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Presbyterian international justice witness post-Lebanon invasion II

Guest Viewpoint by Christian T. Iosso

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Whatever the verdict on Israel's second invasion of Lebanon, it should be clear to most Americans that our relationship to the Arab and Muslim worlds is being defined in Tel Aviv as much as Washington, DC. Seymour Hersh, in *The New Yorker's* August 21 issue, maintains that our Administration not only knew of Israel's plans well in advance, but wanted Israel to test our "bunker-blasters" and other munitions so we could better decide whether to use them on the bigger target: Iran's nuclear complexes.

This would be to argue that the current Israeli and US Administrations are joined not only in the philosophy of unilateral militarism, but in specific war strategies. Certainly the prompt US re-supply of Israel with high-tech munitions and our blocking a cease-fire until Israel was ready to accept one would further indicate our supportive role—and a far more overt one than that of Iran and Syria to Hezbollah. What will it mean for US Christians to be linked to a power that no longer pretends to be "an honest broker" for peace? How will we continue relationships with the Christian remnant communities that will face increased pressure from both Muslims and Jews in a region where extremism is likely to intensify?

This reflection is intended to help us think about our witness in the Middle East in light of the tragic events of this past month, and in light of the General Assembly's action to re-frame our policy of corporate engagement: keeping divestment but stressing dialogue, especially with Jewish friends disturbed by our criticism of Israeli (and US) policies. It is also written in advance of the Stony Point Peacemaking Colloquium, scheduled for Sept.11-13. Colloquium speakers and participants will be wrestling with how to calculate the consequences of our international diplomatic isolation as a country on our church's Christian witness abroad. Note: this is not simply about our peacemaking witness, but about our Christian witness overall, which must be independent of national interests. Our national interests and those of others always need critical evaluation from the standpoint of Christian faith, not to apportion blame but to search for that "truth (that) is in order to goodness," as one of our Preliminary Principles puts it.

Our first task would seem to be simply to remember Christian principles governing human relations among collectives, and then to try to clarify admittedly emotional questions involving changed relationships, both international and interfaith. Following especially the Barmen Declaration in our Book of Confessions, it would seem unfaithful for the church to remain silent on matters affecting so many lives.

From a Christian point of view, the use of violence to solve problems is wrong from the start. Just Peace thinking reinforces the presupposition against violence already embedded in Just War principles, and most observers noted how "disproportionate" Israel's response was to a

cross-border incident with 10 soldiers. Since its withdrawal from Lebanon a few years ago, in fact, the border in South Lebanon/Northern Israel has been crossed many times both ways by artillery and small military forces. Israel's massive retaliation approach had also just been seen in Gaza, where ostensibly in response to Hamas—itsself responding to the killing of family at the beach. Israel knocked out power sources for the whole impoverished ghetto region.

What about Arab terrorism that blows up innocent civilians? Wrong and tragic and terrifying, especially with suicide bombers. But totally predictable as long as Arab populations are dispossessed by Israeli policies. Is Israel only to blame? No, of course not. There are many sides in the Middle East, but it is hard to take the moral high ground when you are taking actual physical ground and are also bombing innocent civilians, albeit mainly from airplanes and helicopters. The first Palestinian Intifada did, in part, try non-violent Gandhian measures, and leaders of that effort, like Mubarak Awad, were imprisoned as if they were violent terrorists. The enduring issue behind the failed peace process of the past 25 plus years is whether a Palestinian leadership can stand up with integrity without engaging in some form of resistance to continued occupation and humiliation, without also being driven into the kind of hatred that wants to destroy Israel. (Refusal to recognize Israel is often driven, not by hatred, but by Israel's unclear borders vis-à-vis its neighbors.)

Muslim fundamentalists are certainly deserving of criticism for their own forms of unilateral thinking, often mixed with anti-Christian and anti-Jewish prejudice. The embrace of "jihadism," disregard for human rights of many kinds, authoritarianism, and lack of church/state separation (from our point of view), all challenge the goal of peaceful coexistence. But the key point in dealing with all people is that on an individual and family basis, all want the same happiness and security: Muslims, Jews, Christians, Agnostics and all others. No one likes being coerced or humiliated. And especially where education and free press are limited, it is easy to blame enemies and oversimplify the world. Non-fundamentalist Christians and Jews are also guilty of such things!

In contrast to the use of massive retaliation and refusals to negotiate with "terrorists" (freedom fighters, in their own view), the diplomatic approach gains from mutual understanding and unilateral acts of compassion. Some of Israel's giving up hard-to-defend settlements was portrayed in such positive terms, although as in Gaza, Israel would remain in control of regional access to food, water, travel, etc.

Among the questions for Christians, then, are both questions about the human psychology of deterring large populations by military coercion (counter-productive, and leads to religious extremism), and the costs of unilateral force (one's own state becomes increasingly militarized and democracy weakens.) This second area of "counting the cost," while dealing with billions in dollars and millions of enemies, must also count the cost in grief and sheer tragedy of lives lost, bodies maimed, and souls profoundly damaged. We Christians cannot simply shake off such things as "collateral damage." To the extent that to be Christian is to take responsibility for the just use of power, we must insist that empathy gives clearer vision and better intelligence about a sustainable human future. And the source of that empathy is not nationalism or fear, but the work of the Holy Spirit who always brings life.

It is the goal of terrorists and provocateurs to cause over-reactions that destroy middle ground. In terms of this goal, the Hezbollah sheik may have won. Sides have hardened, religious blocs are politicized, democratic government will be more fragile in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Arab world, although the UN may actually gain in credibility and influence as that of the US declines. And yet again, the heroism of fighters overshadows the heroism of peacemakers, making the spiritual and cultural work of peacemaking all the more difficult.

What will we talk about come 9/11? Some of the lessons will be all too clear. But we will start with a "ministry of mourning," beginning with lament rather than blame, and then move to count the resources that remain in this "broken and fearful world" for our "enterprise of hope."

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