

Why do they hate us? Listen to Qana (again)

Will these attacks wake up the Western publics to stop their leaders engineering a global war?

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Global Research, July 31, 2006

31 July 2006

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The crowds in Beirut last year demanding a Cedar Revolution, “the first shoots of democracy” supposedly planted by the United States, are a distant memory. Yesterday we saw in their place the fury of Lebanon directed against the capital’s United Nations building — an early “birth pang” in Condoleeza Rice’s new Middle East.

If Israel wanted to widen its war, it could not have chosen a better way to achieve it than by sending its war planes back to the mixed Muslim and Christian village of Qana in south Lebanon to massacre civilians there, as if marking a morbid anniversary. A decade ago, Israeli shelling on the village killed more than 100 Lebanese civilians sheltering in a local UN post.

To the Lebanese, and most in the Arab world, the United Nations now symbolises everything that is corrupt about the international community and its “conscience”. The world body, it has become clearer by the day, is a mere plaything of the United States and, by default, of Israel too. It is nothing more than a talking shop, one so enfeebled that it lacks the moral backbone even to denounce unequivocally the murder of four of its unarmed observers by the Israeli army last week. How can Lebanon expect protection for its civilians from an international body as emasculated as this?

The rage we saw directed against the United Nations building in Beirut, as if we needed reminding, will be converted in time into more violence against the West, to more 9/11s and to more London and Madrid bombings. Will these attacks wake up the slumbering Western publics to stop their leaders engineering a global war, or will more of us simply be persuaded that the Arab world is fundamentally irrational and savage?

Why do they hate us? Qana provides the answers but it appears few in the West are really listening.

All morning when Arab channels were showing the crushed building in Qana, and the Red Crescent workers extracting from under it more than 60 bodies, mostly children, embalmed in blood and dust, Israel was showing family movies on its main television networks.

Foreign channels were hardly better. It is in the first responses of the Western broadcasters — before they have had time to hone and polish their scripts and cover all the bases — that their partisan agenda is at its most transparent. So all morning their attention was directed less at the new Qana massacre than at the destruction of the UN building in Beirut, as though it was our last rampart against the rampaging hordes of Islam. In this framing of the

world, our provocative acts appear so much less significant than the mystifying response, the Other's delusional anger.

Noticeably, our news anchors were careful to avoid referring to the massacre of Lebanese children at Qana as "an escalation" by Israel. That word, intoned so solemnly when eight Israeli railway workers were killed by a Hizbullah rocket in Haifa a fortnight ago, was not uttered on this occasion. According to our media, when we suffer, it is an escalation demanding retaliation; when they suffer, maybe it is time to begin talks about talks about a ceasefire.

BBC World's presenter in Beirut, Lyse Doucet, personifies this moral blindness. She chided Lebanese speaker after speaker for the crowds attacking the UN building. "Why are they doing this when the UN is trying to broker a ceasefire?" she demanded in bafflement of each. The headlines at 11am GMT even began with her quoting an expression of regret she had extracted from a Hizbullah MP for the attack on the Beirut building, as though amid all that morning's carnage the destruction of UN property was the real issue.

This presumably is what our media mean when they talk about "balance".

Jim Muir, the BBC's fine reporter in Tyre, observed in the same broadcast that it was non-combatants who were paying the price in this war, and that the majority of the dead on both sides were civilian. Where did he get that idea? In Israel, the great majority of dead are soldiers, but you would hardly know it listening to our media. In the same spirit, Jonathan Charles in Haifa observed that it had been "a difficult day" for both countries, adding — in case we could not fathom what he meant — that Israel had faced a hard day on the diplomatic front. What lengths our broadcasters must go to to remain even-handed when we massacre innocence.

Israel, as usual, can be relied on to defend the indefensible. A government spokeswoman told the BBC in another easy-ride interview that the army would never target an area if it knew Lebanese civilians were there. Then she performed a somersault of logic several times by arguing in her country's defence that the army knows Hizbullah hides behind civilians. If she is right, then even as the pilot fired on the Hizbullah fighters he assumed were inside the building he knew civilians would pay the price too. But, of course, Hizbullah fighters were not in the building.

