

# Jerusalem Letter

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### ISRAEL'S "PEACE FOR THE GALILEE" OPERATION IN LEBANON: SOME INITIAL PERSPECTIVES

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#### Introduction

The Jerusalem Letter is not normally the forum for providing the kind of information which should be readily obtainable through the normal reporting of the mass media. However in the course of the Jerusalem Center's monitoring of foreign media coverage of recent Israeli operations in Lebanon, it has become abundantly clear to us that the pattern of distortion is so comprehensive as to raise suspicions that it was deliberately designed to create a mythic screen around the entire Lebanese situation which will be extraordinarily damaging to Israel's moral and political position in the world. Hence, the Jerusalem Letter feels duty-bound to provide a more balanced picture of the situation for its readers and others. What follows is the result of our independent assessment of the data available to us at the time of this writing.

#### Who Won the Foot Vote?

Americans are fond of saying that while the United States is criticized from so many corners of the world, there is no country more popular as a target of immigration, even on the part of many of its critics. In the last analysis, they note that what counts is how people vote with their feet, and the results of that vote are overwhelming.

There has been much discussion about refugees in Lebanon in the last several weeks, starting with the well-nigh uncritical acceptance of the mythic figure of 600,000 broadcast by the PLO. In what must be considered a great propaganda victory, the PLO managed to convince a great part of the world that 600,000 refugees had fled from an area in which no more than 300,000 people lived. As the dust settled and a better count could be made, it turned out that there were only about 20,000 refugees altogether.

What is more important is that after the first cease fire a new stream of movement began out of the last significant PLO dominated area in the country, West Beirut, principally southward to the Israeli occupied section of Lebanon. In other words the Lebanese, voting with their feet, thought that they would be most safe and comfortable under Israeli occupation. For days, eyewitnesses reported unceasing lines of automobiles loaded with family possessions heading southward past Israeli checkpoints, voting with their feet (or more literally with their wheels) as to which part of Lebanon was the most desirable. In the last analysis then, there is no doubt as to who won the foot vote, the implications of which should be clear to any impartial observer.

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### Restoring Lebanese Self-Government

Results of the foot vote are not surprising; life is more peaceful and secure in southern Lebanon because of the elimination of the Palestinian forces, who were a constant threat to the security of the local inhabitants. The PLO used their power to abuse the local population, whether by "requisitioning" food from markets and restaurants without paying for it, by casually murdering local antagonists, or by attacking local women. As the dust clears the Lebanese inhabitants of the cities and villages in the region have begun to come forward with what are literally horror stories including atrocities and murders which brought suffering beyond anything inflicted by the Israeli invasion. Indeed even residents who lost relatives during the Israel attack have told impartial foreign observers that the liberation was worth it.

Congressman Charles Wilson of Texas summed up this mood in an interview on Israeli radio after his visit to southern Lebanon during the second week of the war. He expressed his astonishment at the joy with which the local population -- Moslems as well as Christians -- greeted the coming of the Israelis. He kept using the word "astounding" over and over again to describe his (independent) conversations and said it was as if Israel were "a liberating army." Moreover, the fact that this feeling was well-nigh universal among Moslems as well as Christians was something which had been utterly unexpected. If Congressman Wilson is not enough of a witness, syndicated columnists Evans and Novack were prompted to write their first pro-Israel piece in years after their on-the-spot visit to southern Lebanon, telling the same story. Their interview with the local population confirmed Congressman Wilson's perceptions in full.

### Lebanese Self-Government

A second prominent feature of this campaign is that the Israelis have not established a military government in southern Lebanon but rather have turned over the functions of government to the Lebanese authorities, reporting to the Lebanese government in Beirut (such as it is). Beirut has responded by sending its officials back into the area or empowering those already there to function in its name. Indeed it has even sent them funds to carry out their responsibilities. In many respects, southern Lebanon is the only part of the country in which the Beirut government has a stable and active administration in place, working under the protection of the Israeli forces.

The Israelis even sent home officers mobilized for military government purposes in the early stages of the war without even transferring them to Lebanon. Instead, they set up a limited network of coordinators to link the IDF with Lebanese and local officials. This de facto Israel-Lebanese "alliance" may be one of the surprises of the campaign.

