Under siege: Letter from Jerusalem

by Yossi Klein Halevi in the September 19, 2006 issue

I am among those Israelis who are ready, in principle, for almost any concession that would end our conflict with the Palestinians. In the late 1990s I undertook, as a religious Jew, a journey of prayer and meditation into Islam and Christianity in the Holy Land in an attempt to discover a common language of devotion with my neighbors. That journey took me into mosques and pilgrimage sites in the Galilee, the West Bank and Gaza. During one memorable visit to a mosque in a Gaza refugee camp, I joined the Muslim prayer line; on bended knee, I felt our common claim to God's love, and the legitimacy of a faith that induces such devotion among its believers.

My journey was perhaps more extreme than most Israelis, even others in the peace camp, would have been willing to undertake. Still, the motive behind that journey was hardly unique. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, largely as a result of the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising against the occupation, a majority of Israelis came to realize that the Palestinians had a case, and that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a struggle between two legitimate national narratives.

Yet what I discovered in my journey through the Palestinian territories is that that nuanced perspective was hardly reciprocated. Even most Palestinian moderates with whom I spoke refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of Jewish sovereignty in any part of the land we share. For Israeli moderates, a two-state solution isn't just political expediency but moral necessity; for Palestinian moderates, partition of the land is at best a necessary evil which they hope will be undone one day, when the Jewish state is destroyed through demographic changes if not violent upheaval.

The final confirmation for me, as for most Israelis, that this conflict was about the legitimacy not of a Palestinian state but of a Jewish state occurred in July 2000. During negotiations at Camp David, Israel offered a contiguous Palestinian state and not, as Palestinian leaders put it, a series of "bantustans." Whatever doubt remained about Israel's offer at Camp David should have been dispelled five months later when Israel accepted President Clinton's proposals—ceding almost the entirety of

the West Bank, all of Gaza and three-quarters of the Old City of Jerusalem. Israel became the first country in history to voluntarily offer shared sovereignty over its capital city. The Palestinian counteroffer was four years of suicide bombings.

Unlike the first intifada of the late 1980s, which united Palestinian Christians and Muslims against the occupation, the second intifada was led by Islamists—and it was launched after Israel tried to end the occupation. Not coincidentally, Palestinian Christians were almost entirely invisible during the second intifada. The rise to power of Hamas only confirmed a process, initiated by Yasir Arafat, that transformed the Palestinian cause from national struggle into jihad.

I recall this now because it is impossible to understand why so many liberal Israelis like me supported the recent Lebanon war without grasping what has happened here since the collapse of the Oslo peace process. The confrontation with Hezbollah is only one battle in the jihadist war against the Israeli home front that began six years ago with the Palestinian suicide bombings. It was hardly lost on Israelis that this summer we were under missile assault on the very two fronts—Lebanon and Gaza—from which we had withdrawn to the 1967 line. For Hezbollah and Hamas, the goal isn't creating a Palestinian state alongside Israel but creating one in place of Israel. One Israeli political cartoonist ironically noted that the West Bank was surprisingly quiet—because that was the one front from which Israel had not yet withdrawn to the 1967 borders.

What connects Sunni Hamas and Shi'ite Hezbollah is the theology of genocide, which sees the Jews as a satanic people and the destruction of the Jewish state as a divine imperative. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah once remarked that he doesn't mind Jews immigrating to Israel, because gathering them in one place will make it that much easier to destroy them. And Hezbollah's patron, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has called for Israel's destruction so often that those genocidal pronouncements barely make news anymore—one more anti-Israel outrage that has been transformed from the inconceivable to the mundane.

If Iran goes nuclear, Israel's own nuclear force may not be much of a deterrence against apocalyptic leaders who apparently believe that the destruction of Israel will trigger the arrival of the Mahdi, the Shi'ite messiah. A nuclear Iran would be the ultimate suicide bomber.

The theology of genocide has penetrated throughout the Muslim world. Not that all Muslims want to destroy the Jews or the Jewish state; far from it. I vehemently dispute those Jews who would turn Islam itself into an enemy. The love I felt for Islam during my journey into Palestinian mosques still lingers, despite the traumas of recent years. Still, I cannot ignore the fact that much of the Muslim world sees my disappearance as a religious imperative. Key premises of the jihadists' theology—like Holocaust denial and the conspiracy theory that blames the Israeli Mossad for 9/11—are embraced by many millions of Muslims. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a runaway best seller throughout the Arab world and in Iran; at the recent Frankfurt Book Fair, the *Protocols* had a place of honor at the Iranian pavilion.

Yet astonishingly, many Westerners have failed to notice that the Arab-Israeli conflict has been transformed into a holy war against the existence of a Jewish state. Rather than turning the Iranian government and other purveyors of Jew-hatred into pariahs, much of supposedly enlightened world opinion has tried to turn Israel into a pariah.

The recent criticism against Israel over Lebanon has only deepened the affront. The question that lingers from the war is this: Is Israel permitted to defend itself against terrorists who hide behind their civilians in order to target ours?

Even as Hezbollah launched rockets from within crowded neighborhoods and schools, Israel didn't resort to the indiscriminate attacks of which it was accused. Had it done so, there would be no Hezbollah infrastructure left in southern Lebanon, and the civilian casualty figures would have been in the many thousands. To accuse Israel of deliberately targeting civilians is to ignore the obvious: civilian casualties only increased international pressure against Israel and hampered its war against Hezbollah. Indeed, both in Lebanon and Palestine, only the jihadists benefit from civilian casualties.