

When Civilians Become Targets: The Israeli Destruction of Lebanon and Gaza

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In the last two weeks, Israel has sent a chilling message to the Palestinian and Lebanese people: civilians and infrastructure are legitimate targets in their war of aggression. The Geneva Conventions have been fragrantly violated and humanitarian law has been thrown into the garbage can. The Israeli government would have us believe that the killing of civilians is the “necessary consequence” of holding *one* Israeli prisoner in Gaza and *two* Israeli prisoners in Lebanon.

On July 12, Israel killed 22 Palestinians in Gaza, including nine civilians from one family. An economic, political and physical siege has been placed on the Palestinian people. In the past two weeks, the Israeli bombardment has killed eighty Palestinians, knocked out power and water for the majority of Gaza’s 1.3 million inhabitants, and pummeled Gaza’s infrastructure with thousands of artillery shells. The international community has been silent on the sidelines, while Israeli forces bombed Gaza back twenty years—as it promises to do with Lebanon. While the premeditated assault on Gaza continues, Israel still holds nearly 10,000 abducted Palestinians, including many members of the Palestinian government.

This week, Hezbollah attacked an Israeli military target, killing three soldiers. Four more soldiers died after an Israeli tank ran over a mine in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah now holds two Israeli prisoners that were caught in the attack. In response, Israel bombed civilian infrastructure and Beirut’s Rafik Al-Hariri International Airport. July is Lebanon’s busiest tourist month. Bombing all three runways of Beirut’s airport and its fuel tanks is a direct attack on the economic welfare of Lebanese society. Already, thousands have fled the country, but with the intense bombing of the airport and the main highway leading out to Damascus, fleeing for safety has become impossible. Reminiscent of the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, the Lebanese population has rushed to supermarkets for food and supplies in fear of a further escalation of Israeli aggression.

The military onslaught against Lebanon has only intensified and expanded. The Israeli strikes have devastated Lebanon’s infrastructure, destroying most of country’s bridges—including bridges in the South that connect villages to their main roads. The entrances and exits of many villages in the South have been destroyed by Israeli forces—leaving civilians as prisoners in their villages. The widespread incursion has left most of the country without electricity and operating land lines. Many Lebanese have cell phones and rely on them as a means of communication, but with cell phone antennas knocked down in most parts of the country, cell phones are useless, further strangulating the population’s means to communicate. The majority of inhabitants in Lebanon are without communication to the outside world.

By 3 am Eastern Time on July 14, my cousin in Beirut indicated that power had been down for nearly an hour. Typing to me through instant messaging, (her electricity is supplied through a generator) she explained that she “couldn’t sleep last night because of the [Israeli] planes.” By the time I contacted her the next morning she said, “It’s horrible. It’s almost comical now. I feel like I’m in a dream. A bad dream.” The Israeli Air Force has been bombing the suburbs of Beirut throughout the morning and afternoon of July 14. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the Israeli Air Force has struck “a bridge in the southern suburb of Beirut, and the fuel stores of the Jiyeh power plant south of the city early Friday, witnesses and security sources said.”

In addition, there are many foreign nationals stuck in the South without a route out, while the expansive bombing is now putting all foreign nationals throughout the country at risk. The Lebanese in the South can’t flee up north towards Beirut because the roads and bridges leading to Beirut have been bombed by Israeli forces. During the civil war, many residents of the South would flee up north during intense periods of fighting to stay out of harms way—but because of the intensity of Israel’s collective punishment and killing, this measure has been impossible to pursue.

Israel continues to pound areas in and around Beirut and is further blasting densely populated Shia areas in the South and in the suburbs of Beirut. The Israeli Air Forces has struck multiple army bases in Lebanon and has bombed Al Manar, the Hezbollah run television station. Since the start of the offensive, Israel has killed at least 60 Lebanese civilians, including ten members of one family. It is yet unknown what humanitarian implications this offensive will have. Without electricity in the second hottest month of the year, it may have a serious effect on the population. The most affected will be young children, the elderly, pregnant women and those in need of medical care. Israel has warned that the military blockade debilitating Lebanese society will continue. The operation is likely to broaden, including more suburbs in Beirut and other heavily populated areas. Nearly 1.2 million people live in Beirut, while another 2.1 million people live in surrounding areas.

