

THOUGHTS ON THE [USCCB STATEMENT](#)

The Middle East is in the throws of an upsurge in violence that threatens to bring increasing instability and disorder while adding to the carnage that has so tragically characterized that region over the past several decades. Civilians are suffering in Israel, Lebanon, and Gaza. The enlightened world watches with pity and a sense of helplessness. And the USCCB has issued a statement that comes across as not fully understanding the dimensions of what is unfolding and what is at stake and that thus fails to play a constructive role, a statement that offers an unfair image of that country and of its geopolitical goals and military practices.

The opening paragraph of the statement talks of a supposed “tragic and terrifying cycle...of occupation and resistance.” In fact, in the two current arenas of conflict there is no “occupation.” Israel withdrew from Lebanon six years ago and from Gaza one year ago. In the former case this was done in full accord with a United Nations agreement, and there was a subsequent United Nations mandate for Hezbollah to be disarmed, with the new Lebanese government taking control of southern Lebanon. That did not happen and instead Hezbollah, armed and encouraged by Iran and Syria, spent six years preparing for war and building up a strong arsenal. It then chose to cross the border into Israel and to begin its rocket attacks on civilians (part of the initial provocation that is omitted from the USCCB summary) in an act of unprovoked aggression that began the current fighting. This is a linear development and hardly a cyclical one, and it has nothing to do with “occupation.”

Somewhat similarly but with different details, Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, which provided the opportunity for Palestinian self-rule and the development of a civil society in a fashion that could have set the pattern for further steps leading to a two-state solution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, has instead been greeted by the rise to power of Hamas terrorists. Hamas’ goal is nothing less than the destruction of Israel (which is Hezbollah’s goal as well), and Hamas and other Palestinian entities have used Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza as an opportunity for building up an armed force, for conducting rocket shelling of Israeli civilian targets, and for cross-border provocation. As one pundit has said, rather than trading land for peace, Israel has found itself trading land for war. And yet the USCCB statement insists on talking about a so-called cycle of “occupation and resistance.”

Use of the word “resistance” here is especially problematic. It is a term from political discourse where it generally has positive connotations. But what Hezbollah and Hamas are unequivocally “resisting” in their minds, as the founding charters and continual statements of their leaders make absolutely clear, is the very existence of the State of Israel. Those groups, courting sympathy and support while wishing to burnish their self-image, may choose to talk about their acts of terrorism as “resistance,” but that certainly is no reason why the USCCB should use the word in this way.

The next three paragraphs of the statement acknowledge some of the factors touched on above, but they do so in what ultimately comes across as a more dismissive than assertive fashion when one notes what follows. The statement, after acknowledging Israel’s “right to defend itself,” proclaims: “We cannot support its sweeping counterattacks on civilian areas, civilian infrastructure, blockades and other acts of war in Gaza and Lebanon” -- an assertion which misrepresents what has happened. When the statement then goes on to talk about the “punishment of an entire population for the indefensible acts of extreme armed factions,” it unfairly distorts what Israel has done while significantly letting Israel’s adversaries off the hook, in part by saying nothing about the way Hamas and Hezbollah have deliberately placed

themselves within civilian populations. Additionally, rather than being a mere “extreme armed faction,” Hamas is the ruling party in the Palestinian legislature while Hezbollah serves in the government of Lebanon, which surely must bear some responsibility for the fate of its population.

Especially problematic is the sense of equivalence that runs through the argument of this document. Hezbollah, readers are told, engaged in “provocative acts” while Israel engages in “disproportionate...military responses.” The current conflict is cast as one between “extremist elements” on the one hand and the State of Israel on the other. But these “extremist elements” formally represent large segments of their respective populations and public opinion polls and news reports show that they are backed by sizable proportions of their respective communal populations. Furthermore, they are allies of and act in synchronization with, and to some degree on behalf of, major regional powers that have ambitions within and beyond the region. Their deliberate ongoing targeting of civilian populations and their overall goals stand in sharp contrast to Israel’s behavior. If, despite a policy of attempting to minimize civilian casualties, Israel may bring about deeply regrettable casualties, that does not justify implying a moral equation of Israel and Hezbollah.

Finally, there is the question of “what next?” The statement calls on the U.S. “to restrain Israel,” but it says nothing as to who might restrain Hamas and Hezbollah. However much people of good will may yearn for a just peace in the Middle East, an immediate cease fire that does not take into account the need for Hezbollah and Hamas to be disarmed, for the Lebanese government and the Palestinian Authority to be able to take control of their entities, and for Syrian and Iranian meddling to be prevented can do more harm than good. An ill-conceived step of that sort would likely contribute to the furtherance of violence in the short term, with potentially disastrous consequences in the long term. More broadly, a formula for resolving the conflict which implicitly imagines a transformation of Hezbollah and Hamas, takes no account of the malevolent shadow of Iran, and soft-pedals the geopolitical belief systems and goals of those parties misses some central realities of our time.

The current developments in the Middle East present severe challenges of many kinds for many people. They challenge Israel’s need to protect its citizens and ensure its national survival. They challenge the Lebanese government’s hope to at last free itself from the impact of internal divisions and external control. They challenge the regimes of several Arab nations whose leaders seem to now be prepared to publicly acknowledge that it is not Israel but other Middle Eastern forces who represent a threat to them. They challenge the diplomats of nations that wish to find a way to help alleviate the situation. They challenge an America whose own interests are in many ways threatened by what is happening. And they challenge people whose religious calling drives them to wish to speak out and to play a constructive role. Despite the good will of the USCCB in attempting to respond to the challenge by issuing its statement on this subject, the position it has taken appears to be out of touch with core prevailing realities, and the statement thus unfortunately fails to make a constructive contribution to resolving the current crises.

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