

The lies Israel tells itself (and that we tell on its behalf)

When journalists use the word "apparently", or another favourite "reportedly"...

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When journalists use the word "apparently", or another favourite "reportedly", they are usually distancing themselves from an event or an interpretation in the supposed interests of balance. But I think we should read the "apparently" contained in a statement from the head of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, relating to the killing this week of four unarmed UN monitors by the Israeli army in its other sense.

When Annan says that those four deaths were "apparently deliberate", I take him to mean that the evidence shows that the killings were deliberate. And who can disagree with him? At least 10 phone calls were made to Israeli commanders over a period of six hours warning that artillery and aerial bombardments were either dangerously close to or hitting the monitors' building.

The UN post, in Khaim just inside south Lebanon, was clearly marked and well-known to the army, but nonetheless it was hit directly four times in the last hour before an Israeli helicopter fired a precision-guided missile that tore through the roof of an underground shelter, killing the monitors inside. A UN convoy that arrived too late to rescue the peacekeepers was also fired on. From the evidence, it does not get much more deliberate than that.

The problem, however, is that Western leaders, diplomats and the media take the "apparently" in its first sense — as a way to avoid holding Israel to account for its actions. For "apparently deliberate", read "almost certainly accidental". That was why the best the UN Security Council could manage after a day and a half of deliberation was a weasly statement of "shock and distress" at the killings, as though they were an act of God.

Our media are no less responsible for this evasiveness. They make sure "we" — the publics of the West — never countenance the thought that a society like our own, one we are always being reminded is a democracy, could sink to the depths of inhumanity required to murder unarmed peacekeepers. Who can be taken seriously challenging the Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni's assertion that "There will never be an [Israeli] army commander that will intentionally aim at civilians or UN soldiers [sic]"?

Even the minority in the West who have started to fear that Israel is "apparently" slaughtering civilians across Lebanon or that it is "apparently" intending to make refugees of a million Lebanese must presumably shrink from the idea that Israel is also capable of killing unarmed UN monitors.

After all, our media insinuate, the two cases are not comparable.

There may be good reasons why Lebanese civilians need to suffer. Let's not forget that they belong to a people (or is it a race or, maybe, a religion?) that gave birth to Hizbullah. "We" can cast aside our concerns for the moment and take it on trust that Israel has cause to kill the Lebanese or make them homeless. Doubtless the justifications will emerge later, when we have lost interest in the "Lebanon crisis". We may never hear what those reasons were, but who can doubt that they exist?

The "apparent" murder of four UN monitors, however, is a deeper challenge to our faith in our moral superiority, which is why that "apparently" is held on to as desperately as a talisman. No civilised country could kill peacekeepers, especially ones drawn from our own societies, from Canada, Finland and Austria? That is the moral separation line that divides us from the terrorists. Were that line to be erased, we would be no different from those whom we must fight.

An iconic image of this war that our media have managed to expunge from the official record but which keeps popping up in email inboxes like a guilty secret is of young Israeli girls, lipsticked and nailpolished as if on their way to a party, drawing messages of death and hatred on the sides of the missiles about to be loaded on to army trucks and tanks. In one, an out-of-focus soldier stands on a tank paternally watching over the girls as they address another death threat to Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

Is this the truer face of Israeli society, even if it is the one we are never shown and refuse to believe in. And are "we" in the West hurtling down the same path?

Driving through the Jewish city of Upper Nazareth this week, I realised how inured I am becoming to this triumphal militarism — and the racism that feeds it. Nothing surprising about the posters of "We will win" on every hoarding. But it takes me more than a few seconds to notice that the Magen David ambulance in front of me is flying a little national flag, the blue Star of David, from its window. I have heard that American fire engines flew US flags after 9/11, but this somehow seems worse. How is it possible for an ambulance, the embodiment of our neutral, civilised, universal, "Western", humanitarian values, to fly a national flag, I think to myself? And does it make a difference that only a few months ago Magen David joined the International Committee of the Red Cross?

Only slowly do my thoughts grow more disturbed: how many hospital administrators, doctors and nurses have seen that ambulance arrive at their emergency departments and thought nothing of it? And is that the only Israeli ambulance flying the flag, or are many others doing the same? Later the BBC TV news answers my question. I see two ambulances with the same flags going to the front line to collect casualties. Will others soon cross over the border into southern Lebanon, after it is "secured", and will no one mention those little flags fluttering from the window?