Placing Blame

Since the taking of the two Israeli prisoners, Israel and America have pointed fingers at Syria and Iran for supporting Hezbollah. Yet, it’s disingenuous to suggest that Syria and Iran are pulling the strings of Hezbollah. The actions of Syria and Iran are similar to American financially supporting Israel—both have interests in common, which justifies the financial support. It is not surprising that Syria and Iran—who out of favor with the Israel and the West—would be willing to fund movements that are trying to free their countries from occupation or defend their countries from Israel, the regional pariah state. It should be noted that Israel has not attributed blame to the Lebanese government for logistically helping Hezbollah, although, Israel still holds the Lebanese government “responsible.” Israel has been quick to take out its hostility on the Lebanese government—which forced out a militarily stationed Syria last year—and the civilian population of the state. The Lebanese government is already calling for a cease-fire and has petitioned to the United Nations to intervene. Israel and America know that the Lebanese government doesn’t have the power to disarm Hezbollah even if it wanted to, aside from the fact that it would be unwilling to start a civil war to appease Israel and America. Israel, mirroring the chilling standard it set in Gaza, is setting the same precedent in Lebanon.

Shifting Positions

There *is* a stark difference between the initial actions of Israel and the initial actions of Hezbollah and the groups in Gaza—Hezbollah and the groups in Gaza attacked military targets. Ironically, groups that much of the West regards as terrorists entities, applied more conventional standards of warfare in recent weeks than Israel has.

Since the start of its incursion in Gaza, Israeli forces abducted many members of the Palestinian government to put pressure on the Palestinian government to release Israeli Corporate Shalit. This policy is not new for Israel. Ali Abuminah, co-founder of ElectronicIntifada.net, pointed out on Berkley radio that “Israel explicitly introduced the tactic of hostage taking for the purpose of prisoners exchanges...in the early ‘90s.” Today, Israel holds many Lebanese prisoners and occupies the Shebaa Farms. Abuminah illustrates Israel’s hypocrisy in condemning Hezbollah’s “disregard for the sovereignty of Israel,”

“When did Israel every respect the sovereignty of any of its neighbors. Israel occupies southwest Syria. There are 30,000 Israeli settlers living in southwest Syria cultivating wine and enjoying the Golan Heights and claiming God gave it to them. Israel is establishing new settlements everyday throughout the Occupied Territories. Israel has been violating the airspace and territorial waters of Lebanon continuously and consistently ever since it was forced to withdraw its forces and its collaborator army, the South Lebanon army, in May 2000.”

A Christian Palestinian, who lived most of his life in Beirut before moving to the US, explained, “They [Israel] do whatever they want. They are so militarily superior. It’s been like this since 1967. It’s depressing. Once upon a time, when Russia was a big power, we could get some support, but now Israel can do whatever it wants and nobody gives a damn.”

What Happens Next?

Those that stayed silent during the atrocities inflicted upon Gaza have voiced a little more concern in the assault on Lebanon. The European Union (EU) stated, “The European Union is greatly concerned about the disproportionate use of force by Israel in Lebanon in response to attacks by Hezbollah on Israel.” The EU continued, “The presidency deplores the loss of civilian lives and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. The imposition of an air and sea blockade on Lebanon cannot be justified.” It is also not in the interest of the US government or the international community to see the collapse of the Lebanese government, as US President George Bush noted on July 13. The international community can stomach the slow ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, but they cannot stomach a regional war in the Middle East. Furthermore, regional instability has led crude oil to surge to 78 dollars a barrel—many analysts see 100 dollars a barrel in the not so distant future if regional instability continues. The outrage of US consumers may help Bush rethink the blank check he has given Israel “to defend itself.” While Condoleezza Rice urged Israel to “exercise restraint,” these hollow suggestions haven’t hindered Israel’s use of brute force.

The US, pressed by the EU and the UN, must force Israel to restrain itself and engage in negotiations to deescalate the situation in Lebanon and Gaza. The destruction of Lebanon and Gaza will not lead to the release of the Israeli prisoners. Much like the residents of Gaza, the Shia dominated south of Lebanon, which has seen widespread humanitarian support from Hezbollah, has become stronger willed over time. Israel hoped its military incursions in Gaza would break the back of Hamas, toppling the Hamas-led government in Palestine: this has yet to be the case. Although the Palestinian population is immensely suffering, it is not willing to concede to its occupier this time. Unfortunately for Israeli forces, those in the

Israeli north and possibly in Haifa, the residents of the South are willing to fight off its oppressive neighbor once again. It is up to the international community to let the Lebanese population know how long they will have to fight for.

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