

Israel's deceptions as a way of life

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NAZARETH, August 31, 2006. In a state established on a founding myth — that the native Palestinian population left of their own accord rather than that they were ethnically cleansed — and in one that seeks its legitimacy through a host of other lies, such as that the occupation of the West Bank is benign and that Gaza's has ended, deception becomes a political way of life.

And so it is in the "relative calm" that has followed Israel's month-long pounding of Lebanon, a calm in which Israelis may no longer be dying but the Lebanese most assuredly are as explosions of US-made cluster bombs greet the south's returning refugees and the anonymous residents of Gaza perish by the dozens each and every week under the relentless and indiscriminate strikes of the Israeli air force while the rest slowly starve in their open-air prison.

Israeli leaders deceive as much in "peace" as they do in war, which is why it is worth examining the slow trickle of disinformation coming from Tel Aviv and reflecting on where it is leading.

Many of Israel's war lies have already been deeply implanted in Western consciousness by the media:

- that Hizbullah "started" the war by capturing two Israeli soldiers rather than that Israel maintained a hostile and provocative posture for the previous six years by daily sending its warplanes and spy drones into Lebanese airspace;
- that Hizbullah's launching of rockets into Israel was an act of aggression, even though they were fired after, and in response to, Israel's massive bombing of civilian areas in Lebanon;
- that Hizbullah, unlike Israel, used the local civilian population as human shields, even though Israel's continual and comprehensive aerial spying on south Lebanon produced almost no evidence of this;
- that Hizbullah, not Israel, targeted civilians, despite a death toll that suggests the exact opposite;
- and that Hizbullah's arming by Iran is entirely illegitimate, even though the weapons were used to defend Lebanon from a long-prepared Israeli attack, while Israel has an absolute and unchallengeable right to receive its arsenal from the US, even though those armaments have been used offensively, mostly against Lebanese and Palestinian civilian populations.

Similar deceptions are now being sown after the fighting.

For example, it now appears to be accepted wisdom that Hizbullah's rocket attacks on Israel led to one million Israelis being made refugees. The most senior commentator with Israel's Haaretz newspaper, Yoel Marcus, made exactly this point the other day in an op-ed in Britain's Guardian newspaper, when he observed that "about a million Israeli refugees" had been forced to leave the north. Marcus appears to take an extremely liberal view of the meaning of the word "about".

In fact, it is impossible that one million Israelis could have been made refugees, as a quick calculation proves. There are approximately 1.2 million Israelis living in the north, with the population divided equally between Jewish and Arab citizens. Hardly any Arabs left the north during the Hizbullah rocket attacks, either through a residual fear that their homes might be taken by the state, as were those of Palestinians who fled or were terrorised away during the 1948 war, or because they had nowhere else to go. Most assumed, probably rightly, that the Jewish population in the country's centre would not welcome them as refugees.

It is also reported that 300,000 Israelis sought sanctuary in bomb shelters. Such shelters were open only in the north, and do not exist in the country's Arab areas, so those using the shelters must have been the north's Jewish citizens. Which means that if 300,000 of the 600,000 Jews in northern Israel were in shelters, there can have been at most — assuming all other Israeli Jews fled — 300,000 refugees.

Why does Marcus want us to believe that one million Israelis were turned out their homes? Because it helps Israel portray the threat posed by Hizbullah in a more terrifying light and because it makes more convincing the claim that Israelis suffered as much as the Lebanese, one million of whom really did end up as refugees.

It also conveniently glosses over the fact that most of the 300,000 (or fewer) Israeli "refugees" were staying with relatives or friends 100km or so further south in spare rooms and out of harm's way. They were not, as were the Lebanese, fleeing for their lives — their convoys under fire from warplanes — and living in the open air without shelter, food or water and still within range of missile attacks.

Outside of Kiryat Shmona, close to the border with Lebanon, almost all of Israel's "refugees" returned to untouched homes, whereas tens of thousands of Lebanon's refugees have found their houses turned to rubble, and amid that rubble cluster bombs that threaten to kill and maim them.

But again, that is not what the Israeli government wants us to believe, which is why it published a report this week claiming that 12,000 buildings had been damaged by Hizbullah rocket attacks. That seems a strangely large figure given that the Israeli army says only 4,000 rockets were fired into Israel and that a substantial proportion supposedly landed in open ground. The same report also says more than 400 bush fires were started by the rockets.

