

Justice and hate

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We've been spending some time trying to understand the recent events in Lebanon. We are certainly not experts on the Middle East; and like most situations of warfare, this one is shrouded in complexities that will only become clearer when hostilities have ceased. Nevertheless we thought it might be helpful to gather the facts as others have reported them, and then to offer a Christian evaluation.

1. Timeline

- 1917: Balfour Declaration supports the idea of a Jewish national homeland.
- 1920: Britain is mandated to govern present-day Israel, Jordan and the Occupied Territories, allowing thousands of Jews to migrate to Palestine from all over the world.
- 1937: A British Royal Commission recommends partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish zone, but Arab nations voice their opposition to the plan.
- 1947: The General Assembly of the United Nations votes to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab controlled sectors.
- 1948: On Friday May 14, 1948 (the day the British Mandate over Palestine expired) the *Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel* was signed by members of the National Council, representing the Jewish community in the country and the Zionist movement abroad. Lebanon joins forces with four other Arab nations to invade the region, attempting to prevent the birth of the Jewish nation. Arabs call the land occupied by the Israelis 'Palestine', and thousands of Palestinians flee to other Arab countries, with several Palestinian guerrilla armies forming to fight Israel.
- 1949: An armistice is signed regulating the presence of military forces in southern Lebanon. Lebanon proves to be the most peaceful of Israel's Arab neighbours, even though the two nations technically remain in a state of war.
- 1967: During the Six Day War, Israel launches a pre-emptive strike against its Arab neighbours, but Lebanon is left alone.
- 1969: Under pressure from anti-Israeli Arab regimes, Lebanon agrees to the use of its southern region by Palestinian guerrillas, led by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), as a springboard to infiltrate Israel or launch cross-border attacks. Cross-border raids provoke violent responses from Israel.
- 1973: Yom Kippur War: Syria and Egypt, supported by other Arab states, launch surprise attacks against Israel. Although Lebanon is not an active participant in the conflict, northern Israel is shelled from Lebanese positions and its radar systems used by Syria.
- 1975: The delicate population balance between Lebanon's Christians and Muslims, upset by the arrival of Muslim Palestinians in the south, erupts into civil war. Syria sends 40,000 troops ostensibly for 'peace-keeping'; but Syrian troops begin to fight alongside the PLO against Lebanese Christian forces. Israel supplies weapons and other support to anti-Muslim forces, but this period sees the Palestinian guerrilla movement establish itself as a major force within Lebanon. The war continues until 1990, with Syria only withdrawing its forces in 2005.
- 1978: After repeated Palestinian bombardment of northern Israel and Israeli counter-attacks, 25,000 Israeli troops invade southern Lebanon to drive out the PLO. A U.N. peacekeeping force deploys and Israel withdraws, leaving control of the area to the South Lebanon Army. An estimated 285,000 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians become refugees, and between 1000 and 2000 Lebanese civilians die.
- 1982: After more rocket and artillery exchanges, the U.S. Reagan Administration backs another Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israel's campaign is destructive and costly, and its forces withdraw while retaining a 'security zone' just north of the Israel-Lebanon border. During

this period, Palestinian guerrillas evacuate Lebanon, but are replaced by a new Lebanese guerrilla force—Hezbollah (or ‘Hizballah’), the ‘Party of God’. This group is drawn from the Shiite Muslim community in southern and eastern Lebanon, supported by 400,000 Palestinian refugees still living in Lebanon, and materially aided by Syria and Iran. It controls southern Lebanon.

- 1993: Israel launches a military campaign against Hezbollah. Hezbollah retaliate with rocket attacks, to which Israel responds by making southern Lebanon an inhospitable environment for Hezbollah, targeting buildings, houses and infrastructure.
- 1996: Israeli forces launch the 17-day ‘Grapes of Wrath’ campaign, committing 1,100 air raids and over 25,000 shells against Hezbollah targets. Hezbollah launches 640 rockets into northern Israel. Casualties include over 500 Lebanese civilians killed and wounded, and 62 Israeli civilians wounded.
- 2000: Israel withdraws from the security zone to the internationally recognised ‘Blue Line’, but warns it will return if its northern security is compromised. Hezbollah celebrates the withdrawal, but claims that Israeli occupation of a small, empty piece of land near Syria, the Chebaa Farms, is illegal. The frontier is quiet for six years, Hezbollah respecting the Blue Line and taking no credit for attacks outside the disputed Chebaa Farms.
- 9am July 12, 2006: Hezbollah fire rocket at two sites, killing or wounding five Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two. For an excellent presentation of daily events since then, see http://www.nytimes.com/packages/khtml/2006/07/19/world/middleeast/20060719_MIDEAST_GRAPHIC.html. Deaths by August 6 total 94 Israelis (mostly soldiers) and about 700 Lebanese (mostly civilians).
- August 7 2006: Lebanese Prime Minister Siniora vetoes a U.S. brokered ceasefire because it would allow Israeli forces to remain in southern Lebanon until an international force arrives. Foreign ministers from 20 Arab states appear to be in support.
- August 9 2006: Israelis invade southern Lebanon.

