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## WAR AND PEACE IN THE MIDEAST

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Michael Lerner, Gila Svirsky, Uri Avnery and Gideon Levy discuss the political and moral significance of this summer's violence.

### End the Suffering in the Middle East

By Rabbi Michael Lerner

July 17th, 2006

The people of the Middle East are suffering again as militarists on all sides, and cheerleading journalists, send forth missiles, bombs and endless words of self-justification for yet another pointless round of violence between Israel and her neighbors. For those of us who care deeply about human suffering, this most recent episode in irrationality evokes tears of sadness, incredulity at the lack of empathy on all sides, anger at how little anyone seems to have learned from the past, and moments of despair as we once again see the religious and democratic ideals subordinated to the cynical realism of militarism.

Meanwhile, the partisans on each side, content to ignore the humanity of "the Other," rush to assure their constituencies that the enemy is always to blame. Each such effort is pointless. We have a struggle that has been going on for over a hundred years. Who tosses the latest match into the tinder box matters little. What matters is how to repair the situation. The blame game only succeeds in diverting attention from that central issue.

Within the context of blame, there's enough to go around. It all depends on where you start the story. Counting on lack of historical memory, the partisans on all sides choose the place that best fits them into a narrative in which they are the "righteous victims" and the others are the evil aggressors. Palestinians like to start the story in 1948 with the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes during the war on Israel proclaimed by neighboring Arab states, and the refusal of the Israeli government to allow these people to return to once the hostilities ceased. Israelis prefer to start the story when Jews were desperately seeking to escape from the genocide they faced in Europe, and a cynical Arab leadership convinced the British military to side with local Palestinians who sought to prevent those Jewish refugees from joining their fellow Jews living in Palestine at the time. I tell the story, and how to understand both sides, in my book *Healing Israel/Palestine*.

Or one can start more recently, with this summer's escalation of violence. But where exactly did that start? Please go to the website of Israeli human rights organization [B'tselem](#) to see that each side can point to outrageous acts on the part of the other.

Since the death of Yasir Arafat and the assumption of power by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Palestine's major political factions — Fatah and Hamas — observed a hudna, or ceasefire. Yet Israel, pointing to the fact that Abbas' police force (decimated by Israeli bombings during the 2nd Intifada of 2001-2003) was unable to fully restrain the violence of Hamas, the Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade and Islamic Jihad—and used that weakness as its reason to claim that there was "nobody to talk to" when the peace forces in Israel pleaded with former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and later with current PM Ehud Olmert that the Palestinian request for negotiations should be accepted. Instead, Israel announced a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank (implemented in 2005) and from forthcoming sections of the West Bank (to have begun with the removal of illegal outposts this summer) that would de facto create new borders which would incorporate into Israel large parts of the West Bank that Israel had agreed to leave during the 1990s. Tikkun magazine and Israeli peace forces warned that the unilateral withdrawal, opposed by the Palestinian Authority,

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would add credibility to Hamas' claim that all the Palestinian Authority's efforts at non-violence had produced nothing more than Israel refusing to talk, whereas acts of violence by Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza had led to the IDF withdrawing to protect its soldiers.

It wouldn't be hard to see why Sharon went ahead with the unilateral withdrawal. If his intention was, as stated, to hold on to as much of the West Bank as possible, it would be far easier to convince the world that "there is nobody to talk to" if Hamas would win the coming election, since Hamas was universally recognized to be a terrorist group. When the Palestinian people complied by falling for this trick and establishing a government run by people who refused to acknowledge the right of Israel to exist, it was easy for Olmert to affirm the Sharon unilateralism and announce plans to withdraw from the West Bank that would be the political cover for Israel annexing significant parts of the Occupied Territory. Hamas played its expected role by lobbing Qassam rockets at Israeli population centers, thereby "proving" for the Israeli right that any withdrawal would only intensify Israeli vulnerability and give Israeli hard-liners reason to oppose Olmert's partial withdrawal as appeasement that had already failed to bring peace in Gaza.