From the available evidence, one is led to conclude that the Israeli authorities' first thought was to assist Major Hadad, leader of Free South Lebanon, that region along the Israeli border which for years had resisted the PLO with Israeli assistance, to extend his authority over most if not all of Israel-occupied southern Lebanon. Indeed, Major Hadad was quite visible in the news during the first few days of the campaign and was shown entering the principal cities in southern Lebanon and starting to develop relations with the local notables. This climaxed in a gathering of the local notables in Nabatiya after the fighting moved north, to acclaim Major Hadad their leader and to pledge their loyalty to him. All this was done in the traditional manner of the Middle East (and, for that matter, many other societies) where the consensus of villages, clans or tribes forms the basis for establishing

political unity and rule beyond the basic calls of kinship which provide the bedrock of the society, yet after his acclamation, Major Hadad retired to his southern bastion and virtually disappeared from the news, to be replaced by reports of Lebanese officials coming back from Beirut with authorization to resume responsibility for the governance of the region. The resurgence of a free Lebanese polity under the auspices of the legitimate government of Lebanon as facilitated by Israel is one of the unsung success stories of the campaign.

#### The Restoration of Services

The first task of the restored Lebanese government was to restore public services, state, municipal and non-governmental. This has been done with great rapidity with the active technical assistance and moral support of the IDF. Basic municipal services were restored literally within days after the fighting ceased in southern Lebanon, as soon as the municipal employees could return to their jobs. Restoring the infrastructure has been somewhat more difficult but has also proceeded apace, first through the restoration of the water system, to be followed by the restoration of electricity, which is far more difficult because linkage to the national grid was made problematic by fighting in other parts of the country.

Perhaps most notable was the restoration of banking services. The banks had been closed for seven years, since early in the civil war the PLO had made it clear that any functioning bank was a prime target for seizure of its assets. Consequently, since 1975 there had been no banking facilities available in southern Lebanon. Now that the Israelis have come, the banks are reopening, with funds transferred from Beirut, amidst the feeling that their assets are secure.

From the first days, the Lebanese police were given full responsibility for maintaining law and order among the settled civilian population. By the beginning of July, even the Lebanese court system was back in operation after being closed down for nearly seven years. This meant not only that the administration of justice was returned to Lebanese hands but that it was possible to maintain and enforce the law for the first time in years.

Israel's record in enabling life to go on under wartime conditions or to restore normalcy after battle has long since been proven, but the Lebanese experience may even exceed that of the Israelis in similar situations in 1948 and 1967, no doubt because of the active cooperation of Israeli and Lebanese authorities, who see Israel as enabling them to bring back a normal life that was denied them under the PLO.

#### The Exaggerated Death Toll and Damages

Israel's greatest defeat in an otherwise militarily successful campaign was its serious loss in the public information war, with regard to what was happening in Lebanon. Many in Israel are seriously questioning why those responsible for public information did not prepare in advance for a military operation whose coming was considered inevitable for over a year and whose targets were clear, just as the IDF prepared its military strategy and equipment accordingly.

In the meantime, the PLO, which is particularly adept at propaganda, in cooperation with forces that have long records of hostility to Israel, such as the International Red Cross\* and various pro-PLO European groups providing assistance

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\*To this day, the IRC refuses to recognize the Magen David Adom -- Israel's equivalent organization -- as part of the IRC's international network, on the spurious grounds that Israel uses the Shield of David instead of the cross as its symbol while all the Red Crescent societies of the Moslem countries are included despite their symbol.

to the Palestinians, was able to seize the initiative by announcing that the war had created 600,000 refugees and caused 10,000 civilian deaths. The patent impossibility of the figures escaped Western newsmen who relayed them uncritically -- and continue to do so (a breach of journalistic ethics which should be investigated in the West as much as Israel's public information failure should be investigated in Israel).

#### How Many Refugees?

Within a day or so these figures became the accepted ones throughout the world, patently false though they were. Take the figure with regard to refugees: in the entire coastal area south of Beirut where the fighting occurred no more than 300,000 people live all told. Of that number, only those in the three principal cities and adjacent refugee camps were affected by the fighting. Most of them stayed put or moved temporarily to the beaches adjacent to their cities on instructions from the IDF, in order to get away from the combat zone, and then returned home within a few days as soon as the IDF had completed its searches of the cities involved to capture any remaining armed PLO members. A larger number of Lebanese had fled from those regions to escape the PLO earlier in the war. Indeed, it was they who crowded the roads and returned south to their homes after the Israelis completed their liberation of southern Lebanon.

When the dust settled it turned out that there were no more than 20,000 refugees in Southern Lebanon, most of whom soon returned to their homes. Most of them were Palestinians from the refugee camps who lost their homes after the main battles in the course of Israeli mop-up operations. Most of them had also gone to the beaches but the hard core PLO terrorists holed up in the camps, refused to surrender, and had to be rooted out, house by house. It was that process which led to the destruction of their dwellings on a substantial scale.

