

Five myths that sanction Israel's war crimes

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This week I had the pleasure to appear on American radio, on the Laura Ingraham show, pitted against David Horowitz, a “Semite supremacist” who most recently made his name under the banner of Campus Watch, leading McCarthyite witch-hunts against American professors who have the impertinence to suggest that maybe, just maybe, Arabs have minds and feelings like the rest of us.

It was a revealing experience, at least for a British journalist rarely exposed to the depths of ignorance and prejudice in the United States on Middle East matters — well, apart from the regular whackos who fill my email in-tray. But five minutes of listening to Horowitz speak, and the sympathy with which his arguments were greeted by Laura (“The Professors — your book’s a great read, David”), left me a lot more frightened about the world’s future.

Horowitz’s response to every question, every development in the Middle East, whether it concerns Lebanon, the Palestinians, Syria or Iran, is the same: “They want to drive the Jews into the sea”. It’s as simple as that. Not even a superficial attempt at analysis; just the message that the Arab world is trying to finish off the genocide started by Europe. And if Laura is any yardstick, a lot of Americans buy that stuff.

Horowitz is keen to bang the square peg of the Lebanon story into the round hole of his claims that the “Jews” are facing an imminent genocide in the Middle East. And to help him, he and the massed ranks of US apologists for Israel — regulars, I suspect, of shows like Laura’s — are promoting at least four myths regarding Hizbullah’s current rockets strikes on Israel. Unless they are challenged at every turn, the danger is that they will win the ground war against common sense in the US

The first myth is that Israel was forced to pound Lebanon with its military hardware because Hizbullah began “raining down” rockets on the Galilee. Anyone with a short memory can probably recall that was not the first justification we were offered: that had to do with the two soldiers captured by Hizbullah on a border post on July 12.

But presumably Horowitz and his friends realised that 400 Lebanese dead and counting in little more than a week was hard to sell as a “proportionate” response. In any case Hizbullah kept telling the world how keen it was to return the soldiers in a prisoner swap.

Hundreds of dead in Lebanon, at least 1,000 severely injured and more than half a million refugees — all because Israel is not ready to sit down at the negotiating table. Even Horowitz could not “advocate for Israel” on that one.

So the chronology of war has been reorganised: now we are being told that Israel was forced to attack Lebanon to defend itself from the barrage of Hizbullah rockets falling on Israeli

civilians. The international community is buying the argument hook, line and sinker. “Israel has the right to defend itself”, says every politician who can find a microphone to talk into.

But, if we cast our minds back, that is not how the “Middle East crisis”, as TV channels now describe it, started. It is worth recapping on those early events (and I won’t document the long history of Lebanese suffering at Israel’s hands that preceded it) before they become entirely shrouded in the mythology being peddled by Horowitz and others.

Early on July 12 Hizbullah launched a raid against an army border post, in what was in the best interpretation a foolhardy violation of Israeli sovereignty. In the fighting the Shiite militia killed three soldiers and captured two others, while Hizbullah fired a few mortars at border areas in what the Israeli army described at the time as “diversionary tactics”. As a result of the shelling, five Israelis were “lightly injured”, with most needing treatment for shock, according to the Haaretz newspaper.

Israel’s immediate response was to send a tank into Lebanon in pursuit of the Hizbullah fighters (its own foolhardy violation of Lebanese sovereignty). The tank ran over a landmine, which exploded killing four soldiers inside. Another soldier died in further clashes inside Lebanon as his unit tried to retrieve the bodies.

Rather than open diplomatic channels to calm the violence down and start the process of getting its soldiers back, Israel launched bombing raids deep into Lebanese territory the same day. Given Israel’s worldview that it alone has a right to project power and fear, that might have been expected.

But the next day Israel continued its rampage across the south and into Beirut, where the airport, roads, bridges, and power stations were pummelled. We now know from reports in the US media that the Israeli army had been planning such a strike against Lebanon for at least a year.

In contrast to the image of Hizbullah frothing at the mouth to destroy Israel, its leader Hassan Nasrallah held off from serious retaliation. For the first day and a half, he limited his strikes to the northern borders areas, which have faced Hizbullah attacks in the past and are well protected.

He waited till late on June 13 before turning his guns on Haifa, even though we now know he could have targeted Israel’s third largest city from the outset. A small volley of rockets directed at Haifa caused no injuries and looked more like a warning than an escalation.

It was another three days — days of constant Israeli bombardment of Lebanon, destroying the country and injuring countless civilians — before Nasrallah hit Haifa again, including a shell that killed eight workers in a railway depot.

No one should have been surprised. Nasrallah was doing exactly what he had threatened to do if Israel refused to negotiate and chose the path of war instead. Although the international media quoted his ominous televised message that “Haifa is just the beginning”, Nasrallah in fact made his threat conditional on Israel’s continuing strikes against Lebanon. In the same speech he warned: “As long as the enemy pursues its aggression without limits and red lines, we will pursue the confrontation without limits and red lines.” Well, Israel did, and so now has Nasrallah.

The second myth is that Hizbullah's stockpile of 12,000 rockets — the Israeli army's estimate — poses an existential threat to Israel. According to Horowitz and others, Hizbullah collected its armoury with the sole intent of destroying the Jewish state.

If this really was Hizbullah's intention in amassing the weapons, it has a very deluded view of what is required to wipe Israel off the map. More likely, it collected the armoury in the hope that it might prove a deterrence — even if a very inadequate one, as Lebanon is now discovering — against a repeat of Israel's invasions of 1978 and 1982, and the occupation that lasted nearly two decades afterwards.

