

Israel, not Hizbullah, is putting civilians in danger on both sides of the border

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NAZARETH, August 3, 2006. Here are some interesting points raised this week by a leading commentator and published in a respected daily newspaper: "The Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert embeds his soldiers in Israeli communities, next to schools, beside hospitals, close to welfare centres, ensuring that any Israeli target is also a civilian target. This is the practice the UN's Jan Egeland had in mind when he lambasted Israel's 'cowardly blending ... among women and children'. It may be cowardly, but in the new warfare it also makes macabre sense. For this is a propaganda war as much as a shooting one, and in such a conflict to lose civilians on your own side represents a kind of victory."

You probably did not read far before realising that I have switched "Israel" for "Hizbullah" and "Ehud Olmert" for "Hassan Nasrallah". The paragraph was taken from an opinion piece by Jonathan Freedland published in Britain's Guardian newspaper on 2 August. My attempt at deception was probably futile because no one seems to seriously believe that criticisms of the kind expressed above can be levelled against Israel.

Freedland, like most commentators in our media, assumes that Hizbullah is using the Lebanese population as "human shields", hiding its fighters, arsenals and rocket launchers inside civilian areas. "Cowardly" behaviour rather than the nature of Israel's air strikes, in his view, explains the spiralling death toll among Lebanese civilians. This perception of Hizbullah's tactics grows more common by the day, even though it flies in the face of the available evidence and the research of independent observers in Lebanon such as Human Rights Watch.

Explaining the findings of its latest report, HRW's executive director, Kenneth Roth, blames Israel for targeting civilians indiscriminately in Lebanon. "The pattern of attacks shows the Israeli military's disturbing disregard for the lives of Lebanese civilians. Our research shows that Israel's claim that Hezbollah [sic] fighters are hiding among civilians does not explain, let alone justify, Israel's indiscriminate warfare."

HRW has analysed the casualty figures from two dozen Israeli air strikes and found that more than 40 per cent of the dead are children: 63 out of 153 fatalities. Conservatively, HRW puts the civilian death toll so far at over 500. Lebanese hospital records suggest the figure is now well over 750, with potentially many more bodies yet to be excavated from the rubble of buildings obliterated by Israeli attacks.

Giving the lie to the "human shields" theory, HRW says its researchers "found numerous cases in which the IDF [Israeli army] launched artillery and air attacks with limited or dubious military objectives but excessive civilian cost. In many cases, Israeli forces struck

an area with no apparent military target. In some instances, Israeli forces appear to have deliberately targeted civilians.”

In fact, of the 24 incidents they document, HRW researchers could find no evidence that Hizbullah was operating in or near the areas that were attacked by the Israeli air force. Roth states: “The image that Israel has promoted of such [human] shielding as the cause of so high a civilian death toll is wrong. In the many cases of civilian deaths examined by Human Rights Watch, the location of Hezbollah troops and arms had nothing to do with the deaths because there was no Hezbollah around.”

The impression that Hizbullah is using civilians as human shields has been reinforced, according to HRW, by official Israeli statements that have “blurred the distinction between civilians and combatants, arguing that only people associated with Hezbollah remain in southern Lebanon, so all are legitimate targets of attack.”

Freedland makes a similar point. Echoing comments by the UN’s Jan Egeland, he says Hizbullah fighters are “cowardly blending” with Lebanon’s civilian population. It is difficult to know what to make of this observation. If Freedland means that Hizbullah fighters come from Lebanese towns and villages and have families living there whom they visit and live among, he is right. But exactly the same can be said of Israel and its soldiers, who return from the battlefield (in this case inside Lebanon, as they are now an invading army) to live with parents or spouses in Israeli communities. Armed and uniformed soldiers can be seen all over Israel, sitting in trains, queuing in banks, waiting with civilians at bus stops. Does that mean they are “cowardly blending’ with Israel’s civilian population?

Egeland and Freedland’s criticism seems to amount to little more than blaming Hizbullah fighters for not standing in open fields waiting to be picked off by Israeli tanks and war planes. That, presumably, would be brave. But in reality no army fights in this way, and Hizbullah can hardly be criticised for using the only strategic defences it has: its underground bunkers and the crumbling fortifications of Lebanese villages ruined by Israeli pounding. An army defending itself from invasion has to make the most of whatever protection it can find — as long as it does not intentionally put civilians at risk. But HRW’s research shows convincingly that Hizbullah is not doing this.

