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America's One-Eyed View of War: Stars, Stripes, and the Star of David

There are two sides to every conflict - unless you rely on the US media for information about the battle in Lebanon. Viewers have been fed a diet of partisan coverage which treats Israel as the good guys and their Hizbollah enemy as the incarnation of evil.

by Andrew Gumbel and Donald Macintyre

If these were normal times, the American view of the conflict in Lebanon might look something like the street scenes that have electrified the suburbs of Detroit for the past four weeks.

In Dearborn, home to the Ford Motor Company and also the highest concentration of Arab Americans in the country, up to 1000 people have turned out day after day to express their outrage at the Israeli military campaign and mourn the loss of civilian life in Lebanon. At one protest in late July, 15,000 people - almost half of the local Arab American population - showed up in a sea of Lebanese flags, along with anti-Israeli and anti-Bush slogans.

A few miles to the north, in the heavily Jewish suburb of Southfield, meanwhile, the Congregation Shaarey Zedek synagogue has played host to passionate counter-protests in which the US and Israeli national anthems are played back to back and demonstrators have asserted that it is Israel's survival, not Lebanon's, that is at stake here.

Such is the normal exercise of free speech in an open society, one might think. But these are not normal times. The Detroit protests have been tinged with paranoia and justifiable fear on both sides. Several Jewish institutions in the area, including two community centres and several synagogues, have hired private security guards in response to an incident in Seattle at the end of July, in which a mentally unstable 30-year-old Muslim walked into a Jewish Federation building and opened fire, killing one person and injuring five others.

On the Arab American side, many have expressed reluctance to stand up and be counted among the protesters for fear of being tinged by association with Hizbollah, which is on the United States' list of terrorist organisations. (As a result, the voices heard during the protests tend to be the more extreme ones.) They don't like to discuss their

political views in any public forum, following the revelation a few months ago that the National Security Agency was wiretapping phone calls and e-mail exchanges as part of the Bush administration's war on terror.

They are even afraid to donate money to help the civilian victims of the war in Lebanon because of the intense scrutiny Islamic and Arab charities have been subjected to since the 9/11 attacks. The Bush administration has denounced 40 charities worldwide as financiers of terrorism, and arrested and deported dozens of people associated with them. Consequently, while Jewish charities such as the United Jewish Communities are busy raising \$300m to help families affected by the Katyusha rockets raining down on northern Israel, donations to the Lebanese victims have come in at no more than a trickle.

Outside Detroit and a handful of other cities with sizeable Arab American populations, it is hard to detect that there are two sides to the conflict at all. The Dearborn protests have received almost no attention nationally, and when they have it has usually been to denounce the participants as extremists and apologists for terrorism - either because they have voiced support for Hizbollah or because they have carried banners in which the Star of David at the centre of the Israeli flag has been replaced by a swastika.

The media, more generally, has left little doubt in the minds of a majority of American news consumers that the Israelis are the good guys, the aggrieved victims, while Hizbollah is an incarnation of the same evil responsible for bringing down the World Trade Centre, a heartless and faceless organisation whose destruction is so important it can justify all the damage Israel is inflicting on Lebanon and its civilians.

The point is not that this viewpoint is necessarily wrong. The point - and this is what distinguishes the US from every other Western country in its attitude to the conflict - is that it is presented as a foregone conclusion. Not only is there next to no debate, but debate itself is considered unnecessary and suspect.

The 24-hour cable news stations are the worst offenders. Rupert Murdoch's Fox News has had reporters running around northern Israel chronicling every rocket attack and every Israeli mobilisation, but has shown little or no interest in anything happening on the other side of the border. It is a rarity on any of the cable channels to see any Arab being tapped for expert opinion on the conflict. A startling amount of airtime, meanwhile, is given to the likes of Michael D Evans, an end-of-the-world Biblical "prophet" with no credentials in the complexities of Middle Eastern politics. He has shown up on MSNBC and Fox under the label "Middle East analyst". Fox's default analyst, on this and many other issues, has been the right-wing provocateur and best-selling author Ann Coulter, whose main credential is to have opined, days after 9/11, that what America should do to the Middle East is "invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity".

Often, the coverage has been hysterical and distasteful. In the days following the Israeli bombing of Qana, several pro-Israeli bloggers started spreading a hoax story that Hizbollah had engineered the event, or stage-managed it by placing dead babies in the rubble for the purpose of misleading reporters. Oliver North, the Reagan-era orchestrator

of the Iran-Contra affair who is now a right-wing television and radio host, and Michelle Malkin, a sharp-tongued Bush administration cheerleader who runs her own weblog, appeared on Fox News to give credence to the hoax - before the Israeli army came forward to take responsibility and brought the matter to at least a partial close.