Of course, from the standpoint of Hamas, this was only part of an ongoing struggle to free thousands of Palestinians who continue to be "arrested" (or, from the Palestinian perspective, "kidnapped") by the IDF, incarcerated without charges or trial for six months in huge prison camps, often subject to torture. Yet Hamas, faced with an economic boycott (including the withholding to Hamas of taxes Israel collected from Palestinians that Israel had previously promised it would give back to the Palestinian Authority) that was preventing it from being able to function as a government, made statements that indicated that it was exploring the idea of de facto recognition in response to the Prisoners document, which threatened to undercut everyone because it was signed by members of every major faction of Palestinians sitting in Israeli jails).

For Israeli militarists and the settlers, Hamas recognition of Israel, however partial, would have been a dramatic propaganda defeat. Within days Israelis began shelling inside Gaza (allegedly to stop Hamas' firing of Qassam rockets against Israeli population centers). One such shell landed on a Gaza beach, killing a family of eight who were simply enjoying the sun and water. A few days later, a Hamas group captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and Israel used this as its excuse to implement a plan it had developed months before to re-enter Gaza and destroy the Hamas infrastructure.

At this point a huge escalation took place. Instead of narrowly focusing on Hamas' capacity to make war, the Israelis chose the path of collective punishment, a frequently ineffective counterinsurgency policy used to eliminate public support for resistance movements. In the height of the oppressive summer heat, Israel bombed the electricity grid, effectively cutting off Gaza's water and the electricity needed to keep refrigeration working, thereby guaranteeing a dramatic decrease in food for the area's already destitute, million plus population. This act was yet another violation of international law that include the arrests of thousands by Israelis and the shooting of Qassams at population centers by Hamas.

In response, Hezbollah fighters who had occupied the land abandoned by Israel when Israel terminated its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000, launched an attack on Israeli troops inside Israel in clear violation of the understandings that peace would be maintained on that border—understandings that made it politically possible for Israel to withdraw from Lebanon without fear that its northern citizens would once again be subject to rocket fire that had put many Israelis into bomb shelters off-and-on for years since Israel had invaded Lebanon in 1982.

From the standpoint of some in the Arab world, the attack on Israeli troops in northern Israel was an act of Islamic solidarity in face of the huge escalation taken by Israel against the entire population of Gaza. They argue that what really needs to be explained is not why they acted, but why the rest of the world did not act to demand that Israel end its outrageous punishment of a million people for the acts of a few (when the U.N. tried to act, the right-wing government of the U.S. vetoed a resolution supported by the Security Council majority).

Yet from the standpoint of Israel, the attacks by Hezbollah were a blatant violation of the understanding that had kept Israel out of Lebanon for the past seven years. And in fact, it was also a violation of international law and human rights, subjecting

a civilian population to random bombings aimed at terrorizing the population. Hezbollah had shown itself to be the vicious terrorist force that Israel always claimed it to be. People living in Haifa or Tsfat or dozens of other locations in Israel are at this very moment living in the same kind of fear that rekindles the fears of earlier experiences in their lives (some, remember, are Holocaust survivors, others the children of survivors, and many have lived through wars that were explicitly aimed at the annihilation of Israel). Those fears are unfortunately likely to be played on by right wing politicians in the coming years.

Nor should we underestimate the malevolence of Iran and Syria in attempting to stimulate unrest and destabilization. While there are some in both of these countries who genuinely feel outrage at Israeli behavior toward Muslim co-religionists, the record of indifference to the plight of the Palestinians in their own countries and failure to provide material support for Palestine to build up its own economic infrastructure when it was needed suggests that their assistance to Hezbollah comes more from seeking political advantage and domination in the Middle East than from genuine moral solidarity with the Palestinian people. And the fear of Iran, a country whose president out and out denies that there ever was a Holocaust and who explicitly affirms the goal of destroying the State of Israel gives Israelis real reason to worry when his proxies in Hezbollah or Hamas develop the capacity to shoot rockets into Israeli population centers.

What was Israel to do?

Well, had Ariel Sharon been in power, having learned his lesson in Lebanon, he likely would have done the exact same thing he did two years ago when an Israeli businessman was captured by “the enemy”—namely, a prisoner exchange in which hundreds of prisoners are released for a single Israeli. That exchange had been asked for by Hamas and pleaded for by the family of POW Gilad Shalit, but was been rejected by the Israeli government. Please read the analysis of this error, and other articles analyzing the current situation at the daily updates of “Current Thinking” at [www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org) .