A psychologist tells me how upset she is about a meeting she attended a few days ago of the northern coordinating committee of her profession. They were discussing how best to treat the shock and trauma suffered by Israeli children under the bombardment from Hizbullah. The meeting concluded with an agreement that the psychologists would reassure the children with the statement: "The army is there to protect us."

And so, the seeds of fascism are unthinkingly sown for another generation of children,

children like our own.

No one agreed with my friend when she dissented, arguing that this was not the message to be telling impressionable minds, and that violence against the Other is not a panacea for our problems. Parents, not soldiers, are responsible for protecting their children, she pointed out. Tanks, planes and guns bring only fear and more hatred, hatred that will one day return to haunt us.

The slow, gentle indoctrination continues day in, day out, reinforcing the idea among Israel's Jewish population that the army can do no wrong and that it needs no oversight, not even from politicians (most of whom are former generals anyway, or like the prime minister Ehud Olmert too frightened to stand up to the chiefs of staff if they wanted to). "We will win". How do we know we will win? Because "the army is there to protect us." Add into the mix that faceless "Arab" enemy, those sub-beings, and you have a recipe for fascism — even if it is of the democratically elected variety.

The Israeli media, of course, are the key to providing the second half of that equation — or rather not providing it. You can sit watching the main Israeli channels all day, flicking between channels 1, 2 and 10, and not see a Lebanese face, apart from that of Hassan Nasrallah, the new Hitler. I don't mean the charred faces of corpses, or the bandaged babies, or the amputees lying in hospital beds. I mean any Lebanese faces. Just as you almost never see a Palestinian face on Israeli TV unless they are the mob, disfigured with hatred as they hold aloft another martyr on his way to burial.

Lebanon only swings in to view on Israeli television through the black and white footage of an aerial gun sight, or through the long shot of a distant urban landscape seconds before it is "pulverised" by a dropped bomb. The buildings crumble, flames shoot up, clouds of dust billow into the air. Another shot of arcade-game adrenalin.

The humanitarian stories exist but they do not concern Lebanon. Animal welfare societies plead on behalf of the dogs and cats left alone to face the rocket fire on deserted Kiryat Shemona, just as they did before for foxes and deer when Israel began building its mammoth walls of concrete and steel across their migration routes in the West Bank, walls that are also imprisoning, unseen, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

The rest of the coverage is dedicated to Israeli army spokespeople, including the national heartthrob Miri Regev, and media "commentators" and "analysts". Who are these people? They are from the same pool of former military intelligence and security service officers who once did this job in the closed rooms of army HQ but now wallow in the limelight. One favoured pundit is even subtitled "Expert on psychological warfare against Hassan Nasrallah".

And who are the presenters and anchors who interview them? The other day an ageing expert on Apache helicopters interrupted his interviewer irritably to tell him his question was stupid. "We were in the army together and both know the answer. Don't play dumb?" It was a rare reminder that these anchors too are just soldiers in suits. One of the most popular, Ehud Yaari of Channel 2, barely conceals his military credentials as he condones yet more violence against the Lebanese or, if he can be deflected for a moment, the people of Gaza.

That is what comes of having a "citizen army", where teenagers learn to use a gun before

they can drive and men do reserve duty until their late 40s. It means every male teacher, professor, psychologist and journalist thinks as a soldier because that is what he has been for most of his life.

Israel is not unique, far from it, though it is in a darker place, and has been for some time, than “we” in the West can fully appreciate. It is a mirror of what our own societies are capable of, despite our democratic values. It shows how a cult of victimhood makes one heartless and cruel, and how racism can be repackaged as civilised values.

Maybe those UN monitors, with their lookout post above the battlefield where Israel wants to use any means it can to destroy Hizbullah and Lebanese civilians who get in the way, had to be removed simply because they are a nuisance, a restraint when Israel needs to get on with the job of asserting “our” values. Maybe Israel does not want the scrutiny of peacekeepers as it fights our war on terror for us. Maybe it feared that the monitors’ reports might help to give back to the Lebanese, even to Hizbullah, their faces, their history, their suffering.

And, if we are honest, Israel is not alone. How many of us want the Arabs to remain faceless so we can keep believing we are the victims of a new ideology that wants only our evisceration, just as the “Red Indians” once supposedly wanted our scalps? How many many of us believe that our values demand that we fall in behind a new world order in which Arab deaths are not real deaths because “they” are not fully human?

And how many of us believe that deliberate barbarity, at least when we do it, is only “apparently” a crime against humanity?

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