Of course, we cannot know how many refugees there are within Beirut itself but the situation there is so complex it is hard to say who is a refugee since by all accounts two thirds of the city continues life as normal, including the bright lights, casinos, and cafes for which Beirut is famous, even as the other third is exposed to warfare, and any vacant apartment in the city is subject to break-in on the part of people moving from one part of the city to another and looking for better accommodation who claim to be refugees when they do so. To the best of this writer's knowledge, no one has been able to figure out who really is and who is not a legitimate refugee under those circumstances.

In the last analysis, there was no way to even reach an estimate of 600,000 refugees so quickly in the middle of a war. The number was clearly manufactured for propaganda purposes. The fact that the International Red Cross and the media disseminated that number and thereby gave it respectability represents a serious bias on their part.

#### The Talk of Civilians Killed: The Tale and the Toll

If the numerology with regard to refugees was given unwarranted credibility, that with regard to casualties was even less plausible. At the same time that the figure of 600,000 refugees was released, it was reported, again by the IRC, that Lebanese authorities had counted up 9,353 civilian dead (or some such number -- it varied slightly from report to report). The very exactitude of the number should have been the tipoff with regard to its accuracy. How in the midst of wartime could such an accurate count be compiled? But an accurate number always sounds better and it could easily be rounded up to "10,000 dead civilians," an indeed horrifying toll.

As it turns out, once a count could be made, not even a thousand civilians were killed. Two weeks after the fighting, after at least a rough count could be made, Eliezer Shostak, the Israeli Minister of Health announced from the platform of the Knesset that 400 civilians were killed in Sidon, 50 in Tyre and 10 in Nabatiya, and that, while the full count with regard to the refugee camps was not complete, the total would not reach 1,000. Subsequent data have confirmed that estimate.

This is not intended to be callous by saying only a thousand not ten thousand. Any civilian casualty is a tragic thing but the evidence is overwhelming that the IDF officially and Israeli soldiers individually did everything possible to keep civilian casualties to an absolute minimum, often suffering additional casualties themselves, including loss of Israeli lives, in the process. As the facts came out, it turned out that the civilian populations in the major cities had been appropriately warned and were able to flee to sheltered areas before the fighting began. We have television footage demonstrating that. Moreover, the Israeli Air Force, which was accused of indiscriminate bombing, demonstrated that its bombing was done with deadly accuracy, so that rather than terror bombing, which was a feature of even the Allied air raids during World War II, the civilians who were hurt or killed were hurt or killed truly accidentally, which is why there were so few of them.

It is easy to have television pictures or photographs of individuals who have suffered horribly and then attach huge figures in the accompanying commentary, thereby suggesting to audiences that that terrible picture be multiplied by thousands, but that is not the same as accuracy.

The Israelis' public relations problem was compounded by the fact that the PLO invited civilian casualties, knowing that they would be of help in the propaganda war. It placed its arms caches in the basements of civilian dwellings or in churches and mosques; it set up its military installations in schools, hospitals and religious institutions so that the Israel Air Force would be damned if it did and damned if it didn't attack them. It held civilians hostage wherever possible, whether in small groups as was the case in the coastal cities and refugee camps, or virtually the whole population of West Beirut which was prevented from fleeing by the PLO when an Israeli attack became imminent, so that they would remain as targets.

I repeat, any civilian casualties are to be deplored, but the total of under a thousand in such an operation is ridiculously small, especially when compared to the total number of civilian dead in the Lebanese civil war since 1975. The lowest estimate of Lebanese and Palestinians killed by one another, or by Syrians, is 50,000. More accurate estimates range up to 100,000. (The fact that there is no accurate count of civil war dead after seven years indicates how difficult it is to reach precise numbers in such conditions, something for which the world press will have to be held accountable some day.)

The radically hostile reaction of the world to Israel's campaign in Lebanon after its almost total indifference to the massacres and killings which had taken place during the course of the previous seven years, has to lead any Jew to wonder whether there is not some latent or not-so-latent anti-Semitism involved. Take the city of Damur whose "destruction" at the hands of the Israeli army was the subject of such lurid reporting on the part of the world media. Who bothered to remember that Damur was the site of a PLO massacre of Christians some years before that; that most of the destruction and virtually all of the refugees in the city dated from then? It was far more convenient for reporters who came to the scene, never having been in Lebanon before and seemingly hardly aware that there had been a civil war raging

for seven years, to blame the Israelis for the whole mess. Of course, the Damur story can be repeated in the case of Sidon, Tyre, Nabatiya, and many other cities, including Beirut itself.

