

## The war in Lebanon: a view from Haifa

By Menachem Kellner,  
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Israelis today are probably more united than any time since 1967. With the exception of a minute and dwindling minority, for whom Israel can do no right in any circumstance, the entire Jewish population (and much of the Arab population as well, it would appear) agree that the war in Lebanon was forced upon us and that it is a war for the very existence of Israel as a nation and for the lives of Israelis as individuals.

It is for this reason that what appears to many Europeans as a wildly disproportionate response to a strategically insignificant event (the murder of several soldiers patrolling a peaceful border [1] and the kidnapping of two others) is supported across the board here – among left and right, socialist and capitalist, secular and Orthodox.

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Also by Menachem Kellner in openDemocracy:

"Israel reverses gravity [2]" (30 March 2006)

Menachem Kellner writes an account of daily life in the war in "Haifa Diary: The Postmodern War [3]" (*Washington Post*, 23 July 2006)

### Israelis' view

Like much else in the middle east, it is all a matter of perspective, of foreground and background [4]. Israelis see the present events in the context of an Arab and Muslim world where:

- for close to two generations it has used the existence of Israel as an excuse to maintain corrupt and brutal regimes
- *Sunni* Muslims and *Shi'a* Muslims, who ordinarily hate and vilify each other, cheerfully collaborate in order to murder Jews
- each Israeli attempt to achieve peace through the sacrifice of territory (south Lebanon in 2000, Camp David/Taba in 2000, Gaza in 2005) is greeted as a sign of weakness inviting further warfare
- a secular, Ba'athist regime in Syria can connive with a fundamentalist, Islamist regime in Iran to support Hizbollah
- Hizbollah can openly call for the destruction of Israel and the murder of Jews worldwide
- the allegedly reformist president of Iran can deny the holocaust and casually call for wiping Israel off the map
- much of the European press, with the enthusiastic leadership of BBC and the *Guardian*, serves as an organ for Arab propaganda, manipulating the news so as to foreground

every Israeli crime, real and imagined, while backgrounding the all-too-real crimes of the Arab world.

In such a world, all but the looniest of Israelis see the existence of their country and the lives of their loved ones as truly endangered.

This is also a world in which the pain and agony of every Lebanese child torn apart by bombs dropped in my name (and no matter that there are far fewer of these children than the press reports would have you believe – one such child is too many) and the destruction of Lebanese infrastructure (again, wildly exaggerated by the press, but devastating enough as it is) must be laid squarely at the door of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah and his henchmen.

It would all stop within minutes were Nasrallah to get on [al-Manar TV](#) [5] and announce: "We are returning the two kidnapped Israelis and stopping all Katyusha attacks on the north of Israel." Whatever our government might want to do, public opinion at home and abroad would force an immediate cessation of hostilities on our part. Every child killed, every bridge destroyed, every life made hell, is the fault of Nasrallah (and, I might add, of those many Europeans who refuse to call him to account).

Given that we see the war in these terms, it is no surprise that Israelis are incensed by editorial cartoons like that by [Martin Rowson](#) [6] in the *Guardian* showing a spiked Israeli fist (where each spike is a star of David) trying to swat a Hizbollah wasp and in the process battering a terrorised Lebanese child; it is no surprise that the insouciance with which many Europeans see Hizbollah's attempts to kill me, my family, my students, my friends and my neighbours as little more than a nuisance makes our blood boil.

The European press and TV emphasise the death and destruction in Lebanon (all too real) and pretends that there is no suffering in Israel. Israel's physical infrastructure is thankfully largely intact (though not in towns like [Kiryat Shmona](#) [7] and Nahariya), but the economic infrastructure of the north of Israel is in ruins. Many seem to think that there are no Israeli refugees; that is false, for perhaps close to 100,000 Israelis have been forced from their homes.