The consensus among Israeli peaceniks is that both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Labor Party Defense Minister Amir Peretz feel the political need to show that they are “strong” and hence the invasion and attack on Lebanon is their only politically possible strategy. For the sake of their egos and their future political viability, they “must” proceed with the wild escalation of the struggle against the Lebanese people, most of whom had exercised their democratic rights by rejecting Hezbollah’s electoral appeals, voting in a government that had only a small minority of Hezbollah within it.

What could Israel still do? It could redefine these issues as minor border irritants, exchange POWs, and unilaterally announce that it will no longer hold arrestees for more than 3 days without filing formal criminal charges against those who had acted with violence and releasing everyone else, giving speedy and public trials, and punishing any soldier, Shin Bet or Aman officer who engages in torture (or, as they call it, “moderate pressure”) on detainees. It could then immediately announce its intentions to strengthen the position of Palestinian Authority President Abbas by giving to him the tax monies withheld from Hamas, and opening “final status” negotiations within two months. Meanwhile, Israel could begin dismantling the Separation Wall, and promise to rebuild it only on the lines of an international border agreed to by both sides. And Israel could unilaterally censor anti-Palestinian incitement within government-controlled media and instead begin to build a culture of non-violence and educate Israelis about the need for reparations to Palestinian refugees.

What could Palestinians do? President Abbas could announce that he is inviting Israel to form a joint Israeli/Palestinian border force to ensure that there are no more violent attacks on Israeli civilians, in exchange for the immediate opening of “final status” negotiations with Israel before any further West Bank withdrawals are created. There were joint patrols and security coordination until Sept. 2,000 and they contributed to the low level of violence on both sides until Ariel Sharon made his famous provocative trip to the Temple Mount. Abbas could further announce that the Palestinian people who elected him are committed to a non-violent (not passive) struggle for ending the Occupation, but that anyone engaged in violence against Israel or against fellow Palestinians would be tried and, if convicted, would lose their Palestinian citizenship. Abbas could tour the West Bank and Gaza preaching non-violence, implement an immediate end to anti-Semitic and anti-Israel

rhetoric in the Palestinian press and in their schools, and could announce that he is determined to build a culture of non-violence inside Palestine.

What could the U.S. and other Western states do? They could immediately establish an international conference representing all the nations of the world who were willing to accept the right of Israel to exist within the 1967 boundaries and the right of Palestine to exist within Gaza and the West Bank, and let those countries impose on both sides a settlement that is fair to both sides and enforce such a settlement, guaranteeing peace and security to both sides. Each participant country in this international conference would be allowed in after it had given to a neutral international bank a deposit equal to .01% of its GDP for the purpose of creating the beginning of an international fund for reparations as described below.

As the Tikkun Community has outlined in the past, the terms of that settlement should include:

1. Permanent boundaries for both states that roughly resemble the pre-67 borders, with some border adjustments mutually agreed to along lines developed in the Geneva Accord (Israel incorporating some of the border settlements into Israel, in exchange for Israel giving equal amounts and quality of land to the Palestinian State).
2. Sharing of Jerusalem and its holy sites, with each side entitled to establish their national capital in Jerusalem, Israel to have control over the Jewish and Armenian quarters plus the Wall and adjacent territory, and Palestine to have control over the Temple Mount with its mosques.
3. All states participating in the International Conference would dedicate at least .1% of their GDP toward an international fund for reparations for Palestinians who lost property, employment or homes in the period 1947-1967, and to Jews who fled from Arab states in the same period (however, reparations will not be paid to any Arab or Jewish family with current gross assets of more than \$5 million dollars).
4. A joint Israel/Palestine/International Community police force will be set up to enforce border security for both sides. The U.S. and Nato will enter into a mutual security pact for both parties guaranteeing that each side will be protected by the U.S. and Nato from any assault by the other or by any assault from any other country in the world.
5. Creation of an Atonement and Reconciliation Commission which will unveil all records of both sides, bring to light all violations of human rights on both sides, bring formal charges against those who do not confess their involvement in those violations and testify to the details, and supervise a newly created peace curriculum for all schools and universities aimed at teaching reconciliation and non-violence in action and communication. The explicit goal of this Commission will be to foster the conditions for a reconciliation of the heart and a new understanding on the part of both peoples that each side has been cruel and insensitive, and need to repent, and that both sides have a legitimate narrative that needs to be understood and accepted as a legitimate viewpoint by the other side.

