

Ourselves in relation to the Lebanese Tragedy

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Dear Friends:

A follow-up to our letter of February 1980 seems in order. That was the long one dealing with trying to see ourselves as others see us and included the historical "litany" of betrayals that has created and maintained deep resentment throughout the Arab world. An awareness of that historical background is as important as ever for any understanding of the present Mid-East situation. We cannot take the time to repeat too much of it here, however, since we want to provide further information related to the new question, "How can most Arabs and many others hold America largely responsible for the Lebanese tragedy?" Let us say at once that there is almost no personalized reproach involved. America's responsibility is seen primarily in terms of great international forces and power plays and has had little influence on our personal relationships with people here.

Let us also be reminded of the type of exercise in which we were engaged in that letter of February 1980--trying, in the words of Robert Burns, "To see ourselves as others see us." Again we must prepare ourselves in humility for the difficult task of trying honestly to see a situation through new glasses, colored NOT with our own cherished experiences and prejudices but colored with a whole new set of filters, meaning here the tragic suffering and bitterness of an entire generation of Palestinians and some of their closest Arab neighbors. When the accusing finger is aimed in our direction, our natural reaction is one of self-defense, rationalization, self-justification, bringing counter arguments to bear. That sabotages the very purpose of the exercise, which is to listen attentively to the other, to feel with him the depths of his hurt and to try earnestly to understand his vision of things. Until we have done this, we cannot hope to enter meaningfully into any ministry of reconciliation. So let us put on these foreign glasses with their un-rosy filters just for a brief moment to glimpse something of a vision quite alien to most of us.

In the eyes of many, and not just Arabs, America's responsibility in the Lebanese tragedy has roots back in the later stages of the "litany" of betrayals. America had helped to create the state of Israel with no heed whatever for the wishes of the people of Palestine, who were made to pay, with their very homeland, the heaviest price of all for European atrocities perpetrated on the Jewish people and for which the Palestinians were in no way responsible. For a good three decades the people of Palestine had been pleading for some form of self-determination and warning all who would listen that they simply could not tolerate massive Jewish immigration into their tiny corner of the globe, especially when many of the immigrants were avowed Zionists openly bent on forming a Jewish state there. The final blow in this regard came after World War II as the U.S.A., Canada, Great Britain, and France refused to relax their immigration policies to receive any more than a trickle of the survivors of the great holocaust. This left some 100,000 with the choice of staying in refugee camps in the lands of their nightmares or going to Palestine, where over half a million Jews (mostly Zionist immigrants having arrived there since the end of World War I) were eagerly awaiting reinforcements. This set the stage for the U.N. decision NOT to grant self-determination to the Palestinian people but to IMPOSE a division of their homeland into separate Jewish and Arab states gerrymandered so as to give Israel the largest possible territory (about 55% of the land) with the smallest possible majority in their favor (only 55-60% Jewish). With the exception of Lebanon, the neighboring Arab countries, who had long supported the Palestinian cause of self-determination, attacked but then lost the war and left in place a larger and stronger Israel.

All of this was felt as a radical historical injustice and had wrenchingly painful consequences for a large segment of the Palestinian population--refugees from the fighting for whom any return was forbidden and whose properties were seized. Not only for them but also for all other Palestinians and most other Arabs this produced a deep psychic wound. Salt was rubbed into that old wound, and new wounds both physical and psychological were inflicted by the Israeli-Franco-British aggression of 1956. Fortunately for both the American image and justice, Eisenhower denounced that particular betrayal of Palestinian rights and brought the affair to an end with minimal losses. However, far worse was to come in 1967 with Israel's preemptive strike that seized full control of all of Palestine and the Sinai.

Throughout that period (1948-67), with the exception of the 1956 Suez invasion, America was one of the most important sources of economic and moral support for the Israelis. After 1967 America became overwhelmingly THE most generous military supplier and economic wellspring for them. Hence, even before the invasion of Lebanon, the frustrations and resentments of two to three million refugees *unable* to go "home" were vented verbally almost as much on America as on Israel. Equally deep bitterness and frustration marked the lives of some two million other Palestinians still living in the land of their birth but under Israeli occupation. All of them knew full well that most Israeli weaponry was American financed, when not American made, and that such weaponry served in the commando raids, preemptive strikes and bombing reprisals that were causing more civilian casualties than Palestinian guerrilla attacks had ever caused. Nor have they ever forgotten that Begin himself had been an active terrorist leader when that served his purposes, struggling for his cause from a position of weakness in the late 40's. Yet America has given him full support (except for occasional mild and nearly meaningless "no-no's") while apparently accepting to a surprising degree Begin's doctrine that all Palestinians who dare oppose Israel are not freedom fighters but inhuman terrorists with whom one simply cannot deal.