So if Israeli officials have been deceiving us about what has been occurring inside Lebanon, have they also been misleading us about Hizbullah’s rocket attacks on Israel? Should we take at face value government and army statements that Hizbullah’s strikes into Israel are targeting civilians indiscriminately, or do they need more serious investigation?

Although we should not romanticise Hizbullah, equally we should not be quick to demonise it either — unless there is convincing evidence suggesting it has been firing on civilian targets. The problem is that Israel has been abusing very successfully its military censorship rules governing both its domestic media and the reporting of visiting foreign journalists to prevent meaningful discussion of what Hizbullah has been trying to hit inside Israel.

I live in northern Israel in the Arab city of Nazareth. A week into the war we were hit by Hizbullah rockets that killed two young brothers. The attack, it was widely claimed, was proof either that Hizbullah was indiscriminately targeting civilians (so indiscriminately, the argument went, that it was hitting fellow Arabs) or that the Shiite militia was so committed to a fanatical war against the Judeo-Christian world that it was happy to kill Nazareth’s

Christian Arabs too. The latter claim could be easily dismissed: it depended both on a “clash of civilisations” philosophy not shared by Hizbullah and on the mistaken assumption that Nazareth is a Christian city, when in fact, as is well-known to Hizbullah, Nazareth has a convincing Muslim majority.

But to anyone living in Nazareth, it was clear the rocket attack on the city was not indiscriminate either. It was a mistake — something Nasrallah quickly confirmed in one of his televised speeches. The real target of the strike was known to Nazarenes: close by the city are a military weapons factory and a large army camp. Hizbullah knows the locations of these military targets because this year, as was widely reported in the Israeli media at the time, it managed to fly an unmanned drone over the Galilee photographing the area in detail — employing the same spying techniques used for many years by Israel against Lebanon.

One of Hizbullah’s first rocket attacks after the outbreak of hostilities — after Israel went on a bombing offensive by blitzing targets across Lebanon — was on a kibbutz overlooking the border with Lebanon. Some foreign correspondents noted at the time (though given Israel’s press censorship laws I cannot confirm) that the rocket strike targeted a top-secret military traffic control centre built into the Galilee’s hills.

There are hundreds of similar military installations next to or inside Israel’s northern communities. Some distance from Nazareth, for example, Israel has built a large weapons factory virtually on top of an Arab town — so close to it, in fact, that the factory’s perimeter fence is only a few metres from the main building of the local junior school. There have been reports of rockets landing close to that Arab community.

How these kind of attacks are being unfairly presented in the Israeli and foreign media was highlighted recently when it was widely reported that a Hizbullah rocket had landed “near a hospital” in a named Israeli city, not the first time that such a claim has been made over the past few weeks. I cannot name the city, again because of Israel’s press censorship laws and because I also want to point out that very “near” that hospital is an army camp. The media suggested that Hizbullah was trying to hit the hospital, but it is also more than possible it was trying to strike — and may have struck — the army camp.

Israel’s military censorship laws are therefore allowing officials to represent, unchallenged, any attack by Hizbullah as an indiscriminate strike against civilian targets.

Audiences ought to be alerted to this danger by their media. Any reports touching on “security matters” are supposed to be submitted to the country’s military censor, but few media are pointing this out. Most justify this deception to themselves on the grounds that in practice they never run their reports by the censor as it would delay publication.

Instead, they avoid problems with the military censor either by self-censoring their reporting of security issues or by relying on what has already been published in the Israeli media on the assumption that in these ways they are unlikely to contravene the rules.

An email memo, written by a senior BBC editor and leaked more than a week ago, discusses the growing restrictions being placed on the organisation’s reporters in Israel. It hints at some of the problems noted above, observing that “the more general we are, the free-hand we have; more specific and it becomes increasingly tricky.” The editor says the channel will notify viewers of these restrictions in “the narrative of the story”. “The teams

on the ground will make clear what they can and cannot say — and if necessary make clear that we’re operating under reporting restrictions.” In practice, however, BBC correspondents, like most of their media colleagues, rarely alert us to the fact they are operating under censorship, and self-censorship, or that they cannot give us the full picture of what is happening.

Because of this, commentators like Freedland are drawing conclusions that cannot be sustained by the available evidence. He notes in his article that “this is a propaganda war as much as a shooting one”. He is right, but does not seem to know who is really winning the propaganda offensive.

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