The entire population of Israel south of the Haifa-Tiberias line has galvanised itself to offer aid and hospitality to these refugees from the north. It seems that the provision of shelter and care to these thousands of internally-displaced people is being carried out more effectively in Israel than in Lebanon. Whatever the reasons for this, the fact that Israel's refugees are being well catered-for does not make them any the less refugees.

I was invited to submit this piece in order to acquaint readers of **openDemocracy** with "the progress of the war as seen from Israel, the debates and arguments, the experience of people and the ideas that are in people's minds... ". As I have tried to indicate, despite Israelis being an amazingly fractious people (most of us, after all, are Jews) there is next to no debate and argument about the justice of this war. The cafes in Tel Aviv may be full, those in Haifa empty, and those in Nahariya in ruins, but the denizens of all want to see this through.

Even [Ha'aretz](#) [8], the daily paper written by and for a small coterie of north Tel Aviv, self-styled intellectuals (many of whom are avowedly "post-Zionist"), has been supporting the war editorially; while its columnists (along with the endless parade of talking heads on TV) have been divided over the way in which it is being prosecuted, rather than the principle of its prosecution.

## Haifa's mix

The social fabric of Haifa (where I live) is rather more complex, I suspect, than most people abroad realise. Haifa is a city in which Jews and Arabs live together, work together, eat out at restaurants together (both the Haifa restaurants destroyed by suicide-bombers in recent years were run by Arab-Jewish partnerships, which may very well be why they were targeted), swim together at our beaches; and after the night of 6-7 August [9] - when seven huge rockets, packed with high explosives and flesh-rending ball-bearings, slammed into different places in the city – get blown up together by Hizbollah.

I teach at the University of Haifa [10], where 20% of our student body of 16,000 is Arab (Muslims, Christians, Druze) and I number among my friends and colleagues here Arab librarians, Arab professors, and an Arab dean. It is, I think, an amazing accomplishment, but through all the years of war and *intifada* - I have been here [11] for twenty-six years, three of them serving as dean of students – Jews and Arabs at the university have treated each other as fellow academics, fellow staff, and fellow students. As I like to say, the level of friendly cooperation is such that Jewish and Arab students cheat together in their exams!

Sheikh Nasrallah [12] and his colleagues must find this particularly galling, which may be why so many Arab towns and villages in northern Israel (Nazareth, Tarshiha, Mrar, and others) have been the objects of their tender attentions. On 9/11, as a rabbi at the time remarked, American Jews were murdered by Muslims for the crime of being Americans; today Arab Israelis are being murdered by Hizbollah for the crime of being Israelis.

Let me close on an important point, at least important to me. Hizbollah, Hamas, Iran, lots of folks, are trying to kill us, individually and corporately, because they hate us. I do not know a single Israeli who hates Arabs as such; oh, sure, there's lots of distrust, often disdain, unfortunate discrimination, even some out-and-out racism here and there, but I can honestly say that I have never met anyone here who simply hates Arabs. If we can continue to hold on to that, we will, God willing, be OK in the long run.

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[1] <http://www.science.co.il/Israel-map-Carta.asp> target=\_blank

[2] <http://jewish-history.haifa.ac.il/philosophy/staff/mkellner.htm> target=\_blank

[3] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/22/AR2006072201052.html> target=\_blank

[4] <http://www.mideastweb.org/timeline.htm> target=\_blank

[5] <http://aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=3&id=5839> target=\_blank

[6] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/cartoons/martinrowson/0,,1823933,00.html> target=\_blank

[7] <http://www.jnewswire.com/article/1016> target=\_blank

[8] <http://www.haaretz.com/> target=\_blank

[9] <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/rising-death-toll-fails-to-dampen-support-for-war/2006/08/07/1154802823183.html> target=\_blank

[10] <http://www.haifa.ac.il/index.html.en> target=\_blank

[11] <http://jewish-history.haifa.ac.il/philosophy/staff/mkellner.htm> target=\_blank

[12] <http://www.cbc.ca/story/world/national/2006/07/25/nasrallah-hezbollah.html> target=\_blank



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