#### When Were the Damages Incurred?

That brings up the issue of damages. Israel made a great mistake when it did not release to the press "before" and "after" aerial photographs, of which it no doubt has plenty. A look at those pictures would have revealed even to the unpracticed eye how much of the destruction now being attributed to the Israelis had taken place earlier as a result of the Lebanese civil war, PLO activities and the Syrian intervention. What has amazed visitors to Lebanon in the aftermath of the fighting has been how many times broken looking shutters have been raised to display beautiful plate glass windows intact underneath as the stores reopen and merchants resume selling, even in the heart of what had been a battle zone. Needless to say, for the uninitiated a battle zone in the immediate aftermath of a battle looks like a scene of total destruction, but as anyone who has been through rehabilitation of such zones knows, much of that disarray is cosmetic and easily cleaned up once the manpower is available to do so. That is what is happening now. Again the accuracy of Israeli bombing and gunnery and the sensibilities of the IDF and its soldiers prevented simply wanton destruction.

#### What of Lebanon Itself

Even the worst offenders among those who reported on the Lebanese situation acknowledged that Israeli intervention was a direct product of the Lebanese civil war. That civil war was, in turn, a direct product of the growth of the PLO presence in Lebanon between 1970 and 1975 and the PLO's effort to establish a state-within-a-state adjacent to Israel. This is not the place to go into the details of the Lebanese civil war, its causes and consequences, but there are certain myths with regard to the way the world has viewed that civil war which have influenced outsiders' understanding -- or lack thereof -- of the events of the last several weeks.

First of all, at the very beginning of the civil war, the Druse-Moslem-PLO coalition designated itself as the "left" and defined the Christians opposing them as the "right." This was a master-stroke from a propaganda point of view, however inaccurate it was in the jumbled context of Lebanese politics. Kamal Jumblatt the leader of the Lebanese Druse, was the first of these self-proclaimed leftists. How any head of the Jumblatt family, which owns half of Southern Lebanon through a system of land ownership that remains quasi-feudal in character, can be considered leftist is beyond the comprehension of those who think that the terms "left" and "right" may have some meaning in politics. But once they become the "left" and the others the "right," the sympathy of the vocal forces in the world, especially the intellectuals, the media people, and the religious establishment, applying criteria more appropriate to Europe of the 1930's, were lined up in sympathy with them and against their enemies. Only American fundamentalist Christians and neo-Conservatives who sentimentally prefer the right to the left (in contrast to the way in which the western "establishments" prefer left to right) took the other side. The truth is that, in the context of Lebanese politics where clans rival clans, sects rival sects, and communities rival communities, the terms "left" and "right" can have no real meaning and it does a disservice to truth and understanding to try to apply them.

One cannot even talk about a conflict between Christians and Moslems. The relations between the Greek Orthodox and the Maronites, both of whom are in the Christian camp, are considerably less than brotherly, while the Melkites, a small

Christian group who like the Maronites are linked to the Church of Rome, have no use whatsoever for the latter. Even within Maronite ranks there are serious conflicts between clans.

The Moslems are divided among Sunnis and Shiites. While Shiites elsewhere are highly militant fundamentalists, because most of the Lebanese Shiites live in the south where they have had very bad experiences with the Sunni Palestinians, the bulk of the Shiite population is cooperating with Major Hadad's Christian militia and with the Israeli forces, even to the point of aligning their own armed militia with Hadad.

Every group has its own militia. We do not even have an accurate count as to how many militias there are. There are five or six prominent militias but scholars who have studied the Lebanese situation reckon that there are some 40 functioning fighting forces and some estimates go up as high as 80. In many respects, the militias are simply somewhat modernized versions of the traditional Arab village fighting forces. Each village, or in some cases, each clan in a particular village if the village embraces diverse ethno-religious communities, can mobilize its adult males as a fighting force in time of need. Each of those fighting forces remains independent except insofar as it enters into alliances with similar fighting forces of other clans or villages.

In short, Lebanon is wracked with divisions upon divisions, each of which can express itself through armed force to a greater or lesser degree.

What then of the future? What all residents of the Lebanese heartland (Mount Lebanon and its western slopes) have in common is that their ancestors settled in the country in order to escape persecution somewhere else in the adjacent countries of the Arab world. Thus as much as they may have antagonisms towards one another, they have a common stake in wanting to be left alone by their neighbors. To them may be added the Lebanese coastal cities south of Beirut now under Israeli occupation whose population sees itself as descended from the ancient Phoenicians and who also want a separate state to protect them from their neighbors, particularly their Arab neighbors. Perhaps it is still possible for some kind of Lebanese national unity to be forged on this negative basis. That, indeed, is the task of the peacemakers in the months and even years to come.

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*Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs President Daniel J. Elazar's most recent book on the Middle East is Judea, Samaria and Gaza: Views on the Present and Future, which he edited for the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington.*