So how and why did the government reach the figure of 12,000 buildings? That would mean that each rocket that hit a structure damaged at least another three buildings. Anyone who has seen the destruction inflicted by a Katyusha rocket (Hizbullah's main weapon) will know that it does little more than punch a hole in whatever surface it hits. The spray of shrapnel, however, does minor damage to neighbouring structures (though much worse harm to human beings), such as piercing the rendering on homes or breaking windows. In other words, most of those 12,000 "structures" — and of course none of us can know what

Israeli officials are including as a structure (individual apartments, garages, dog kennels?) — suffered minor damage that can be fixed in an afternoon.

So why the need to promote that inflated number? Because Hizbullah is reporting that 15,000 buildings were destroyed: that is, wrecked beyond repair by Israel's missile attacks. As is the tradition in Arab society, many of those several-storey buildings were home to multiple families, meaning that probably many more "homes" than 15,000 have been destroyed. Some Lebanese sources estimate that more than 100,000 homes have been ruined. But for Israel the goal is to make it look as though its own people's suffering is the same as that of the Lebanese.

Interestingly, the estimates of economic damage inflicted on Lebanon by Israel's onslaught stand at about \$5 billion, a figure which again Israel says neatly fits with its own assessments of its losses. It seems that each time one of those American-supplied munitions was dropped it did as much harm to Israel's defence budget as it did to the place where it exploded. The point presumably is that, if and when the reparations account is being settled, Israel will claim its own losses cancel out those of Lebanon's.

Many of Israel's deceptions are also being used domestically to determine who will benefit — and who will be excluded — from the government's largesse as it plans the north's "reconstruction". No surprises about which way the wind is blowing.

Government ministers, for example, have been claiming in the war's aftermath that Arab — not Jewish — municipal leaders fled from their communities to avoid the rocket fire. For example, after a tour of the north, the interior minister, Ronnie Bar-On, argued that the failings in some towns and villages to cope with the war stemmed from the fact that local leaders "ran away, at the highest levels". Asked to name the mayors and local councillors who had fled, Bar-On would only say: "Those people I am referring to ... I can say that in their towns I saw no synagogues."

Why make this claim, even though all the evidence suggests that the Arab populations of the north stayed put during the fighting while, as we have seen, a large number of Jewish citizens did flee? There are two reasons.

First, the government has been embarrassed by reports that nearly half of the civilians killed by rockets were Arab, and by suggestions that the reasons for this were the state's long-standing failure to protect Arab communities by building public bomb shelters, providing air raid sirens and disseminating advice from the civil defence authorities in Arabic. Better to shift the blame on to their elected leaders.

And second, the government is amassing huge sums of money for the reconstruction effort from Jewish groups in America and Europe and is looking for an excuse not to fund work in Arab communities. Another senior politician, Effi Eitam, leader of the National Religious Party, has accused Arab authorities of "pretending to be deprived". The north's Arabs will most likely be cut out of tasting the reconstruction pie. Certainly there is no discussion of building public bomb shelters for Arab towns, even though few in Israel appear to believe the ceasefire with Hizbullah will hold long.

Similarly, the environment minister Gideon Ezra has stated that Arab communities in the north should not receive money to rehabilitate their separate and grossly deprived education system, on the grounds that during the war "the residents there behaved as per

usual, as if nothing had happened” — a reference that sounds like they are being penalised because they did not flee. His reasoning appears popular, among the public and in the cabinet, because Arab citizens generally opposed Israel’s war.

A related deception being promoted by the government is that it is committed to compensating workers and businesses in the north who lost income during the war. But the list drawn up by the finance ministry of areas eligible for compensation reveals that all Arab communities have been excluded, apart from four Druze villages (the Druze serve in the army and are treated by Israel as a national group separate from the rest of the Arab population). Most of the money, millions of dollars, is being made available only to Jewish citizens, even though Arab citizens comprise half the population of the north. What a contrast to Hizbullah’s non-discriminatory policy of compensating all Lebanese harmed by the fighting, whether from its own Shia community or Christian, Druze and Sunni Muslims.

(Incidentally, according to Haaretz, in one court case being brought by an Arab engineer from the village of Fassouta who, unlike his Jewish colleagues, is being denied compensation for loss of income during the war, it is noted that he could not leave his home because the Israeli army was firing artillery batteries stationed on the edge of the village. So much for Israel’s argument, adopted by the United Nation’s representative Jan Egeland, that only Hizbullah was using civilians as human shields!)

Israel’s post-war deceptions, of course, embrace the Palestinians living under occupation too. Yuval Diskin, head of the Shin Bet secret service, is claiming that, inspired by the success of Hizbullah, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are turning Rafah into “the garden of Eden of weapons smuggling”. Apparently Israel knows about 15,000 guns, 4 million bullets, 38 rockets, 10-15 Katyusha rockets, and dozens of anti-tank missiles that have entered Gaza through the Rafah crossing in the past year. Israel believes that just about everything bar tanks and planes is coming across the short border with Egypt it still controls. In a few years, says Diskin, Israel will face the same situation in Gaza as in south Lebanon. We will just have to take his word for that.

