

The War of Double Standards

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There is a wall-to-wall consensus in Israel that the war against the Hezbollah in Lebanon is a just and moral war. Unfortunately this consensus is based on selective and short-term memory, on an introvert world view, and on double standards. This is not a just war. The use of force is excessive and indiscriminate, and its ultimate aim is extortion. This does not imply that Hezbollah has a moral case in this conflict; quite to the contrary. But the fact that Hezbollah “initiated” this conflict by abducting Israeli soldiers across an internationally recognized border does not even start to shift the balance to Israel’s side of the scales of morality.

Let us start with some facts. In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied its Capital Beirut. In the course of this invasion, Israel dropped thousands of tons of bombs on civilian population centers, killing and maiming thousands of innocent civilians. Conservative estimates put the number of Lebanese fatalities at around 14,000 (of which 5,000 civilian deaths were reported in Beirut). Most of these fatalities had nothing to do with the PLO, the alleged cause of this invasion. The occupation of parts of Lebanon lasted another eighteen years. During operations “Accountability” (in 1993) and “Grapes of Wrath” (in 1996) Israel’s mass bombardments of civilian targets caused mass evacuations of Southern Lebanon, the estimated number of refugees in each case exceeded 500,000 Lebanese. We do not have a reliable estimate of the number of civilian fatalities in each of these incidents, but during the “Grapes of Wrath” operation, Israeli shells hit a shelter, killing 103 civilians including many women and children. This was clearly a case of collateral damage, but this does not help provide the operation a moral foundation.

On July 28, 1988 Israeli Special Forces abducted Sheikh Obeid, and on May 21, 1994 Israel kidnapped Mustafa Dirani, who had been responsible for capturing the Israeli pilot Ron Arad. Israel held these and other 20 Lebanese who were captured under undisclosed circumstances in prison for prolonged periods without trial. They were held as human “bargaining chips.” Apparently, abduction of Israelis for the purpose of prisoners’ exchange is morally reprehensible and militarily punishable when it is the Hezbollah who does the abducting, but not if Israel is doing the very same thing.

The Hezbollah has violated an internationally recognized border in its attack on the Israeli patrol on June 12. That is indisputable. What is less known, however, is that Israel has violated Lebanese airspace by carrying out aerial reconnaissance missions virtually every day since its withdrawal from Southern Lebanon six years ago. True, these aerial overflights did not cause any Lebanese casualties, but a border violation is a border violation. Here too, Israel does not hold a higher moral ground.

So much for moral history, now we can turn to an analysis of the present conflict. What exactly is the difference between Hezbollah’s launching Katyusha rockets at Israeli

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population centers and Israel's attacks of civilian centers in Beirut, Tyre, Sidon, and many villages in Southern Lebanon? The Israeli argument that Hezbollah members are hiding inside civilian population suggests metaphorically that the victim of gang rape is guilty because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. So far, over thirty Israeli civilians have been killed by Hezbollah's rockets, compared to nearly 400 Lebanese, virtually all of whom are civilians. More important, Israeli attacks on Lebanese infrastructure—beyond accomplishing the counterproductive objective of destroying the kind of Lebanon that is in Israel's interest to preserve—victimize most of Lebanon's population. The increased difficulty of hospitals and public services to operate are a direct result of Israel's strategy.

The stated objective of Israeli attacks on infrastructure and civilian targets is getting the weak Lebanese government to implement U.N. resolution 1559, which calls for disarmament of all militias in Lebanon. This is an exercise in extortion no less than the abduction of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah. This strategy is an attempt to extract compliance from the Lebanese government through systematic attacks on its citizen, but there is no shred of morality in this action.

This war has an important aspect of propaganda, a competition in self-victimization. Each side works hard to convince the international community that it is more miserable than their opponent. As any propaganda struggle, both the Israeli and Lebanese use of information is selective, distorted, and self-righteous. If Israel wants to build its case on the notion that the international community would buy its spoiled goods, let it continue to delude itself. Israelis, however, owe it to themselves to face the inconvenient truth (to borrow a phrase from Al Gore). Israel may win this conflict militarily due to the overwhelming asymmetry in military power; it may or may not accomplish some of its political objectives. Yet, Israel does not hold any moral superiority, nor does it have any special status when it comes to the battlefield of moral claims. Tragically, the moral battle is doomed to end in an outcome where everyone embroiled in it emerges as a loser.