This endless sophistry is designed to lull us into acquiescence. Only vigilance keeps us asking the right questions. How, for example, after its reconnaissance planes and spy drones have been hovering over south Lebanon for the best part of three weeks, was Israel not aware that hundreds of civilians were still in Qana? But no one raised that question.

Cut through the apology, both from Israel and our media, and the aerial strike on Qana looks, at the very best interpretation, recklessly ambivalent about the likely civilian death toll. A cynic might go further. Was the attack meant as a warning to other civilians still in south Lebanon to get out — and fast? After its clear failure to win a conventional war, does the Israeli army want a freer hand to begin the job of incinerating Hizbullah, using its cluster and incendiary bombs, the Middle East's napalm? Was the answer to be found in the statement of Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, yesterday that, generously, he was giving civilians 24 hours safe passage to get out of the south.

Or was the massacre crafted as punishment for Qana's villagers, for those living among

Hizbullah, for those who are related to Hizbullah, for those who believe that Hizbullah is their best hope of preventing another Israeli occupation? Did Israel's Justice Minister Haim Ramon not make precisely this point last week when he announced in a cabinet meeting: "Everyone in southern Lebanon is a terrorist and is connected to Hizbollah."?

Moshe Marzouk, a former senior Israeli army officer who has turned his hand to being a "counter-terrorism expert" in one of the country's leading academic institutions, told the American Jewish weekly *The Forward* that one of Israel's goal in this war is to teach Lebanon's Shiite community that it will pay a tremendous price for Hizbullah's actions. Maybe Qana was part of the price he was talking about.

Israel offers a second excuse for the massacre: it says it dropped leaflets on Qana warning civilians to leave the area. Again, our cynic could point out that those leaflets were dropped 10 days ago, as they were across most of south Lebanon. Qana had no reason to expect worse than anywhere else — and possibly it expected better, assuming that Israel would not dare to stage a war crime here for a second time after it troops massacred more than 100 civilians in 1996.

Our cynic could also note that Israel has bombed the escape roads from the south and is shooting at anything that moves on what is left of them. And he could point out that many of Qana's families have no cars to leave in, that they can find no petrol to fill the cars that remain after Israel bombed all the petrol stations, and that in any case they have nowhere else to go.

Though these things are all true, they distract us from the real issue: that Israel has no right to empty south Lebanon of its population, to make a million people homeless, just because its leaflets say they must leave. Jim Muir let us and himself down when he observed that south Lebanon is "not an area which can become depopulated overnight". No it isn't, but the deeper question is why should it be depopulated? At what point did the international broadcasters fall unnoticed behind an agenda that demands south Lebanon be ethnically cleansed to satisfy Israel?

Our media are oblivious to the double standards. Did Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah not publicly warn that he would attack Haifa days before he did so, if Israel continued its aggression and refused to negotiate over a prisoner swap? Were Israelis not warned to leave too? And would we allow Hizbullah to use that as a justification for its rocket fire on Israel?

On Friday Hizbullah fired its first khaibar missile, packed with 100kg of explosives, close by Nazareth — we could feel the earth tremble from the impact. The Shiite militia waited more than two weeks before launching a warhead of that size, after it made repeated threats to do so if Israel continued its onslaught. Who will point out that had Hizbullah wanted to, if Israel's destruction was the real aim, it could have fired those khaibar rockets from day one?

And on Saturday Nasrallah promised to strike "beyond Haifa" with even more lethal rockets if Israel refused to countenance a ceasefire. Who on the BBC, or CNN or any of our other channels will quote that warning as justification if Hizbullah extends its fire to Hadera, Netanya or Tel Aviv in the coming days?

This is not a war of two narratives, nor even of two worldviews. It is a war in which we, the West, speak for both sides. Where we define the meaning of suffering and death, and of victory and peace. Where our humanity alone counts because we feel only our own pain as

the birth pangs take hold.

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