

OPINION

Why Israel's Reaction is Right

By *Matthias Küntzel*

The natural reaction to the current violence in the Middle East is one of horror. It's time for a cease-fire, right? Not necessarily. Pacifism would only help the radicals.

When it comes to Israel, public opinion in Europe walks a fine line. Israel's overreaction and use of overwhelming force, say most, is to be condemned and criticized. But in the same breath, Hezbollah's provocation is likewise reviled and rejected as the militant group's unceasing attacks on Israeli civilians are cited. Both sides are judged using the same criteria and both sides come out stained with some blame for the current conflagration. But this seemingly nuanced point of view is misleading. In reality, German and European public opinion does take sides -- and it tends to side with the apparent underdog and against Israel.

It has almost become a reflex on the Continent. In 2003, 59 percent of all Europeans pointed to Israel as the country presenting the greatest risk to world peace. On the third day of the current crisis, fully three quarters of all Germans polled were convinced that Israel was overreacting and using too much force in its response to Hezbollah. And since then, the images coming from the war zone have set the tenor: A cease-fire, most believe, should begin as soon as possible.

I disagree -- and have four reasons for doing so.

First, Israel is fighting a just war. Germany and the European Union should unequivocally back Israel.

Islamism has attacked Israel from both the south and the north and Israel has no choice but to react. But there is more to it than that. Israel's military operation is important for the entire Western world. Until 2005, Islamism was able to successfully mislead the West into thinking that the "occupation" of Gaza and southern Lebanon was the cause of the terror attacks carried out against Israel. Now we know better: Islamism isn't out to change Israeli policy in the region, Islamism is out to completely eradicate the country of Israel. The same strategy is being used on a larger scale: The Middle East conflict is not the cause of Tehran's conflict with Western secularism. It is merely a convenient alibi.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself has pointed to Islam's larger conflict with the Western world. When, in October of 2005, he called for the elimination of Israel, he added: "We are in the middle of a historical war that has been going on for hundreds of years." This war, Ahmadinejad's war, has nothing to do with the most recent flare up of the Middle East conflict. "The current war taking place in Palestine," Ahmadinejad has said, is nothing more than "the frontline between the Islamic world and the world of arrogance. We have to recognize the baseness of our enemy so that our holy hatred expands continuously and strikes like a wave."

This "holy hatred" comes with no conditions attached. It doesn't depend on whether one is Jewish or not -- the single measuring stick is whether one blindly obeys the Sharia and dedicates one's life to the Koran. And this "hate" wouldn't disappear were Israel to cease to exist -- the Islamist creed calls for the "World of Arrogance" to also submit to the Sharia, meaning this genocidal wave of hate should ultimately spread across the globe. In order to expedite this goal, the Iranian leadership indicated that thousands of suicide bombers would be sent out to targets across the world. The men and women of the Israeli military are currently fighting on the front lines against this apocalyptic program -- should we not at least consider offering our solidarity?

Second, Israel wants peace.

So far, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government has succeeded in coupling its military operation with transparent political goals. Every step can be justified. On the one hand, Israel recognizes Lebanon as a sovereign state, thus making it responsible for the Hezbollah attack on June 12 in which the group abducted two Israeli soldiers.

On the other hand, Israel's war aims have been clearly stated. In a speech to the country's parliament, the Knesset, on July 17, Olmert said Israel is practicing "basic self defense." "We have the right to our freedom," he said. "When we have to, we know how to fight for and defend that freedom." The fighting serves to achieve the following aims: a. The implementation of United Nations resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of Hezbollah; b. The implementation of UN resolution 5241, which calls for south Lebanon to be solely under the control of the Lebanese army, and c. The unconditional return of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers.

These are the goals being pursued by the Israeli military operation. The infrastructure in Lebanon is being attacked, but only insofar as it is relevant to the arming and operations of Hezbollah. The Lebanese civilian population has been warned with leaflets and radio messages prior to attacks in residential areas.

Hezbollah, on the other hand, is marching to a different drummer. Their motto is: "You love life, we love death." There is nothing, gushes Hezbollah's patron Ahmadinejad, "more beautiful, holier or more eternal than the death of a martyr." Thus, Hezbollah is not only happy to kill as many Jews as possible, it is not bothered by the deaths of Shiite Muslims as well and has thus strategically based many of their rockets directly in the middle of Shiite residential districts.

While Hezbollah, with their inaccurate missiles, tries to kill as many Israeli civilians as possible, Israel -- even if not always successful -- tries to limit the number of Lebanese civilian casualties.

Third, there is no alternative to Israel's current military operation.

Will Hezbollah ever willingly give up their weapons? Not a chance!