But there is a problem. Since November 2005, say human rights groups, the Rafah crossing has been almost continuously shut. Those weapons must have been smuggled in a stampede on the day or two when the crossing was open.

Further doubt is cast on Diskin’s claims by a report in Haaretz this week that the blanket closure of Rafah crossing has continued since one of Israel’s soldiers was captured by Palestinian fighters two months ago. The reason for the crossing’s closure, recommended by Shin Bet, is also noted by Haaretz — and it has nothing to do with weapons smuggling. The blockade was imposed as a way to put pressure on the Palestinians to release the Israeli soldier, a form of collective punishment illegal under international law.

Diskin’s comparisons between developments in Gaza and south Lebanon are at best fanciful. How Gaza’s resistance fighters will be able to build hundreds of underground bunkers in the Strip’s flat, sandy terrain unknown to Israel as its planes and tanks freely roam the area, and as Military Intelligence operates its network of collaborators, is not explained. But Diskin’s conclusions presumably will be used to justify Israel’s continuing assaults on Gaza’s civilian population. Better, the argument will go, not to wait to be caught out as in Lebanon.

The biggest deception of all, however, relates to the reasons for Prime Minister Ehud

Olmert's decision this week to reject the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry, headed by a judge, that would have been free to investigate all aspects of the war. Instead Olmert has set up two separate internal committees of investigation, one to examine government decision-making and the other the army's conduct. (A third watchdog body, under the government's state comptroller, is supposed to look at failings in civil defence.)

Most Israelis are deeply unhappy about what one commentator has called Olmert's "committee of non-inquiry". Separate investigations mean that the remit of each committee will be very narrow, focusing on technical issues and failings, and unable to look at the wider picture.

The members of the committee who will be investigating Olmert have been handpicked by him. All the judges approached to head the committee turned down the offer, as did the country's foremost constitutional law expert, Amnon Rubinstein, apparently aware that being party to a whitewash would permanently tarnish his reputation.

It will now be led by a former head of Mossad, Israel's international spy agency. Observers have speculated that 77-year-old Nahum Admoni's room for criticising the government will be extremely limited, given that he himself was admonished by the Kahan Commission of Inquiry that in 1982 investigated Israel's role in the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the Lebanese refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla. Admoni failed to give "an unequivocal warning about the danger entailed in the Phalangists' entry into the camps" that resulted in the slaughter of more than 1,000 Palestinians. Mossad was keenly involved with the Christian Phalangists, attempting to install them in power as a puppet regime.

Kahan took no action against Admoni, however, because he — like Olmert now — had only recently taken up his job. It will be hard for Admoni to treat Olmert more harshly than Kahan treated him two decades ago.

Why would Olmert want a discredited committee rather than a proper commission of inquiry, especially if, as he claims, the reason against the latter is that it will take years to report? By then, he may be out of office and never have to face the fall-out. The official reason, according to Olmert, is that such a delay would paralyse the army. But most commissions of inquiry have produced interim reports, making recommendations for reforms, within a few months and have then taken their time to produce a final report.

Other factors are at play, relating to the past and the future. The obvious one is that a powerful commission would almost certainly investigate the six-year build-up to the war following Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon. There is a real danger that its investigations might throw an uncomfortable light on Israel's motives for continuing provocative overflights by its war planes in Lebanon; on its refusal to hand over the maps of the minefields it planted in south Lebanon during its two decades of occupation; on its refusal to release the last remaining Lebanese prisoners in its jails, thereby perpetuating a state of hostilities; and its refusal to negotiate with Lebanon and Syria about an end to its occupation of the Golan Heights and with it a resolution of the disputed status of the corridor of land known as the Shebaa Farms, which Lebanon claims.

But there is an even bigger threat posed by the establishment of a commission. It might unearth evidence that the war against Lebanon was long planned, that it had nothing to do with the capture of two soldiers on the border, that it was coordinated with the United

States, and that its ultimate goal was an attack on Iran.

Olmert, and Israel's political and military leaders, do not need another Kahan Commission — or another embarrassment like its findings about Israel's involvement with the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. Israel needs a free hand to strike unchallenged when the next stage of the war on terror takes shape. Olmert admitted as much in his coded observation that a commission of inquiry would distract from the central goal: "to focus on the future and the Iranian threat".

A clue where Israel might be heading next emerged this week when Olmert's trusted international ambassador, Shimon Peres, "revealed" that Iran is trying to transfer its nuclear know-how to terrorist organisations. Peres did not name Hizbullah but it is only time before the link is made and a new casus belli established.

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