2. What do Hezbollah want?

Hezbollah’s kidnapping of two soldiers in the north came not long after difficulties in Israel’s south (where Hamas, operating out of the Gaza Strip, kidnapped an Israeli soldier). Hezbollah could simply be using the moment as an opportunity to place further pressure upon Israel. But Hezbollah says it wants the release of three Lebanese prisoners in Israeli hands, along with some ten thousand Palestinian prisoners.

The group has long been regarded by many Lebanese as the only effective defender of Lebanon against Israel, in contrast to the perceived weakness of the Lebanese government. By serving the Palestinian cause, Hezbollah further enhances its domestic and regional standing. For example if international leaders produce a ceasefire, Hezbollah can then claim a victory and reinforce its local political standing as Lebanon’s true defenders.

But observers think Hezbollah’s new aggression must be driven by more, and point to Hezbollah’s Syrian and Iranian support. The kidnappings occurred on the same day that Iran was to respond to a European incentives package that was offered with a view to halting Iran’s nuclear enrichment program. Perhaps Iran is using Hezbollah in order to relieve pressure on Iran’s nuclear program, by applying pressure to the international community elsewhere. This result seemed to have occurred when a recent G-8 Summit focused upon the Lebanon crisis and allowed the Iranian nuclear question to slip from its agenda.

If Hezbollah is Syria’s and/or Iran’s proxy, then it is uncertain just how limited Hezbollah’s goals are, and its role may have larger regional implications.

3. What does Israel want?

Israel's goals are straightforward. In military terms, it seeks an end to Hezbollah operations in southern Lebanon. In political terms, it seeks to promote the conditions under which the Lebanese government can assert control over the area, possibly with international help. A flow-on effect of nullifying Hezbollah is that Israel removes a significant weapon from the hands of its regional enemies. In terms of the immediate conflict then, Israel's goals are:

1. the release of kidnapped Israeli soldiers;
2. the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559's call for disarming Hezbollah; and
3. the deployment of Lebanese forces along the border, also as called for in Resolution 1559.

Of course if Israel succeeds in destroying Hezbollah and its infrastructure, it may also damage so much Lebanese infrastructure as to impair the effectiveness of the Lebanese government. The Israeli conundrum is to neutralise Hezbollah while retaining relations with an effective Lebanese government, with whom signs of peaceful coexistence have been emerging over the last six years.

4. Christian considerations

a) 'Christian Zionism'

For some Christians, it is hard to know how to respond to events in the Middle East, because they seem 'supernaturally' different to events elsewhere in the world.

Christians know that in the Old Testament, the land of Israel figures highly in the purposes of God. God's Genesis 12 promise to Abraham of a people, a land and great blessing is realised throughout Joshua and Judges as the ancient Israelites miraculously conquer the Canaanites. But the land is lost again under successive assaults by the Assyrians and the Babylonians (1-2 Kings, Isaiah 40-66, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), and never really regained.

For 'Christian Zionists,' the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 is the fulfilment of a biblically predicted return by Jewish people to this land, and is a necessary precursor to the return of Christ. It is beyond the scope of this briefing to outline Christian Zionism and its history, or to respond to it in detail, but John Hubers of the Reformed Church in America has written an excellent historical and doctrinal summary which includes good background material on modern Middle Eastern history (see link below). The end point of Christian Zionism is a 'maximalist' stance on the extent of Israeli territory, where the proper Jewish State is held to include the present state of Israel, the whole of the occupied West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Zionism, which is very popular among American Protestants (and another version of it among Israeli orthodox Jews) significantly affects the way many people, perhaps even including many statesmen, approach the affairs of modern Israel.

Christian Zionists should be respected for their attempts to take the Bible seriously, but John Hubers is right when he says that the critique of Christian Zionism is 'first and foremost a biblical critique' (p17). Many Bible-believing Christians think that Christian Zionists have not taken adequate account of how the New Testament says that Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled. For example, we see no reference to the restoration of the land in Jesus' teaching or in any of the apostles' teaching. Hubers' paper includes a short statement of what Sydney Anglican evangelicals would call a 'biblical theology'—an account of the overall 'story arc' of the Bible in which we find that the promises of a land to Abraham are fulfilled *not* by the establishment of a physical land in this age, but by Jesus' rule of heaven and earth with his people in a future 'age'. For Wheaton College Professor Gary Burge (see book reference below), the Christian Zionist position relies on 'dispensationalist' views which in turn can be biblically challenged (Chapter 12).