The Jihad against Israel is the foundation of the militant group's very existence. For Hezbollah members, the destruction of Israel is not only non-negotiable, it is a religious duty. Hezbollah only understands the language of violence and Israel's military is the only force that is in a position to effectively confront Hezbollah. A United Nations force would never be able to achieve what Israel could. In 1983, two suicide attacks carried out by Hezbollah were enough to force the US and France from the region. A UN force, which wouldn't be nearly as strong, would have no chance. Only if Israel were able to weaken the terrorist group in the long term would the stationing of a UN force even become an option.

Never before have the conditions been better for Israel to complete the mission of weakening Hezbollah. The longer the Israeli military can focus on the job at hand, the better the chances are that Lebanon can be freed from the influence of Hezbollah and that the conditions for a lasting peace in the region can be created.

With this in mind, the demand for an immediate cease-fire is the equivalent of a plea for saving Hezbollah. The group's leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah would be able to come out of his hiding place and tell his fighters that, while they may have suffered some casualties, they successfully defended Hezbollah's existence and dignity. He would also be able to rely on Iran to finance the rebuilding of the destroyed Shiite areas and make the claim that Hezbollah was the most important representative of Arab interests. In the case of an immediate cease-fire, a continuation and intensification of the war would be guaranteed.

Fourth, Israel's military operation has already resulted in positive effects.

One can already see some positive results from the Israeli operation -- the strength of which clearly took Hezbollah and its supporters by surprise. Whereas the process of "critical dialogue" -- supported especially by Germany -- with the Mullah dictatorship in Iran and with anti-Semitic terror groups tended to strengthen those groups, the Israeli offensive seems to have started a paradigm shift in the Middle East: For the first time in the history of the Middle East conflict, an overwhelming majority of the Arab League distanced itself from Hezbollah's "dangerous adventurism." Never before have Hezbollah and Iran -- and indirectly Hamas -- been disavowed so directly.

The reaction from the "Arab Street" has likewise thus far indicated that Israel has chosen the right time and the correct method. Whereas some 2 million people between Rabat and Bahrain took to the streets in the spring of 2002 to demonstrate solidarity with Hamas during the peak of the Second Intifada, things have been relatively quiet this time around -- and this despite the largest Israeli military operation in 24 years. "Rarely have I seen such an uprising, indeed an Intifada, against those little turbaned, bearded men across the Muslim landscape as the one that took place last week," wrote Youssef Ibrahim in the *New York Post*. "The leader of Hezbollah, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, received a resounding 'no' to pulling 350 million Arabs into a war with Israel on his clerical coattails."

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora has likewise seen fit to distance himself from Hezbollah and the terrorism the group represents -- clearly the result of the weakening of an organization that has until now been able to keep the Lebanese government in line.

Last but not least, Hezbollah's patron Iran has only produced a feeble response. Whereas Ahmadinejad on July 12 pronounced the eve of Israel's destruction, the country's counterattack left him speechless for a full 48 hours. When he found his tongue again, he said merely that an Israeli attack against Syria would result in a fierce Iranian response. He said nothing about the ongoing attack against his close allies in Lebanon. Promptly, the bellicose language coming out of Tehran and Damascus was exposed as empty rhetoric: Neither of these two countries has sought to actively defend Hezbollah. Israel's offensive has thus managed to deflate Ahmadinejad's regional image.

Of course the political successes that can be seen today do not eliminate the possibility of nasty surprises tomorrow. Islamists are desperately denouncing the Arabian League's "treachery" and trying to mobilize radicals in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Whether they will be successful remains an open question. The Iranian leadership has likewise sought to strengthen the resolve of Hezbollah: "Well done Nasrallah," said Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, speaker of the Iranian parliament, on July 18. "Today we are seeing the liberation of Palestine. The war has just begun." It's difficult to predict Iran's

reaction: Will they accept the defeat of their Islamist allies or will they escalate the conflict by sending suicide bombers to Lebanon and Europe?

Either way, Israel could do no better than it has to this point -- part of the reason that the US House of Representatives recently declared its unconditional solidarity with Israel by a vote of 410 to eight.

It is terrible to look on while southern Beirut is turned into piles of rubble and to know that civilians on both sides -- as well as Israeli soldiers -- are being injured and killed. Even worse, though, is the realization that Iran could very well emerge as the victor in this war and use the current conflict to justify future attacks.

The pacifist reaction that the Israeli defensive war has triggered in Germany and Europe is not well thought out and is disingenuous. It is also counter-productive. An immediate cease-fire would merely result in a worse conflict in the future. The consequences drawn from Adolf Hitler's World War II -- "Never again fascism! Never again war!" -- were intended to prevent an anti-Semitic war from ever again taking place. Today, that lesson has been forgotten. "Never again war against fascism" is all that remains.

Israel must not be forced to abandon its war against Hezbollah, rather it must win the conflict. Just as Hezbollah is fighting the war as Iran's proxy, Israel is fighting genocidal Islamism as the proxy for the rest of the Western world. The least Israel should be able to expect from the West is that it not be betrayed.

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