Reader's Response

"I Write as a Jew..."

Robert L. Bard

I write as a Jew who recognizes the benefits he derives from the existence of Israel but cannot justify the killings necessary to maintain that existence. I think of boat people— the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians—escapees who can find no country willing to take them. And I think of Argentina's Jews who can find haven in Israel. But I also think of four thousand years of commitment to intellectual vigor, moral sensitivity, and hatred of militarism. And one hundred years of struggle to achieve full citizenship in the United States while retaining Jewish identity, and I wonder how long these can survive the continuation of the Middle East impasse and the sometimes ferocious commitment of American organized Jewry to Israel's interests—almost invariably as Israel views these interests.

The docility of Syria and its Arab neighbors to the Israeli incursion into southern Lebanon demonstrates that Arab military and political weakness permit Israel to maintain the status quo almost indefinitely. But every day the stalemate continues hardens Israel's moral arteries and guarantees the death of more Israeli civilians and more embittered young Palestinians. But, it is argued, can Israel ever trust an Arab world that approves such atrocities as the slaughter on the Haifa-Tel Aviv road? And why does Egypt, which has refused to recognize the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and has just been the victim of PLO violence in Cyprus, speak so softly about the raid, and so very loudly about the Israeli response? Basically, for the same reasons that Israeli supporters tolerate somewhat more directed killing of Palestinian and Moslem Lebanese civilians in southern Lebanon. Neither the Palestinians nor their non-Egyptian Arab brethren can directly challenge Israel's military might. And Israel cannot take revenge on or fully protect itself from PLO terrorists without violating Lebanese territory and killing Palestinian and Lebanese civilians.

The PLO raid, a master stroke of conscienceless Realpolitik, made life easier for Yassir Arafat, for Menachem Begin, and for a substantial segment of American Jewry. Begin is more comfortable because it gives him excuse to revert to the role with which he is most comfortable—the intransigent defender of Israel and visionary of an Israel occupying all of its ancient territories. Sadat's demarche created a terrible dilemma for Begin. Begin could not ignore the possibility of a permanent peace even though it meant giving up many of the objectives he has spent a lifetime pursuing. Now he can again be the indomitable defender of Israel's existence in a world where the enemy is not the civilized Sadat pleading for a time where parents needn't grieve for their war dead but the black-jowled Arafat with the blood of Israeli women and children on his hands while the rest of the Arab world applauds the deed. Enemies must remain enemies, and those we injure must appear unworthy of concern. Moderate Palestinians are much more troublesome than fanatics. Sadat pleading the Palestinian cause is infinitely harder to deal with than Arafat, brandishing his gun and five o'clock shadow, boasting of his murders. Now, though, Sadat can again be replaced by Arafat and the world returned to its comfortable black and white. That the Israeli response increased Israeli deaths by 25 per cent, not counting Lebanese casualties, is likely to be overlooked.

Israel's incursion into Lebanon may make it more secure against PLO terrorism. But it also enhances Israel's image as a militarily powerful expansionist and irredentalist intruder. This may not deter Sadat, but it will deter Hussein, Assad, and Feisal from taking any risks for a permanent settlement.

Though Israel clearly has the military ability to maintain the status quo, it will pay a terrible price in U.S.-Israel relationships, and American Jews may pay an equally terrible price in political and social isolation within this country. The United States' requirement for decent political relationships with much of the Arab world guarantees greatly increased pressure on Israel to make fundamental concessions to the Arabs, more or less along the lines demanded by Sadat. And it appears that organized American Jewry will use every means at its disposal to counter that pressure.

Sadat's actions, combined with Begin's outrageous claims to the West Bank, also made life miserable for much of American organized Jewry. But, after a period of quiescence, they decided to attack the Carter administration for any wavering from all-out Israel support, no matter how unreasonable the Israeli actions; and no matter how important relations with moderate Arab states are to the interests of this country and to Israel's long-run interest as well. Any rational analysis must demonstrate that packaging warplanes for Egypt and Saudi Arabia with those for Israel was the cheapest way for the U.S. to maintain essential relations with the Arab world while being of maximum assistance to Israel. Despite the fact that no responsible American president could be more committed to the survival of Israel than Carter, various American Jewish leaders have decided to attack the administration for pro-Arabism.

And these attacks couldn't come at a worse time for Carter. In addition to the Middle East, he is now engaged in a seemingly limitless array of treacherous political issues—energy, tax reform, SALT negotiations, etc. Every congressional vote counts. And the pro-Israel lobby can command an awful lot of votes. The outcome of these pressures is impossible to predict. Certainly it will dramatically undercut continued support for Israel by many Jewish intellectuals and will estrange them from the American Jewish community. It will push them even closer to doubting the wisdom of a Jewish national home.

Under the conditions prevailing in the Middle East, the distinction between legitimate killings of military personnel and illegitimate killings of innocent civilians is very difficult to sustain. Whatever the reasons for Begin's election, the Israeli electorate was fully aware of his super-hard-line position on Israel's right to permanent possession of the West Bank— Judea and Samaria. Under these circumstances, are Likkud voters and politicians totally innocent of the inevitable consequences of turning the country over to Begin? For myself, establishment of a national homeland does not justify the use of violence. But most Arabs, Jews, and Americans reject this position. Everyone condoning violence for these purposes must share, to some degree, responsibility for every killing on both sides of the conflict. There are few innocent bystanders to the tragedy.