In fact, according to other figures supplied by the Israeli army, at least 2,000 Hizbullah rockets have already been fired into Israel while the army's bombardments have so far destroyed a further 2,000 rockets. In other words, northern Israel has already received a fifth of Hizbullah's arsenal. As someone living in the north, and within range of the rockets, I have to say Israel does not look close to being expunged. The Galilee may be emptier, as up to third of Israeli Jews seek temporary refuge in the south, but Israel's existence is in no doubt at all.

The third myth is that, while Israel is trying to fight a clean war by targeting only terrorists, Hizbullah prefers to bring death and destruction on innocents by firing rockets at Israeli civilians.

It is amazing that this myth even needs exploding, but after the efforts of Horowitz and co it most certainly does. As the civilian death toll in Lebanon has rocketed, international criticism of Israel has remained at the mealy-mouthed level of diplomatic requests for "restraint" and "proportionate responses".

One need only cast a quick eye over the casualty figures from this conflict to see that if Israel is targeting only Hizbullah fighters it has been making disastrous miscalculations. So far some 400 Lebanese civilians are reported dead — unfortunately for Horowitz's story at least a third of them children. From the images coming out of Lebanon's hospitals, many more children have survived but with terrible burns or disabling injuries.

The best estimates, though no one knows for sure, are that Hizbullah deaths are not yet close to the three-figures range.

In the latest emerging news from Lebanon, human rights groups are accusing Israel of violating international law and using cluster grenades, which kill indiscriminately. There are reports too, so far unconfirmed, that Israel has been firing illegal incendiary bombs.

Conversely, the breakdown of the smaller number of deaths of Israelis at the hands of Hizbullah — 42 at the time of writing — show that more soldiers have been killed than civilians.

In fact, although no one is making the point, Hizbullah's rockets have been targeted overwhelmingly at strategic locations: the northern economic hub of Haifa, its satellite towns and the array of military sites across the Galilee.

Nasrallah seems fully aware that Israel has an impressive civil defence program of shelters that keep most civilians out of harm's way. Unlike Horowitz I won't presume to read Nasrallah's mind: whether he wants to kill large numbers of Israeli civilians or not cannot be known, given his inability to do so.

But we can see from the choice of the sites he is striking that his primary goal is to give Israelis a small taste of the disruption of normal life that is being endured by the Lebanese. He has effectively closed Haifa for more than a week, shutting its port and financial centres. Israeli TV is speaking increasingly of the damage being inflicted on the country's economy.

Because of Israel's press censorship laws, it is impossible to discuss the locations of Israel's military installations. But Hizbullah's rockets are accurate enough to show that many are intended for the army's sites in the Galilee, even if they are rarely precise enough to hit them.

It is obvious to everyone in Nazareth, for example, that the rockets landing close by, and once on, the city over the past week are searching out, and some have fallen extremely close to, the weapons factory sited near us.

Hizbullah seems to have as little concern for the collateral damage of civilian deaths as Israel — each wants the balance of terror in its favour — but it is nonsense to suggest that Hizbullah's goals are any more ignoble than Israel's. It is trying to dent the economy of northern Israel in retaliation for Israel's total destruction of the Lebanese economy. Equally, it is trying to show Israel that it knows where its military installations are to be found. Both strategies appear to be having an impact, even if a minor one, on weakening Israeli resolve.

The fourth myth is a continuation of the third: Hizbullah has been endangering the lives of ordinary Lebanese by hiding among non-combatants.

We have seen this kind of dissembling by Israel and Horowitz before, though not repeated so enthusiastically by Western officials. The UN head of humanitarian affairs, Jan Egeland, who is in the region, accused Hizbullah of "cowardly blending" among the civilian population, and a similar accusation was levelled by the British foreign minister Kim Howells when he arrived in Israel.

In 2002 Israel made the same charge: that Palestinians resisting its army's rampage through the refugee camps of the West Bank were hiding among civilians. The claim grew louder as more Palestinian civilians showed the irritating habit of getting in the way of Israeli strikes against population centres. The complaints reached a crescendo when at least two dozen civilians were killed in Jenin as Israel razed the camp with Apache helicopters and Caterpillar bulldozers.

The implication of Egeland's cowardly statement seems to be that any Lebanese fighter, or Palestinian one, resisting Israel and its powerful military should stand in an open field, his rifle raised to the sky, waiting to see who fares worse in a shoot-out with an Apache helicopter or F-16 fighter jet. Hizbullah's reluctance to conduct the war in this manner, we are supposed to infer, is proof that they are terrorists.

Egeland and Howells need reminding that Hizbullah's fighters are not aliens recently arrived from training camps in Iran, whatever Horowitz claims. They belong to and are strongly supported by the Shiite community, nearly half the country's population, and many other Lebanese. They have families, friends and neighbours living alongside them in the country's south and the neighbourhoods of Beirut who believe Hizbullah is the best hope of defending their country from Israel's regular onslaughts.

Given the indigenous nature of Hizbullah's resistance, we should not be surprised at the

lengths the Shiite militia is going to ensure their loved ones, and the Lebanese people more generally, are not put directly in danger by their combat.

If only the same could be said of the Israeli army and airforce. One need only look at the images of the victims of its strikes against residential neighbourhoods, car, ambulances and factories to see why most of the dead being extracted from the rubble are civilians.

And finally, there is a fifth myth I almost forgot to mention. That people like David Horowitz only want to tell us the truth...

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