And then there was Lebanon. It is a tiny nation only about 4/5 the size of Connecticut and is largely hilly to mountainous yet has a population a bit larger than that of Connecticut (around four million vs. three and a half). That population represents a very intricate and **fragile mosaic of various** religious and ethnic groups although all are Arab in language and

basic self-identity, with many of the educated people also speaking fluent French and/or English and feeling ties to Western culture as well. In the break-up of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Lebanon became a French protectorate and was granted independence in 1943. It has a truly unique constitution that recognizes the relative numerical importance of the major religious communities there. The president must be chosen from among the Maronites (linked to the Roman Catholic tradition), the prime minister must be a Sunnite (from the major, orthodox Muslim group in the world) and the head of the legislative body must be a Shiite (from the main non-orthodox or sectarian group of Islam that forms the overwhelming majority in Iran with very significant groups also in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan). There are also a number of other Muslim and Christian groups in the country, and most of these religious communities (Protestants among the exceptions) have been there for centuries and are organized internally along feudal lines with each group having a dominant old family providing its succession of leaders.

Given the historical quarrels and strife of the Mid-East, including crusades and counter-crusades, the very attempt to make a nation out of such a mosaic seemed a foolhardy gamble. Yet it worked amazingly well with many beautiful examples of tolerance, cooperation, and reconciliation. Nevertheless, many tensions and a built-in danger of inter-group feuding remained as a constant threat to the unity of the country. Clearly the strains and stresses in such a social mix could not withstand much additional pressure introduced from outside. That is precisely what came, however, following the Israeli conquests of 1967, which created additional masses of Palestinian refugees seeking haven as near their homeland as possible. Roughly 170,000 settled in Lebanon, and freedom fighters made occasional commando raids from there into Israel. This brought devastating reprisals on Lebanon and produced new cracks within the delicate mosaic, cutting across the old religious lines. The refugees were mostly Muslims but included a significant minority of Christians as well. Within Lebanon, the majority of the Muslims and a minority of the Christians felt deep sympathy with the refugees' plight and gave them economic and moral support. This left a minority of Muslims and a majority of Christians in the country who were, on the contrary, more and more alienated from the refugees as the latter came to constitute an armed state within the state and brought more and more Israeli reprisals against Lebanon. The delicate mosaic of their society could not withstand the additional pressures, and in the mid-70's Lebanon was torn apart by multi-sided civil war.

In the crucible of that multi-sided conflict, the armed militias of the major population groups evolved into independent mini-armies with one splinter Christian group in the extreme south allying itself with Israel. At the height of the fray, in the summer of 1976, the Syrians sent in large forces to stop the fighting. It took them many months and finally the moral and economic backing of Egypt and Arabia to succeed. This brought relative peace and calm, but the Lebanese mosaic was badly chipped and cracked and still felt immense pressures upon it at nearly every point. In addition, the Syrian peace-keeping forces acted more and more like an army of occupation while Israel continued to use all the leverage at its disposal to keep tensions high and add fuel to the smoldering fires at all the points of major confrontation so as to keep the enemy as divided and as busy as possible. Now, if all this sounds a bit complicated, just remember that this is necessarily an ultra-SIMPLIFIED sketch of things!

Then came the Israeli invasion--but hardly as a surprise. For several weeks there had been massive preparations for the invasion, and everyone at all informed knew that this was an invasion-in-waiting--just waiting for a pretext. When the Israeli ambassador was shot in London, there was a heavy reprisal bombing raid on Beyrouth without waiting to find out that the crime had been carried out by avowed enemies of the PLO, in the business of trying to kill off PLO leaders as well as Israeli diplomats precisely because Arafat has for some years been doing all in his power to stop that kind of strategy in the liberation struggle. And, of course the 200 or more people killed in that air attack and the 300 crippled and injured were not all Palestinian guerrillas or even all Palestinians. Anyway, the PLO then fired rockets into northern Israel, killing at least eight civilians and one soldier and setting off a frontier artillery duel plus many small air raids over southern Lebanon. After a couple more days the full-scale invasion was launched, and what followed is pretty well known.

