarfing the previous protests.

In the US, the sense of outrage from the Lebanese and Arab community has been unlike anything I’ve ever seen. People are angry, disgusted, and enraged by these recent events. Over time, many Arab-Americans became desensitized to the violence engulfing Iraq and the Occupied Territories. The events in Lebanon, however, have politically energized many Arab-Americans generally disinterested in the “politics” of the Middle East. A few reasons may attribute to this. First, the US is home to a large Lebanese population. 25,000 Lebanese-Americans, currently under siege in Lebanon, have yet to be evacuated from the nation. Second, in the minds of many Arab-Americans, Beirut—once considered the “Paris of the Middle East”—was nearing that status again. Third, many Lebanese and Arab-Americans I’ve spoken with were stunned by what’s seen as an attack on the Lebanese government, the indiscriminate bombing of Beirut, the striking of both Christian and Muslim

neighborhoods and interests, and the expansive attack on the civilian population and infrastructure. Many Lebanese believed that after a 15 year civil war, the calming of inter-religious tensions, and an end to the Israeli occupation, that they were on a better footing. Yes, governmental corruption consumed the state, the economy was in tatters, and political unrest still existed, but the Israeli incursion that started last week was simply a hit they couldn't afford to take.

Israel lost its moral compass through its creation. The "disproportional use of force" against the indigenous civilian population of Palestine has been its cardinal sin. The firm policy of keeping an ethnic Jewish majority through means of violence and might is a cancer that will always plague the state. Today, the majority of the Israeli population is rallying around Olmert and Israel's absolute right to "defend" itself. This tends to be the case when Israel is engaging in a military offensive. The US population has not always been as supportive of its government's use of military force. Americans eventually turned on the war in Vietnam; many are now turning on the war in Iraq. Just as most Americans understood that Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the massacres in Haditha, and the recent raping of the 14-year-old Iraqi girl by US soldiers were wrong, they immediately realized that the attacks on the innocent people of Lebanon were deplorable. It is too soon to tell how strongly this will affect the American outlook, but one can only hope that it produces a change of unprecedented proportions.

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