Who are Israel's friends and the friends of the Jewish people? Those who support this path toward peace and reconciliation. Who are its enemies? Those who encourage it to persist in the fantasy that it can "win" militarily or politically. Just as the objective enemies of America in the 1960s were those who egged it on to persist in the Vietnam war, and those who were its objective friends were those of its citizens who actively opposed that war, so similarly today the friends of the Jewish people are those who are doing everything possible to restrain it from cheerleading for Israel's militarist adventures and refusal to treat the Palestinians as equally entitled to freedom and self-determination as the Jewish people.

Who are Palestine's friends? Those who encourage a path of non-violence and abandoning the fantasy that armed struggle combined with political isolation of Israel will lead to a good outcome for Palestinians. Who are its enemies? Those who preach ideas like "one state solution" or global economic boycott without offering the Jewish people a secure state in Palestine--paths that will never produce anything positive but continued resistance by Israel and world Jewry.

As for us in the Tikkun Community who are friends of both sides, our orientation is clear. Our goal is to speak truth to both the powerful in Israel and the powerless in

Palestine, to tell them that their goals cannot be achieved without a radical reversal in the strategic directions they have been following. This truth will eventually be heard—the only question is whether it will be heard without another generation of Arabs and Israelis losing their lives. Because we care very much about the human suffering on both sides, we pray that this truth will be heard, and our strategies for a solution will be implemented. And we will do more than pray—we will also demonstrate against the governments of the U.S., Israel and Palestine till they all change their directions in the ways suggested here, we will organize and educate, and will take other non-violent steps to get our message heard.

### **The Occupation? Fuggedaboutit!** **By Gila Svirsky**

What a stroke of luck - 10 days before a war breaks out in Lebanon, we buy an apartment in Nahariya.

We had been looking for a place for about a year. We went to Cyprus to check out the beautiful new communities on the northern shore - it's quite a bargain, if you don't mind settling in occupied territory. We thought about Mauritius, but the savings on real estate would be offset by the costs of flights there. So finally we settled on an apartment under construction in Israel's sweetest little town on the Mediterranean coast - just 5 miles south of the border with Lebanon.

We were looking for a sea view. Had the balcony already been built, we would have been able to watch the Israeli navy array itself along the coast, laying siege to Lebanon. We wanted to be close to Kibbutz Sa'ar, just north of Nahariya, where one of my grown daughters lives, except when she evacuates herself to safer points south. And we wanted a getaway from turbulent Jerusalem, somewhere we could spend long quiet weekends and eventually a serene retirement. Several dozen rockets dropped into her kibbutz and our serene neighborhood this weekend.

In listening to the media, to my neighbors, to the gas station attendant, I am amazed by the lack of comprehension: "We leave Gaza, they shoot missiles at us from there. We leave Lebanon, they kidnap our boys. How do they expect us to leave the West Bank? Fuggedaboutit!"

These views, expressed by most Israelis these days, can only fill me with awe at how the Big Lie works: Repeat it often enough, publicly enough, by political and spiritual leaders, and the whole country/world will begin to believe that Israel is innocent of all wrongdoing and that these attacks emerged from a political vacuum:

As if there is no occupation. As if there is no siege on Gaza. As if there are no 39 years (and counting) of military and political oppression with all the killing, maiming, home destruction, and livelihood wrecking that this entails. What is it about "end the occupation" that they don't understand?

No, I do not justify Qassam missiles or Katyusha rockets hurled at Israeli towns or the kidnapping of anyone (even armed soldiers in tanks). I do not justify any attacks by missile or suicide bomber or remotely detonated device.

Nor do I justify the endless shelling of Gaza and Lebanon - land, sea, and air - for any reason at all, let alone for purposes more related to posturing and domestic public opinion than with accomplishing any political objective. "How could we not respond when they kill and kidnap our soldiers?" asked Yuli Tamir, our Education Minister (for goodness sakes!) and a former Peace Now activist. As if shelling is sure to make the Hizbullah leaders remorseful and let our boys come home.