Now we must return to the original matter of how people see America's responsibility in these events. At the base of it all remains America's massive and persistent support of Israel in both military and economic terms, no matter what happens. People point to the years of severe repression in the occupied territories, where collective punishment has been used against whole neighborhoods for individual acts of sabotage and where duly elected local officials have been simply removed from office by the Israeli authorities. They point to the arbitrary expropriation of Arab property in the occupied territories to install new Jewish settlements there, to Begin's repeated statements that there can never be any thought of giving up Israeli sovereignty over these territories seized in 1967 by preemptive aggression, to the full annexation of the Golan Heights--all of which contradicts stated U.S. policy, defies U.N. resolutions supported by the U.S., flouts the basic principle of international law that there should be no permanent acquisition of territory by military aggression and makes a mockery of the Camp David agreements as Presidents Carter and Sadat both clearly understood them. Yet people witness America's unabated bolstering of Israel's already tremendous military capability and continued subsidizing of her dangerously strained economy. Since actions speak louder than words, they assume that any American protests over Israeli actions are only verbal smoke screens. They also point to what they consider the hollowest of hypocrisy in the U.S. attitude toward the PLO. For well over a year, the PLO has been multiplying its diplomatic signals that it would be ready to recognize Israel in a final settlement granting independence to the occupied territories. At the same time, Begin has repeatedly announced that even if the PLO does explicitly recognize Israel, even in advance, his government will NEVER recognize the PLO, much less make any concessions regarding the occupied territories. Yet the U.S. continues its massive backing for Israel while refusing even to talk to the PLO until the latter throws away the one diplomatic bargaining card it has left by explicitly recognizing Israel IN ADVANCE. All of this is taken as proof of America's blind, unconditional support of Israel in spite of an occasional bit of word play to the contrary.

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As for the invasion of Lebanon, most Europeans are as convinced as the Arabs that U.S. officials were well aware of Sharon's plan of overrunning Lebanon and smashing the PLO at whatever inevitable cost to both Israel and Lebanon as well as to Palestinian civilians. Some are clearly convinced that the American leaders knew this was the intent from the very beginning and gave their consent in advance. Others assume consent was given only in terms of a border operation and that these leaders simply let Begin hoodwink them with his deceitful claim that nothing more than a twenty-five mile deep border clearing operation was being undertaken. In any case, there was massive use of U.S. weaponry, which had been provided strictly for "defensive" operations; and yet throughout the entire war, and to this day, there has been no serious indication that America's enormous military and economic aid programs for Israel would suffer the slightest hiccup. In fact, Israel has just recently requested of its American ally an increased amount of aid in 1983 to help cover the costs of the war and the following occupation. The increase may not be granted, but Israel obviously felt free to ask for it and to count on the renewal of aid at least at the 1982 level. Since actions speak louder than words, the argument runs again, America must assume considerable responsibility for the whole tragedy of this summer.

The British novelist, John Le Carre, visited with both Palestinian and Israeli soldiers during the lull between the main fighting and the later massacres at Sabra and Chatila. He commented that the situation could be likened to the British having lost all control of themselves in their struggle against the IRA and deciding to end the problem once and for all with a massive invasion of Ireland. He added that one of the ironies of history is the inability of Begin and his generals to see how close they have come to applying to others the same shameful criteria once applied to themselves. BUT WORST OF ALL, he lamented, IS THE FACT THAT THE AMERICANS CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THEM IN THIS PROJECT.

This has been long, yet all too brief; painful, yet as nothing compared to the real pain of the survivors of the holocaust, the pain of the Palestinian people paying for Western anti-Semitism, the pain of the Lebanese caught in the cross fire. Insofar as our tax dollars have participated in producing part of the pain, we have an increased responsibility for sharing in the ministry of reconciliation and healing. If we can humble ourselves in love before the suffering of these different Semitic peoples and root out prejudices against Jews and Arabs alike, we may be useful instruments in such a ministry.

At the same time we must have no illusions of ease in such a ministry. It is extremely hard for people on both sides of the conflict to think seriously in terms of real reconciliation. They are people who have been horribly traumatized and feel they are fighting for their very survival. They live in a context where the slightest concession can readily be denounced by one's neighbors and brothers as treason. So, while we know there can be no real peace without justice and no reconciliation without giving and receiving forgiveness, we also know that it *is* precisely forgiveness which is the hardest thing of all to foster in such an environment. Yet "Love came down at Christmas" right there in Palestine. Perhaps earnest prayer and deep ~~person~~ personal commitment in terms of love made concrete through justice and true reconciliation could be our best gift *TO* Palestine, Lebanon, and the whole world this Christmas and throughout the new year.

Fraternally yours,

David & Carol

The BUTLERS

P.S. Just as we were finishing the first draft of this letter, we discovered that the October "news-letter" from the General Secretary of the Anglican Church Missionary Society treats basically the same concerns and continues where we left off (or barely began) in terms of "The Way of the Cross" and "The Christian Response." We shall try to have copies sent to you if at all possible.