

## THE CURRENT ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN-LEBANESE CONFLICT: THE VIEWS OF FOUR CHICAGO RABBIS

### 1. Who Started It?

On June 25, Hamas operatives tunneled from Gaza into Israel, where they killed two Israeli soldiers and kidnapped a third, demanding that Israel free more than nine hundred Palestinian prisoners, many of them being held for violent crimes. Two weeks later, Hezbollah forces crossed the international border from southern Lebanon to support Hamas' demand. They killed eight Israeli soldiers, and took two others hostage. Neither attack was provoked.

In the past, some Christian leaders have tempered their criticism of Palestinian violence by casting it as the understandable response of an otherwise helpless people living under occupation. The current situation reveals serious flaws in this analysis. Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, and from Gaza in 2005. There is no Israeli presence in either locale. Moreover, the Israeli government has announced plans to disengage from most of the West Bank, either through negotiations or unilaterally should the Hamas government persist in refusing to recognize Israel.

Rather than being a consequence of Israeli occupation, the present situation is a direct result of Israel having withdrawn from Arab lands, leaving Palestinian terrorist groups free to train operatives, manufacture weapons, and launch actions inside Israel.

### 2. Background

From the late 1970's until 2000, Israel maintained a 3-5 mile wide security zone inside Lebanon, to prevent Palestinian terrorists from shelling Israeli towns and crossing the border to attack civilians, many of them women and children. Periodic attempts at replacing Israeli troops with an international force failed. A contingent of U.S. marines positioned there in 1982 was withdrawn after 241 of them were killed in their barracks by a Palestinian suicide bomber. The United Nations force (UNFIL) is chronically undermanned and ineffective. When Israel withdrew six years ago, Hezbollah moved swiftly to establish a state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon backed by Iran and Syria. The Lebanese government has done nothing to implement a 2004 U.N. Security Council resolution (#1559) calling upon it to disarm Hezbollah and take control of southern Lebanon.

Israel's disengagement from Gaza last summer was intended to give the Palestinians an opportunity to prove their ability to build a self-governing Palestinian society prepared to live in peaceful co-existence with its Jewish neighbor. A Palestinian success would strengthen Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's case for placing most of the West Bank under Palestinian sovereignty, thus opening the door for full Palestinian statehood.

What actually ensued was catastrophic. Shortly after Israel departed, a virtual civil war erupted between Fatah (Yassir Arafat's party which controlled the Palestinian Authority) and Hamas. Lawlessness prevailed in the streets. An already fragile economy crumbled. The PA was unwilling and/or unable to prevent terrorists from firing missiles at towns inside Israel. Then, the Palestinians overwhelmingly elected a Hamas government, which is committed to annihilating the Jewish state, and which openly praises suicide bombings.

### 3. Conduct of the Operation

Negotiating with terrorists is rarely productive. If Hamas and Hezbollah can win the release of hardened criminals by kidnapping three soldiers, why not kidnap three more and demand further concessions? Nevertheless, the Israeli government has sent semi-veiled signals of its willingness to consider concessions *after* the three soldiers are returned. This is diplomatic code for agreeing to release some of the prisoners at a time when it can be done away from the glare of publicity. Thus far, the terrorists have refused.

Moreover, it is critical to understand that rescuing three soldiers, while Israel's primary objective, is not its only one. From the time Israel entered the Oslo negotiations more than a decade ago, its territorial policy has been rooted in the principle that peace with the Palestinians is impossible without a near-total Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Formal and informal proposals by four successive governments make it clear that Israel intends to keep less than 10 percent of the West Bank and none of Gaza. Additionally, Israel has offered to

cede to the new Palestinian state an equal amount of land either in heavily Palestinian areas of the Galilee, or in the Negev. Success of this policy, or any policy that presumes a two-state solution, rests on Palestinian willingness to establish peaceful relations with Israel.

Hamas and Hezbollah make no secret of their disdain for a two-state solution. When they talk of "ending the occupation," they mean the West Bank, Gaza and *all* of Israel, which they regard as Islamic land occupied by Jews. Opinion polls indicate that a substantial majority of the Palestinians are willing to accept a two-state solution. But this sentiment is irrelevant so long as actual policy is dictated by rejectionists for whom terror is their primary tool of "statecraft."

So long as an intransigent Hamas rules in Gaza, and Hezbollah is free to operate in southern Lebanon, there can be no progress toward a negotiated peace. Without substantial changes in the Palestinian political landscape, could any responsible government withdraw from the West Bank---from which even primitive rockets can reach Jerusalem and Tel Aviv?

Israel has legitimate reasons for seeking to break, or at least seriously weaken, the terrorists' stranglehold on what remains of the peace process. Unlike in the past, its strategy for pursuing this goal does not entail occupation in any form. As Israeli Council General Baruch Binah told a noontime rally in The Loop earlier this week: "They say they want us out of Gaza and Lebanon. We were out, but they sucked us back in. If they want us to leave again, return the captives, stop hurling rockets and they won't see us anymore."

Amal Saad Ghorayeb, a professor of political science at Lebanese American University, characterizes Hezbollah and its operatives as "being driven by a jihadi ideology and a sacrificial theology, and they don't give a damn about the consequences." The only approach to defeating this blood-thirsty fanaticism, other than another extended military presence, are short-term, but large-scale, military operations, some of them targeting infrastructure. Israel has been careful to drop leaflets warning civilians in southern Beirut and southern Lebanon where it knows that Hezbollah keeps stores of rockets and launchers in apartment houses, garages and homes. Nevertheless, innocents are killed and wounded, their peril intensified by the terrorists' strategy of positioning themselves in densely populated areas, using women and children as shields, or as fodder for their public relations campaign. This cynical policy violates international law and the canons of human decency.

#### 4. What's at Stake for Humankind?

It is no longer accurate to describe the conflict as pitting Israelis against Palestinians. As columnist David Brooks wrote in the New York Times, "Iran has conducted a semi-hostile takeover of what used to be known as the Arab-Israeli dispute." Hezbollah, which receives \$200-\$300 million annually from Teheran, is Iran's proxy in its pursuit of regional hegemony, and Syria's in its drive to remain a major player in Lebanon after its forced withdrawal last year in the wake of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination. "It has become the essential instrument of Syrian maneuvers to prevent the Lebanese state from adapting to its newfound independence," according to Waddah Sharara, a sociology professor at the Lebanese University. Nor is the conflict east vs. west, or Judeo/Christianity vs. Islam. Criticism of Israel from most of the Arab/Islamic world has been muted. Saudi Arabia went so far as to condemn Hezbollah's actions as "uncalculated adventures."

#### 5. Conclusion

Like you, the authors of this communication abhor the carnage, and pray that it ends as quickly as possible. Talk of establishing a new multi-national force is encouraging, but only if its mandate has teeth. Otherwise, the terrorists will regroup, re-arm and prepare to ignite another round of violence. Arab and Muslim pressure on Iran and Syria could be exceedingly helpful, as they are the patrons of terrorism.

For the moment, however, as unsettling as the thought may be to all of us, short-term violence may be the most effective way of pursuing peace. Israel is not attempting to beat the Palestinians and Lebanese into submission. The violence is aimed at defeating the terrorist organizations in order to create a window of opportunity for other Palestinian, Arab and Muslim voices to be heard.