So, as usual in wars, we have an alliance of the jingoistic decision-makers on both sides, whipping up patriotism while they watch the fighting on-screen from bunkers deep in the earth. In Israel, this war absolutely thrills the right wing: The escalation keeps up the militaristic approach to problem solving, discredits the view that Israel must leave the occupied territories, and distances the current warfare from its roots in the ongoing occupation. What's not to love about this war?

And as usual in Israel, a few cantankerous peace organizations - the Coalition of Women for Peace, Gush Shalom, Ta'ayush, and a few others - increase their presence on the streets. At Women in Black last Friday, we carried our regular "End the Occupation" signs and buttressed them with signs saying, "Stop the Killing

- Negotiate!" (and "It's the Occupation, Stupid!"). But when the cannons roar, so do the bystanders, and a dozen police were there to prevent anything worse than words and gestures.

A day will come when this small corner of the Mediterranean will again hold sailboats and waterskiers, and I'm looking forward to that view from the balcony. I still think it was a good investment.

### **The Real Aim By Uri Avnery**

THE REAL aim is to change the regime in Lebanon and to install a puppet government.

That was the aim of Ariel Sharon's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It failed. But Sharon and his pupils in the military and political leadership have never really given up on it.

As in 1982, the present operation, too, was planned and is being carried out in full coordination with the US.

As then, there is no doubt that it is coordinated with a part of the Lebanese elite.

That's the main thing. Everything else is noise and propaganda.

ON THE eve of the 1982 invasion, Secretary of State Alexander Haig told Ariel Sharon that, before starting it, it was necessary to have a "clear provocation", which would be accepted by the world.

The provocation indeed took place - exactly at the appropriate time - when Abu-Nidal's terror gang tried to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London. This had no connection with Lebanon, and even less with the PLO (the enemy of Abu-Nidal), but it served its purpose.

This time, the necessary provocation has been provided by the capture of the two Israeli soldiers by Hizbullah. Everyone knows that they cannot be freed except through an exchange of prisoners. But the huge military campaign that has been ready to go for months was sold to the Israeli and international public as a rescue operation.

(Strangely enough, the very same thing happened two weeks earlier in the Gaza Strip. Hamas and its partners captured a soldier, which provided the excuse for a massive operation that had been prepared for a long time and whose aim is to destroy the Palestinian government.)

THE DECLARED aim of the Lebanon operation is to push Hizbullah away from the border, so as to make it impossible for them to capture more soldiers and to launch rockets at Israeli towns. The invasion of the Gaza strip is also officially aimed at getting Ashkelon and Sderot out of the range of the Qassams.

That resembles the 1982 "Operation Peace for Gallilee". Then, the public and the Knesset were told that the aim of the war was to "push the Katyushas 40 km away from the border".

That was a deliberate lie. For 11 months before the war, not a single Katyusha rocket (nor a single shot) had been fired over the border. From the beginning, the aim of the operation was to reach Beirut and install a Quisling dictator. As I have recounted more than once, Sharon himself told me so nine months before the war, and I duly published it at the time, with his consent (but unattributed).

Of course, the present operation also has several secondary aims, which do not include the freeing of the prisoners. Everybody understands that that cannot be achieved by military means. But it is probably possible to destroy some of the thousands of missiles that Hizbullah has accumulated over the years. For this end, the army chiefs are ready to endanger the inhabitants of the Israeli towns that are exposed to the rockets. They believe that that is worthwhile, like an exchange of chess figures.

Another secondary aim is to rehabilitate the "deterrent power" of the army. That is a

codeword for the restoration of the army's injured pride that has suffered a severe blow from the daring military actions of Hamas in the south and Hizbullah in the north.

OFFICIALLY, THE Israeli government demands that the Government of Lebanon disarm Hizbullah and remove it from the border region.

That is clearly impossible under the present Lebanese regime, a delicate fabric of ethno-religious communities. The slightest shock can bring the whole structure crashing down and throw the state into total anarchy - especially after the Americans succeeded in driving out the Syrian army, the only element that has for years provided some stability.

The idea of installing a Quisling in Lebanon is nothing new. In 1955, David Ben-Gurion proposed taking a "Christian officer" and installing him as dictator. Moshe Sharet showed that this idea was based on complete ignorance of Lebanese affairs and torpedoed it. But 27 years later, Ariel Sharon tried to put it into effect nevertheless. Bashir Gemayel was indeed installed as president, only to be murdered soon afterwards. His brother, Amin, succeeded him and signed a peace agreement with Israel, but was driven out of office. (The same brother is now publicly supporting the Israeli operation.)

