

Lebanon and Kosovo: an instructive comparison

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With hundreds dead, many of them slaughtered in their own homes, hundreds of thousands take flight, terrified of suffering the same fate at the hands of a regime possessed of vastly superior military force, which claims that its ongoing war against a terrorist force gives it a mandate to expel an entire population. The mass exodus is deliberately encouraged by the propaganda of the regime, which publicizes the atrocities to stampede the population. The ultimate goal: ethnic cleansing, and the replacement of the local population with settlers mobilized by the regime.

That was the scenario in Kosovo in March-April 1999—and that is what is beginning to take place in southern Lebanon in July-August 2006. The difference, of course, is that in the first case the US government used ethnic cleansing as a pretext for war, while in the second case, the ethnic cleansing is a joint US-Israeli project.

In Kosovo, the regime of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic was viewed as an obstacle to US foreign policy. Accordingly, the Clinton administration engineered a NATO bombing campaign which ultimately forced Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo, while the American media demonized Milosevic as the Hitler of the Balkans and lauded the Kosovo Liberation Army as “freedom fighters.” (The KLA’s tactics included reprisal massacres of Serb civilians, as well as planting bombs in restaurants and bus stops in Pristina, the capital of the province. Its financing came largely from two sources: CIA subsidies and narcotics trafficking.)

Today, the Bush administration views Israeli expansionism as a key component of its strategy to reshape the Middle East and give American imperialism control of vast oil resources. Accordingly, the US has chosen to ally itself with the invading power, Israel, in an operation in which US-built warplanes flown by Israeli pilots drop American-supplied bombs on the people of Lebanon. The American media, working in sync with this

policy, excuses Israeli atrocities as acts of self-defense, while demonizing the guerrilla fighters of Hezbollah as “terrorists.”

In the Kosovo war, the American media focused relentlessly on the mass suffering among Kosovo refugees, grossly inflating the death toll. There were claims, to justify the US-NATO bombardment, that more than 100,000 civilians had been murdered by Serb militias. After the war, careful studies lowered the estimated death toll in Kosovo to 6,000, of whom only 2,000 died before the US-NATO bombing began.

It is nearly certain that 2,000 Lebanese have already been killed by three weeks of relentless Israeli bombing and shelling. The official Lebanese government figure is about 1,000, but this does not include bodies buried in crushed buildings all across south Lebanon, in villages and towns unreachable by outside agencies. But there is no outcry in official circles in the United States for a halt to the slaughter of innocents in Lebanon, no denunciations of Olmert as a butcher, no suggestion that the US should stop supplying the bombs and missiles which are used to perpetrate these crimes.

The president of the United States at the time of the Kosovo war, Democrat Bill Clinton, repeatedly denounced the policies of the Milosevic regime in Serbia in terms that, with very little changed but the geographic location, could apply equally well to the Olmert government in Israel.

As he ordered the first US-NATO bombing, Clinton asked in a speech: “Are we, in the last year of the twentieth century, going to look the other way as entire peoples in Europe are forced to abandon their homelands or die, or are we going to impose a price on that kind of conduct and those who seek to aid it.” Apparently this stricture does not apply to the Middle East, where “abandon their homeland or die” is precisely the choice presented to the people of southern Lebanon.

In a radio address from the Oval Office on April 3, 1999, Clinton said the “cold clear goal” of Milosovic was to “keep Kosovo’s land while ridding it of its people.” Twelve days later he told the American Society of Newspaper Editors that Milosovic was “determined to crush all resistance to his rule even if it means turning Kosovo into a lifeless wasteland.” On June 11, 1999, on the eve of the deployment of NATO troops into Kosovo, Clinton described the actions of the Serbs as “an attempt to erase the very presence of a people from their land, and to get rid of them dead or alive.”

All of these statements apply with equal or greater force to the policies of the Israeli government. Israeli warplanes have dropped hundreds of thousands of leaflets across south Lebanon demanding that the entire population leave or be targeted as part of Hezbollah. Children, the elderly, the mentally ill, the sick, the disabled—all face death from aerial bombardment if they do not abandon their homes and cross the Litani River going north.

Piling war crime upon war crime, the Israelis have then bombed convoys of refugees set into motion by their own demands for mass evacuation—something Milosevic never attempted. And there are reports that leaflets threatening the civilian population have been dropped over the largely Shiite-populated southern suburbs of Beirut.

In other words, the stated goal of the Israeli Defense Forces is the physical removal of the entire population of the south, whether Shiite, Sunni or Christian, as well as the Shiite population of Beirut—all told, about 50 percent of the Lebanese people. If any other government but that of Israel (and the United States) were making this demand, the American media would call it what it is: ethnic cleansing on a monstrous scale.

In both Kosovo and Lebanon the US government claimed to stand for the highest standards of human rights and international law. In both cases, it supported massive bombing by a technologically advanced power against a weak and relatively defenseless opponent, presenting these actions as a regrettable necessity. In both cases, the US government was complicit in war crimes—carried out directly by US forces and their NATO allies against Serbia, carried out using US bombs, missiles and warplanes by Israel in Lebanon.

Apologists for the Bush administration and Israel would no doubt reject the comparison of Lebanon and Kosovo. They would claim Israel has no territorial ambitions in south Lebanon and that the displaced Arab population will return to their homes after the conflict is settled. The Milosevic regime made similar claims in 1999, but the US

government dismissed them as cynical propaganda, maintaining that Serbia had to be judged, not by its stated intentions, but by the previous conduct of ethnic Serb militias in Bosnia and Croatia.

If Israel is held to the same standard, however, one must conclude that the campaign of bombing and population displacement in south Lebanon could well lead to occupation, settlement and ultimately permanent seizure of the land.

That has been the pattern in every Israeli war since 1948, when Palestinian Arab populations were stampeded into exile just as Lebanese Arabs are being displaced today. In 1948, the Zionists had to use more “low-tech” methods: massacres at Deir Yassin and other Arab villages, conducted by terrorists like the future prime ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir. Today they use precision-guided weapons and air-dropped leaflets, but the strategy is still the same: kill some, panic many more.

Moreover, there is a definite political logic driving Zionism towards a new seizure of Arab lands. Going back to even before the creation of Israel in 1948, an important section of the Zionist movement regarded the Litani River, not the present border, as the “natural” northern boundary of the Jewish state.

From a security standpoint, the permanent expulsion of the Arab population of the region, largely Shiite Muslim and supportive of Hezbollah, is the only measure that could actually guarantee that Hezbollah rockets could no longer reach Haifa and other Israeli cities.

Of course, any new Israeli settlements in southern Lebanon would themselves be exposed to rocket attack from Arab-populated areas still further north in Lebanon. That is the dilemma that the Zionist project has confronted since its inception in 1948. Whatever borders are established by driving out or conquering the local Arab population are vulnerable to attack; the further the borders are extended, from 1948 to 1967 to today, the greater the mass of displaced, dispossessed and angry refugees who will never be reconciled to the permanence of the state of Israel.



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