

Israeli mantra

Peace by force



The debate on Israel's invasion of Lebanon occurred within a very narrow framework. **Steven Friedman**, a Jewish South African, believes the international community's response made a mockery of humanitarian law. He explains why and suggests that Israel's actions should be considered a crime against humanity in much the same way that apartheid was.

What would the apartheid state have looked like with a blank cheque from world opinion? Much like Israel today.

Like apartheid South Africa, Israel is a state reserved for an ethnic group. But it is better at prettying this up. It is a Jewish state which means that it can be maintained only at the expense of those who do not fit its ethnic specifications.

Unlike apartheid South Africa, it seems to get away with it. The major powers dismiss any suggestion that it ought to become a state for all its people as naïve nonsense. And so it is able to get away with behaviour for which the apartheid state faced international condemnation and sanctions.

Behaviour such as adopting a policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders it dislikes. Or violating the rights of people who have lived under its occupation for nearly 40 years. Or invading its neighbours to show them who is boss. For all this, Israel not only escapes sanctions, it often wins sympathy from major powers and the mainstream media.

Protecting Israel is a core goal of US foreign policy. When the

American Jewish theologian Marc Ellis asked despairingly whether there was anything the Israeli government could do which would morally offend Jewish leadership in America, he could have asked the same question of the American government. An election win for the Democrats would not change that, they also support Israel uncritically.

Europe is less supportive of the Israelis but comes down on their side in the end. One reason may be a desire not to offend the US. Another may be guilt at centuries of European anti-Semitism culminating in the Nazi atrocities. The guilt is justified. Europe has been responsible for more anti-Jewish discrimination than any other place on earth. But the price for it is being paid not by those who did the discriminating, but by the Palestinians.

This helps explain much of the Middle East conflict and to clarify events in Lebanon.

PARTIAL VISION

The 'official' view of what happened in Lebanon, that of the Israeli government, the US and

Europe, and much of the media, is that Hezbollah, a militantly Islamist organisation, launched an unprovoked attack on Israeli soldiers to which Israel had to respond. This was in the same manner that Hamas, in Gaza, had captured an Israeli soldier forcing a response in kind.

The Israelis, we are told, retaliated, prompting Hezbollah to fire rockets into northern Israeli settlements and the city of Haifa.

This forces debate on the Israeli action into a very narrow framework. It is assumed that the Israeli state was a victim and debate centres on how it should have responded. Was carpet bombing Lebanon the right response or an over-reaction? This entirely misrepresents what happened.

Capturing a uniformed soldier on duty is not a human rights abuse as long as the captors do not mistreat the captive. The Israelis have captured hundreds of Palestinians and Lebanese citizens. Most governments seem to believe that it is a human rights abuse to capture Israelis, but not those they are fighting.

Nor were the captures unprovoked, they followed months of violence by Israelis against Palestinians which was not condemned by the major powers. Shortly before the Hamas capture, Palestinians enjoying an afternoon on a beach in Gaza were killed. Despite an unconvincing Israeli attempt to claim that they were victims of buried Hamas shells, expert evidence confirms that they were, in all likelihood, the victim of Israeli actions.

Until the incident, Hamas had observed a one-year truce. Nevertheless, occupied Palestinian territories were deprived of vital resources because they had elected Hamas. And because, although it was willing to talk to the Israelis, it refused to 'recognise' Israel, so accepting in principle an ethnic state, much like demanding that the liberation movements recognise apartheid.

The Gaza beach shellings have been forgotten by all but the Palestinians, people only remember the retaliation. The Palestinians' right to elect their leadership is ignored and the side that refrained from violence is blamed for being provoked while the provoker is painted as the victim.

LIBERAL VIEW: FAULTS ON BOTH SIDES

A more liberal view of the conflict sees both sides as the problem. It insists that both must be called to account. And so some human rights organisations found both the Israelis and Hezbollah guilty of breaches of international law. Others, say they oppose the Israeli actions but refuse to condemn them publicly unless the Hezbollah attacks on civilians are condemned too.



“colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population”

(Vladimir Jabotinsky – a father of Zionism)

In this view there is no moral difference between the Israelis on the one hand, Hamas and Hezbollah on the other. Those who care about peace should knock sense into both sides.

This ignores the fact that, as long as Israel chooses to be a state for only some of its people, it is an automatic rights violator. That does not mean its adversaries can do whatever they like: even a just struggle must be subject to rules. But to discuss Israeli and Hezbollah actions in the light of international law without once mentioning that one is using the power of a state to violate the rights of Palestinians, just as the apartheid state used its power to deny rights to most South Africans, is to make a mockery of humanitarian law.