The calculation now is that if the Israeli Air Force rains heavy enough blows on the Lebanese population - paralysing the sea- and airports, destroying the infrastructure, bombarding residential neighborhoods, cutting the Beirut-Damascus highroad etc. - the public will get furious with Hizbullah and pressure the Lebanese government into fulfilling Israel's demands. Since the present government cannot even dream of doing so, a dictatorship will be set up with Israel's support.

That is the military logic. I have my doubts. It can be assumed that most Lebanese will react as any other people on earth would: with fury and hatred towards the invader. That happened in 1982, when the Shiites in the south of Lebanon, until then as docile as a doormat, stood up against the Israeli occupiers and created the Hizbullah, which has become the strongest force in the country. If the Lebanese elite now becomes tainted as collaborators with Israel, it will be swept off the map. (By the way, have the Qassams and Katyushas caused the Israeli population to exert pressure on our government to give up? Quite the contrary.)

The American policy is full of contradictions. President Bush wants "regime change" in the Middle East, but the present Lebanese regime has only recently been set up by under American pressure. In the meantime, Bush has succeeded only in breaking up Iraq and causing a civil war (as foretold here). He may get the same in Lebanon, if he does not stop the Israeli army in time. Moreover, a devastating blow against Hizbullah may arouse fury not only in Iran, but also among the Shiites in Iraq, on whose support all of Bush's plans for a pro-American regime are built.

So what's the answer? Not by accident, Hizbullah has carried out its soldier-snatching raid at a time when the Palestinians are crying out for succor. The Palestinian cause is popular all over the Arab world. By showing that they are a friend in need, when all other Arabs are failing dismally, Hizbullah hopes to increase its popularity. If an Israeli-Palestinian agreement had been achieved by now, Hizbullah would be no more than a local Lebanese phenomenon, irrelevant to our situation.

LESS THAN three months after its formation, the Olmert-Peretz government has succeeded in plunging Israel into a two-front war, whose aims are unrealistic and whose results cannot be foreseen.

If Olmert hopes to be seen as Mister Macho-Macho, a Sharon # 2, he will be disappointed. The same goes for the desperate attempts of Peretz to be taken seriously as an imposing Mister Security. Everybody understands that this campaign - both in Gaza and in Lebanon - has been planned by the army and dictated by the army. The man who makes the decisions in Israel now is Dan Halutz. It is no accident that the job in Lebanon has been turned over to the Air Force.

The public is not enthusiastic about the war. It is resigned to it, in stoic fatalism, because it is being told that there is no alternative. And indeed, who can be against it? Who does not want to liberate the "kidnapped soldiers"? Who does not want to remove the Katyushas and rehabilitate deterrence? No politician dares to criticize

the operation (except the Arab MKs, who are ignored by the Jewish public). In the media, the generals reign supreme, and not only those in uniform. There is almost no former general who is not being invited by the media to comment, explain and justify, all speaking in one voice.

(As an illustration: Israel's most popular TV channel invited me to an interview about the war, after hearing that I had taken part in an anti-war demonstration. I was quite surprised. But not for long - an hour before the broadcast, an apologetic talk-show host called and said that there had been a terrible mistake - they really meant to invite Professor Shlomo Avineri, a former Director General of the Foreign Office who can be counted on to justify any act of the government, whatever it may be, in lofty academic language.)

"Inter arma silent Musae" - when the weapons speak, the muses fall silent. Or, rather: when the guns roar, the brain ceases to function.

AND JUST a small thought: when the State of Israel was founded in the middle of a cruel war, a poster was plastered on the walls: "All the country - a front! All the people - an army!"

58 Years have passed, and the same slogan is still as valid as it was then. What does that say about generations of statesmen and generals?

