

US media alibis for Qana massacre

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31 July 2006

As the news broke Sunday morning of the Israeli massacre in the southern Lebanese village of Qana, the American media swung into action to provide alibis and excuses for the horrific war crime.

The basic modus operandi of the US media has been well established over the past two-and-a-half weeks. The war cannot be mentioned without claiming that Hezbollah, always referred to as a terrorist organization, ignited the Israeli onslaught by seizing two soldiers.

Journalists worthy of the name have a responsibility to probe beneath the official version of events, to question the government's claims, to hint at possibilities that the powers-that-be would prefer not be discussed. In the present conflict that would mean at least raising the possibility that the US and Israel have definite geopolitical ambitions.

The American media investigates none of this. It simply repeats the trite formulae of the Bush administration (a "sustainable ceasefire," a "robust" mandate to disarm Hezbollah, and the deployment of an equally "robust" international peacekeeping force, etc.) ad infinitum.

The efforts of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who has given Israel the green light to carry out its attacks, are inevitably referred to as a "peacekeeping mission." Israel's wanton violence is described as "self-defense."

In the morning following the massacre at Qana, the US media scrambled to provide explanations for the horrible event. In the first place, American television refused to show images of the mangled, bloody bodies that television audiences in the rest of the world were seeing. "We cannot show this," they said.

Why not? The level of US government censorship is staggering. A decision was reached during the night that the American public simply could not be allowed to see the reality of the Qana massacre.

Reports of the deaths of dozens of women and children were immediately followed by "Israeli officials say ...," "the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) points out ...," "the government in Tel Aviv explains that ..."

A mass murder is committed, and the US media rushes *first* to interview the murderer and get his side of the story.

The Israelis obligingly made a series of officials available for the American networks to interview. Every news program routinely begins and ends with the Israeli positions. Arab and Lebanese voices are squeezed in here and there, the more respectable and 'pro-Western' the better, without the slightest concern for a balanced presentation of a complex political situation, much less its historical background.

In this, the American media simply deludes itself and the public. The outrage felt for the US government and military in the Middle East and throughout much of the world is reaching a boiling point.

A few examples of the media coverage Sunday will suffice. This is from the *New York Times*: "Israel said the Qana strike was aimed at

Hezbollah fighters firing rockets into Israel from the area, but an explosion caused a residential apartment building to collapse, crushing Lebanese civilians who were spending the night in the basement, where they believed they were safe. The Israelis raised the possibility that munitions stored in the building blew up hours after the air strike, destroying the building."

In other words, the Lebanese blew themselves up. This scurrilous claim was not repeated elsewhere, as far as this writer could make out.

The *Washington Post* presentation is more typical: "Israeli warplanes blasted a group of buildings in this southern Lebanese village Sunday, killing dozens of people, most of them women and children, according to Lebanese officials. The Israeli military said the air strike was aimed at destroying Hezbollah rocket launchers nearby and that civilians were not being targeted."

With some 800 Lebanese dead since the beginning of the war, 90 percent of them civilians, a semi-honest media would not leave such claims unchallenged. If Israel, with its surgically precise missiles and bombs, continues to kill civilians in large numbers, perhaps one should draw the logical conclusion that their strikes are, in fact, hitting their targets.

The unsubstantiated claim that Hezbollah fighters were launching missiles from the immediate vicinity of the building that collapsed is simply taken as good coin by the American media. Why should the Israeli government and its military be given the benefit of the doubt? Fox News, the right-wing voice of the Murdoch interests, was most forthright in passing off IDF claims as fact, but none of the networks or major newspapers cast any serious doubt on the Israeli military's justifications.

On NBC's "Meet the Press," host Tim Russert opened his program, on the morning after the bloodiest episode in the 19 days of the war, with Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman. Russert provided Gillerman a platform for the defense of Israel's actions. He did not begin by expressing his horror at the massacre, but by politely asking as to whether Israel would now agree to a ceasefire.

Gillerman responded in the predictable, cold-blooded manner. "First of all, Tim, this is a horrible, devastating, bloody Sunday, and it's a horrible morning, and we grieve the deaths of those civilians and children. But it is very, very important to stress that they may have been hit by an Israeli bomb, but they are victims of the Hezbollah. If Hezbollah wasn't there, this would never have happened.

"And I wouldn't put it beyond that vicious, brutal, cynical terrorist organization to have held those people there against their will after we'd repeatedly asked them to leave, so that they would actually be used as human shields, and maybe even, as farfetched as this may sound, for this to happen, because this serves nobody's purpose, except Hezbollah and Iran."

"The dead made us do it!" Russert made no comment in response to this filthy allegation.