As the conflict has gone on, the media interpretation of it has only hardened. Essentially, the line touted by cable news hosts and their correspondents - closely adhering to the line adopted by the Bush administration and its neoconservative supporters - is that Hizbollah is part of a giant anti-Israeli and anti-American terror network that also includes Hamas, al-Qa'ida, the governments of Syria and Iran, and the insurgents in Iraq. Little effort is made to distinguish between these groups, or explain what their goals might be. The conflict is presented as a straight fight between good and evil, in which US interests and Israeli interests intersect almost completely. Anyone who suggests otherwise is likely to be pounced on and ripped to shreds.

When John Dingell, a Democratic congressman from Michigan with a large Arab American population in his constituency, gave an interview suggesting it was wrong for the US to take sides instead of pushing for an end to violence, he was quickly - and loudly - accused of being a Hizbollah apologist. Newt Gingrich, the Republican former House speaker, accused him of failing to draw any moral distinction between Hizbollah and Israel. Rush Limbaugh, the popular conservative talk-show host, piled into him, as did the conservative newspaper The Washington Times. The Times was later forced to admit it had quoted Dingell out of context and reprinted his full words, including: " I condemn Hizbollah, as does everyone else, for the violence."

The hysteria has extended into the realm of domestic politics, especially since this is a congressional election year. Republican have sought to depict last week's primary defeat of the Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, one of the loudest cheerleaders for the Iraq war, as some sort of wacko extremist anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli stand that risks undermining national security. Vice-President Dick Cheney said Lieberman's defeat would encourage "al-Qa'ida types" to think they can break the will of Americans. The fact that the man who beat Lieberman, Ned Lamont, is an old-fashioned East Coast Wasp who was a registered Republican for much of his life is something Mr Cheney chose to overlook.

Part of the Republican strategy this year is to attack any media that either attacks them or has the temerity to report facts that contradict the official party line. Thus, when Reuters was forced to withdraw a photograph of Beirut under bombardment because one of its stringers had doctored the image to increase the black smoke, it was a chance to rip into the news agency over its efforts to be even-handed. In a typical riposte, Michelle Malkin denounced Reuters as "a news service that seems to have made its mark rubber-stamping pro-Hizbollah propaganda".

She was not the only one to take that view. Mainstream, even liberal, publications have echoed her line. Tim Rutten, the Los Angeles Times liberal media critic, denounced the "obscenely anti-Israeli tenor of most of the European and world press" in his most recent column.

It is not just the US media which tilts in a pro-Israeli direction. Congress, too, is remarkably unified in its support for the Israeli government, and politicians more generally understand that to criticise Israel is to risk jeopardising their future careers. When Antonio Villaraigosa, the up-and-coming Democratic Mayor of Los Angeles, was first invited to comment on the Middle East crisis, he sounded a note so pro-Israeli that he was forced to apologise to local Muslim and Arab community leaders. There is far less public debate of Israeli policy in the US, in fact, than there is in Israel itself.

This is less a reflection of American Jewish opinion - which is more diverse than is suggested in the media - than it is a commentary on the power of pro-Israeli lobby groups like Aipac, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which bankrolls pro-Israeli congressional candidates. That, in turn, is frustrating to liberal Jews like Michael Lerner, a San Francisco rabbi who heads an anti-war community called Tikkun. Rabbi Lerner has tried to argue for years that it is in Israel's best interests to reach a peaceful settlement, and that demonising Arabs as terrorists is counter-productive and against Judaism.

Lerner is probably right to assert that he speaks for a large number of American Jews, only half of whom are affiliated with pro-Israeli lobbying organisations. Certainly, dinner party conversation in heavily Jewish cities like New York suggest misgivings about Israel's strategic aims, even if there is some consensus that Hizbollah cannot be allowed to strike with impunity.

Few, if any, of those misgivings have entered the US media. "There is no major figure in American political life who has been willing to raise the issue of the legitimate needs of the Palestinian people, or even talk about them as human beings," Lerner said. "The organised Jewish community has transformed the image of Judaism into a cheering squad for the Israeli government, whatever its policies are. That is just idolatry, and goes against all the warnings in the Bible about giving too much power to the king or the state."

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