**Operation Peace for the IDF**  
**By Gideon Levy**  
**Reprinted Courtesy of Haaretz**  
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Every neighborhood has one, a loudmouth bully who shouldn't be provoked into anger. He's insulted? He'll pull out a knife. Spat in the face? He'll draw a gun. Hit? He'll pull out a machine gun. Not that the bully's not right - someone did harm him. But the reaction, what a reaction! It's not that he's not feared, but nobody really appreciates him. The real appreciation is for the strong who don't immediately use their strength. Regrettably, the Israel Defense Forces once again looks like the neighborhood bully. A soldier was abducted in Gaza? All of Gaza will pay. Eight soldiers are killed and two abducted to Lebanon? All of Lebanon will pay. One and only one language is spoken by Israel, the language of force.

The war that the IDF has now declared on Lebanon and before it on Gaza, will never be considered another "war of no choice." Let's save that debate from the historians. This is unequivocally a war of choice. The IDF absorbed two painful blows, which were particularly humiliating, and in their wake went into a war that is all about restoring its lost dignity, which on our side is called "restoring deterrent capabilities." Neither in Lebanon nor certainly in Gaza, can anyone formulate the real goals of the war, so nobody knows for sure what will be considered victory or an achievement. Are we at war in Lebanon? With Hezbollah? Nobody knows for sure. If the goal is to remove Hezbollah from the border, did we try hard enough over the last two years through diplomatic channels? And what's the connection between destroying half of Lebanon and that goal? Everyone agrees that "something must be done." Everyone agrees that a sovereign state cannot remain silent when it is attacked within its own borders, though in Israel's eyes Lebanese sovereignty was always subject to trampling, but why should that non-silence be expressed solely by an immediate and all-out blow?

In Gaza, a soldier is abducted from the army of a state that frequently abducts civilians from their homes and locks them up for years with or without a trial - but only we're allowed to do that. And only we're allowed to bomb civilian population centers.

The painful steps taken in Gaza, which included dropping a one-ton bomb on a residential building, or killing an entire family of seven children under cover of darkness in Lebanon, killing dozens of residents, bombing an airport, cutting off electricity and water to hundreds of thousands of people for months were a response lacking any justification, legitimacy or proportion. What goal did it serve? Was the soldier released? Did the Qassams stop? Was deterrence restored? None of that happened. Only lost honor was supposedly restored, and immediately the next evil wind showed up, this time from the north.

Two more soldiers were abducted and it was clearly proven that the deterrent power was not restored, while IDF failures repeated themselves. How does one erase those searing failures? On the backs of innocent populations. In Lebanon, the situation is more complicated. There is no Israeli occupation and no justification for provoking Israel. If Hezbollah is so worried about its Palestinian brethren, it should have first of all done something for the hundreds of thousands of refugees living in camps in Lebanon in conditions that are just as bad as those under the Israeli occupation, before it grabbed soldiers in their name.

But does the fact that Hezbollah is a cynical organization that exploits the misery of Palestinians for its own purposes justify the disproportionate reaction? The concept that we have totally forgotten is proportionality. While we're in no hurry to get to the negotiating table, we're eager to get to the battlefield and the killing without delay, without taking any time to think. That deepens suspicions that we need a war every few years, with terrifying repetition, even if afterward we end up back in exactly the same position.

The war we declared on Lebanon has already exacted from us, and of course from Lebanon, too, a heavy price. Did anyone give any thought to the question whether it should be paid?

Everyone knows how this war begins, but does anyone know how it ends? Heavy casualties in the Israeli rear? A war with Syria? A general war? Is it all worth it? Look what a new rookie government can do in such a short time.

Behind the operations in Lebanon and Gaza is the same foolish idea about pressure on the population leading to political changes that Israel wants. In the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict, that concept has only led us from one disaster to the next. We "cleansed" southern Lebanon of Palestinians in 1982, and what did we get? Hezbollah instead of Fatahland. Hamas won't fall because Gaza is in the dark, and not even because we bombed the Palestinian Foreign Ministry building at the weekend - another nonsensical move; Hezbollah won't be smashed because the international airport in Beirut has been put out of commission.

Israel once again is not distinguishing between a justified war against Hezbollah and an unjust and unwise war against the Lebanese nation. The camouflage concealing the war's real goals was ripped off by this defense minister, who says what he means: "Nasrallah is going to get it so bad that he will never forget the name Amir Peretz," he bragged, like a typical bully. Now at least we know that Israel went to war so that the name Amir Peretz is never forgotten. It's the war for the perpetuation of the name Peretz and the blurring of Dan Halutz's failures. And to hell with the cost.