In other words, many Christians think that there are weighty biblical grounds upon which to conclude that there is nothing supernaturally special about the states of the modern Middle East. They are nation states much like any other, and subject to the same kinds of moral reasoning and analysis as any other.

b) Just war

According to a longstanding tradition of Christian thought, **war is about justice**, and must be limited to whatever brings about justice. On this view, a war can only be defended as ‘an extraordinary mode of judgment’. Of course justice is better pursued with laws, trials, judges and so on; but war stands in relation to that kind of justice in the same way that ‘an emergency operation, performed in a remote mountain hut with a penknife, stands to the same surgery performed under clinical conditions in a hospital’ (O’Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, p. 18). War is the kind of justice we have when it is the only justice we’ve got.

This is Israel’s position in its prosecution of war against southern Lebanon. As at August 9th, over 3,300 Hezbollah rockets have fallen upon northern Israel. U.S. *Sojourners*’ Jim Wallis, who has many concerns about the Israeli response, nonetheless sums up the conflict’s most basic injustice: ‘Killing innocent civilians (often families and children) is evil and must be steadfastly opposed, and in response to such ugly violence we must draw a clear line in the sand.’ Israel and its people exist, and there is no going back. Therefore unprovoked attacks against Israeli citizens by Hezbollah must be stopped because they are straightforwardly evil, and the Lebanese government appears not to have the kind of ‘hospital’ in which this justice problem can be ‘treated’. Israel has enacted its rough justice, and just war theory allows for such action.

It follows, though, from a just war theory that action to enact justice cannot be *indiscriminate* or *disproportionate*. Indiscriminate actions intend the death of those who are not materially contributing to the injustice, and disproportionate actions are not commensurate with the severity of the injustice, or result in conditions that destroy the possibility of habitation and subsistence, and therefore the possibility of a settled peace.

Many think that Israel has developed a habit of indiscriminate and disproportionate response. The Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem thinks that Israel’s defense force has developed a casual and callous attitude to Arabs in the West Bank, Gaza and southern Lebanon (see link below). It has to be acknowledged that Israel has always had to fight uncompromisingly against angry, determined and very callous opponents. Even so, they are in error if they become like those opponents, and as far as we can tell from this distance and through the fog of war, the current level of Israeli hostility seems both indiscriminate and disproportionate.

Israeli leaders deny this charge. Vice Premier and ex-Prime Minister Shimon Peres said that ‘when we know there is a base of rockets or missiles, we look at the map and the first consideration is, how far away is it from civilian buildings and schools. We never bomb a base that is close to a school or a mosque, even a private home,’ going on to claim that Hezbollah use human shields. ‘But look, in war there are mistakes.’ (See also the Israel Foreign Ministry statement at the link below.)

Israel’s difficulty in restraining an enemy deeply embedded into the political structure of southern Lebanon emerges when Peres says ‘we told the Lebanese people and Hezbollah, either leave your home or get rid of the missiles.’ But that solution is impossibly difficult for the Lebanese people; meanwhile the Israeli response, to make southern Lebanon ‘unhospitable’ for Hezbollah, can too easily become indiscriminate and disproportionate. That said, anyone opposing Israel’s current actions needs to be able to suggest what Israel should do differently while still protecting its people, which is not easy to do. (At the time of writing, Israel is launching the kind of ground assault that could enable a much more accurate response against Hezbollah operatives.)

c) Hate

The current conflict, coming as it does after forty years of sporadic hostilities, only highlights the real tragedy of the Middle East. A cycle of violence layered on top of the circumstances of modern Israel’s establishment has resulted in a form of institutionalized loathing. International arbitration can assist to ameliorate the worst effects of this hatred, but of course cannot reach deep into the hearts that generate it. Neither Muslim nor Zionist dogma (whether Christian or Jewish) has what it takes to generate the large-scale repentance and forgiveness that will be needed if Arabs and Jews are to live together.

That conclusion seems a rather obvious one to arrive at, but it is no less truthful for that. Realistically, Christians in Australia only have the throne of God to call upon in this situation, asking God to show all the warring parties in all their collective ignorance and sin to begin to take notice of the preciousness of their enemies, and at least to begin negotiating with one another.

- Can Arabs give up their basic claim against the existence of the Jewish state?
- Can Jewish people acknowledge that their ongoing treatment of Arabs has sometimes been wrong? Can they acknowledge the legitimate grievances held by the previous Arab residents of Israel who call themselves 'Palestinian'?
- Can the international community have the wit and wisdom to parley mutually agreeable terms so that these questions can be considered without violence?

We'll be praying that God graciously answers *yes* to all of these big questions. But as Archbishop Rowan Williams' sensitive response (http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/060806a.htm) highlights, it is excruciatingly difficult for either Hezbollah or Israel to make even tiny concessions on an hour by hour basis. We need to pray for everyone involved in those ongoing negotiations to find a tiny bit more trust for their enemies, day by day.

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