On CNN's early morning program, anchors Tony Harris and Betty Nguyen took pains to put a good face on the Israeli actions. After reporting the facts of the attack, Harris continued: "Israel says the site was used by Hezbollah to launch rockets into Israel. An Israeli spokesman called the area a war zone and said Lebanese civilians were warned to leave. Even so, the Israeli defense minister has ordered an investigation."

Over images of the bombing, Nguyen commented, "It is just hard to stomach this morning. We've seen the protests as well. But, on the flip side, Israel says that it has sent out warnings. It dropped flyers. It also made a radio announcement telling people to get out of the area."

Harris then introduced Jacob Dalal, a spokesman for the Israeli Defense Force, who was interviewed from Jerusalem. Harris was immensely sympathetic to the difficult situation in which the IDF finds itself: "Give us some insight," he said to Dalal, "if you would, help us understand the IDF's strategic approach to this conflict right now. On the one hand, you clearly are trying to wipe out Hezbollah, which is your stated objective, but on the other hand, you have to balance that against the possibility of killing civilians. So help us understand strategically how you're approaching this conflict right now."

To this friendly query, Dalal replied, "That's an excellent question and that indeed is the dilemma. That's the dilemma of the war on terror. How, on the one hand, you attack terrorists and terrorist targets, and on the other hand, you spare civilian lives, because terrorists operate from within the civilian environment. Now, this balancing act is a very difficult balancing act for any army, and we're trying to do the best we can."

The Israeli claim, that it acts with concern for Lebanese civilians and is engaged in this so-called balancing act, Harris takes as given and makes the starting point for a friendly chat with a representative of the Israeli military.

Advertisement for the Israeli state

CNN's "Late Edition" with Wolf Blitzer on Sunday was little more than an unpaid advertisement for the Israeli state and its operations. Speaking to one correspondent on the ground in Lebanon, Blitzer made his position in regard to Qana—the culpability of the civilians themselves—quite clear: "The Israelis say they gave plenty of warning to all the individuals living there, dropping leaflets. They showed us some of those leaflets that they say they dropped. Among other things, it said to civilians in villages located south of the Litani River, 'Because of the terrorist acts that have been executed against the Israeli state from inside your villages and houses, the IDF had to react immediately against these actions, even inside your own villages.'"

Blitzer had filmed segments for his "Late Edition" program intended to underscore the hardships endured by Israelis during the current fighting. A lesser man might have thought that images of young children killed by Israeli bombs had made his footage somewhat unseemly, but Blitzer went right ahead.

Beginning his special report near Haifa, at an Israeli air force base, Blitzer took a tour by automobile through the port city, commenting, that the ride was "bleak—not many cars on the streets; not many people either. As I take a look at this port and this Haifa bay, it's pretty depressing to see there aren't many ships at all docked at Haifa right

now."

Later in the program, Blitzer showed a ride he took aboard a US Blackhawk helicopter with Israeli air force Brigadier General Ido Nehushtan. They flew north along Israel's Mediterranean coastline. Blitzer commented: "Haifa, a city of some 300,000 under normal circumstances, is drained. ... The huge port area, usually full of cargo ships from around the world, is largely empty. So are the beautiful Mediterranean beaches nearby."

Lebanon bleeds from every pore. But near Haifa "the beautiful beaches are empty"!

Blitzer went on to conduct an interview with Republican Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, a know-nothing ignoramus, and Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York, an ardent pro-Zionist. McConnell could not bring himself to express regret over the massacre in Qana, remarking instead, "Unfortunately, Hezbollah uses civilians as shields. The Israelis don't do that."

Schumer, asked how Bush and Rice were doing in the Middle East crisis, replied, "Well, I have no criticism of the president on this issue because I think he is doing the right thing." This is the opposition party in the US.

A Syrian cabinet minister, Bouthaina Shaaban, was met with the usual American media arrogance. Blitzer's first question: "Is Syria ready to stop facilitating weapons shipments to Hezbollah, as alleged by the US and Israeli governments as well as other governments?" Blitzer failed to note that the word 'alleged' undermined the premise of his question. How can someone stop doing something you haven't proved they are doing in the first place?

At one point, Shaaban made the following point, "Remember, Nazi Germany was claiming that it was fighting terrorism. And then the whole world had to stop that. We are facing something very similar to what happened as a result of the actions of Nazi Germany against civilians."

Blitzer ignored this. His program ended with a special segment revealing that Hezbollah's rockets weren't "the only thing posing a real danger. In this exclusive report I prepared earlier in the week, I found out that there are also some new threats from the Mediterranean Sea," including exploding jet skis and life rafts. Meanwhile the broken bodies of women and children continued to be discovered in the rubble in Qana.



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