Criticism of Hezbollah and Hamas actions only makes moral

sense if it is framed within a recognition that both are responding to a major rights violation. Their actions must be judged by whether they are proportionate to the wrong they seek to address and can achieve a just end to the conflict. There is a difference between those who caused the problem by violating the rights of others and those who are reacting to that.

Nor can we see the Lebanon conflict as an Israeli reaction to an attack. It is not clear whether the soldiers Hezbollah captured were in Israel or in Lebanon, which would make the capture a defensive act. Whatever the truth, it is clear from Israeli sources that the attack on Lebanon had been in the works for a long time. All that was required was an excuse.

Whether Hezbollah provided that excuse is not clear. But the Lebanon conflict was not an accident. It is an almost inevitable result of the way in which the Israeli state sees the Middle East conflict.

THE IRON WALL

Israeli strategy is a product of the 'Iron Wall' theory coined by right-wing Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky and endorsed by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, and other key Israeli leaders. It is discussed in a book of the same name by Israeli historian Avi Shlaim.

This acknowledges that Palestinians will never voluntarily accept an ethnic state from which they are excluded. "Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonised," Jabotinsky wrote.

“...therefore, there is no likelihood of any voluntary agreement being reached.” Zionism could only be imposed by force: “colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population.” So peace cannot be negotiated: it can be the result only of force.

This view is reinforced by a spurious Zionist vision of the world which insists that the Jewish people is perpetually surrounded by threats and can save itself only by showing enough physical strength to keep everyone else at bay. Unless the Palestinians are forced into submission, they will, in this view, threaten Jewish survival.

The logical implication is that war will be inevitable in the Middle East until the Palestinians are so crushed that they have to accept colonisation. And, since that is unlikely to happen, the Israeli state continues to base itself on a view which makes war an inevitable product of its continued existence. If Palestinians will never accept colonisation, Palestinian willingness to negotiate must be suspect unless they are so crushed that they are seeking surrender.

This explains why the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon must, in the Israeli view, be met by military might. It explains too why Hamas is not seen as a negotiating partner until it is prepared to humiliate itself by surrendering to the idea of an ethnic state. And it explains why world attention was focussed on Lebanon. The Israelis were not seeking to negotiate in Gaza but were conducting a sustained assault on its people, which continues. Not only have hundreds been killed. In June, the Israelis bombed Gaza’s power plant, leaving it without electricity. This,

with the cut off of aid to the Palestinian authority, has turned the territory into a humanitarian disaster. Recently the *London Independent* reported that residents had been reduced to one meal a day while some were forced to scavenge on garbage dumps.

Unless we understand the logic of Israeli actions, this makes no sense. Surely they know that victimising an entire territory will radicalise it? Surely they understand that punishing people for voting for Hamas will only make some Palestinians more angry? Surely they know that Hamas was signalling a willingness to compromise and that by trying to bully it, they are throwing away an opportunity for a settlement?

These questions only make sense if you believe a negotiated settlement is possible. The Iron Wall approach means that the Israelis do not. As long as they believe that only a Palestinian surrender is possible, a Palestinian willingness to negotiate as equals will simply be taken as a sign that more pressure is needed to ensure that they beg for surrender talks.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Does this mean we are doomed to watch never-ending violence in the Middle East? Not necessarily. But change requires far more moral will from the world, including South Africa.

The Israeli state sees the conflict as one in which might is right – either you push others around or they will push you. So its attitude will change only when the power balance changes.

At the moment, the Israelis have things much their own way. Lebanon confirmed that it

continues to enjoy diplomatic support. Besides America and Britain’s refusal to try to stop the violence, the UN ceasefire resolution allows UN troops to do what the Israelis could not – place a buffer between Hezbollah and the Israelis.

Just as apartheid could not be beaten by force of arms, neither can Israeli domination of the Palestinian people. But the diplomatic balance can change if enough people pressure their governments to press the Israelis to end violence and begin good faith negotiations with elected Palestinian leaders.

Approaches which treat the two sides as morally equal will not bring peace because the Israelis are not waiting for friendly folk to help them negotiate. They do not yet believe they should negotiate and will not believe this until the balance of power changes.

The only way to do that is to make the assault on the Palestinian people the same international human rights issue which apartheid was. This would not only jolt the Israelis, it would also create incentives for Palestinian leadership to develop new political strategies for change which would be far more effective than violence or resignation, into which Palestinians have been forced by the indifference of the major powers.

Our government, like all others, has a duty to place peaceful pressure on the Israelis to heed the voice of the Palestinian people. And, in the name of our common humanity, we have a duty to urge it to do so.

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