

# Tel Aviv and the Qana massacre: anatomy of a propaganda campaign

Rick Kelly  
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The Israeli government has responded to its massacre of almost 60 civilians, including 37 children, in the Lebanese village of Qana with a barrage of brazen lies, falsifications and slander against the innocent victims of the bombing.

Without even trying to be consistent, Israeli government and military spokespeople have variously claimed that: the building's destruction was caused by Hezbollah explosives; Israeli missiles, aimed at Hezbollah rocket launchers, accidentally hit the residential building, in which the Lebanese civilians were taking shelter; the Israeli air force did target and destroy the building, but was justified in doing so because the civilians killed had been warned to leave Qana; and the women and children were being held as "human shields" in the building by Hezbollah.

All these lies are intended to cover up the reality that the Qana massacre was a calculated and criminal attack designed to terrorise the Lebanese people and permanently remove the largely Shiite population from the country's southern regions. With the full backing of the Bush administration, the Israeli government of Ehud Olmert aims to reduce Lebanon to the status of a degraded protectorate.

Israel has committed countless war crimes in its three-week assault on Lebanon. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and thousands wounded, while more than three-quarters of a million people have been forced from their homes and turned into refugees. The massacre at Qana is only the worst atrocity in a campaign which has seen civilian convoys bombed, ambulances targeted, and United Nations workers murdered.

As news of the civilian deaths in Qana emerged early Sunday, the Israeli government quickly mobilised what the *Jerusalem Post* described as an "all-star team" of civilian and military spokespeople to "handle the foreign press". The propaganda campaign followed the standard Israeli modus operandi after any Israeli Defence Force atrocity—no lie is too big, and no admission of guilt is allowed.

Government spokeswoman Miri Eisen was interviewed on CNN shortly after the images of woman and children being pulled from the rubble were first broadcast. "This is definitely a mistake," she declared. "We did not target this building... The building itself was not targeted, as I said. The building itself was next to the rocket launcher sites and we are targeting all of

those rocket launcher sites. This was a mistake, Israel deeply regrets this."

The claim of an accidental strike is absurd. The Israeli air force is equipped with US-supplied precision missiles that hit targets with devastating accuracy. This has been demonstrated in recent weeks in the West Bank and Gaza, where numbers of Palestinians have received phone calls from Israeli military personnel warning them that their homes would soon be bombed as punishment for alleged militant activity. Minutes after these calls are made, the air force drops a bomb destroying the targeted houses, which are often located in densely populated areas. Moreover, in recent years, Israeli missiles have been used to assassinate scores of Palestinian militants in moving vehicles.

In Qana, at least five residential homes were destroyed on Sunday night as a result of a sustained Israeli artillery and missile attack. That many more civilians were not killed is solely due to the fact that almost all of the town's 12,000 residents had fled in fear for their safety.

More evidence has emerged that the Israelis knew that children and other civilians were using the bombed building as a refuge. Survivors of the bombing have told the *Los Angeles Times* that their children played near the residential building as Israeli reconnaissance drones flew overhead. "For sure, the drones must have recognised that there were children playing in the area," Mohsen Hashem, a 30 year-old resident, said.

After Eisen's appearance on CNN, Israeli military spokespeople further embellished the story. Brigadier General Amir Eshel told journalists at the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv that Israeli planes hit the building between midnight and 1 a.m. but that it had not collapsed, killing those inside, until 8 a.m. "The gap between the timing of the collapse of the building and the time of the strike on it is unclear," he declared. "It could be that inside the building, things that could eventually cause an explosion were being housed, things that we could not blow up in the attack and maybe remained there."

This so-called "gap" was immediately seized upon by Israel's most shameless apologists. One popular right-wing Zionist web site, *Israel Insider*, described the Qana massacre as "Hezbollahollywood", and accused Lebanese resistance fighters of planting the dead bodies in the building and then conducting a

controlled demolition in order to blame the Zionist state.

Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman, echoed this grotesque claim when he spoke to NBC's "Meet the Press". "I wouldn't put it beyond that vicious, brutal, cynical terrorist organisation to have held those people there against their will after we'd repeatedly asked them to leave, so that they would actually be used as human shields, and maybe even, as farfetched as this may sound, for this to happen, because this serves nobody's purpose, except Hezbollah and Iran," he declared.

Tel Aviv's attempt to deny responsibility for the building's destruction was, however, quickly refuted by the facts on the ground. All of the survivors and Qana residents angrily rejected Israel's claims, and insisted that the building's collapse immediately followed the Israeli missile attack. The director of the Red Cross in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre also reported that he received news of the atrocity at 7 a.m., that is at least an hour before the building collapsed according to the Israeli military. Ambulances and medical crews took about an hour to reach the area due to ongoing Israeli air strikes and the destruction of roads and bridges.

By late Sunday evening it was clear that Israeli disavowals of responsibility for the deaths in Qana were falling flat—producing what one Tel Aviv newspaper described as a "public relations disaster". The government and military then adopted another defence, to which they have since stuck, namely that the bombing was justified because Hezbollah rockets had been fired from Qana and civilians had been given prior warning to leave the area.

Israel released video footage purportedly showing Hezbollah rockets being fired from Qana and trucks allegedly transporting arms into civilian buildings. This footage was later revealed to have been taken on July 28—two days before the deaths of the civilians. Israel also admitted that none of the video material was of the building bombed on July 30. Officials have still not explained any connection between the footage and the building. Moreover, no evidence was later found in the rubble indicating that it had been used for military purposes.

"The footage we're seeing, it doesn't tie in," Andrew Brookes of the International Institute for Strategic Studies told Britain's Channel 4 news. "We see a truck here, we'll see a missile firing there. But again we don't see any mechanism for saying, well that relates to this pile of debris, this relates to the terrible catastrophe over there where people are lying maimed and killed. We don't see any remains of missile trucks blown sky high, we see no evidence whatsoever of a missile capability."

Tel Aviv's defence of its attack on Qana is testament to the unabashed criminality of the Israeli government. Even if it were true that Hezbollah was firing rockets from the civilian building, the Israeli missile strike remains an atrocity and a war crime.

"Just because the Israeli military warned the civilians of Qana

to leave does not give it carte blanche to blindly attack," noted Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch. "The Israeli military seems to consider anyone left in the area as a combatant who is fair game for attack. Such consistent failure to distinguish between combatants and civilians is a war crime."

Beirut-based journalist Robert Fisk told *Democracy Now!*: "Is it the case now that if you happen to live in a house next to where someone launches a missile, you are to be sentenced to death? Is that what Israel thinks this war is about? I'm sitting here, for example, in my house tonight in darkness—there's no electricity—next to a car park. What if someone launches a missile from the car park? Am I supposed to die for that? Is that a death sentence for me? Is that how Israel wages war? If I have children in the basement, are they supposed to die for that?"

One can only imagine the outrage in Tel Aviv and Washington if Hezbollah, or Palestinian militants, were to issue a warning to a million Israelis to flee their homes, then justify random civilian deaths on the basis that the victims had received due notification.

Moreover, Israel's claim that Hezbollah was using civilian areas in Qana to fire rockets cannot be accepted at face value. Local residents and Red Cross workers told the IPS news agency that no rockets had been fired before the Israeli bombing raid.

"We found no evidence of Hezbollah fighters in Qana," Kassem Shaulan, a Red Cross medic and training manager said. "When we rescue people or recover bodies from villages, we usually see rocket launchers or Hezbollah fighters if they are there, but in Qana I can say that the village was 100 percent clear of either of those."

No other nation-state is as well versed in the practice of the "big lie" as Israel. Unable to publicly admit the criminal nature of its geo-strategic ambitions in Lebanon and the Middle East, Tel Aviv is forced to resort to blatant cover-ups and falsifications in the aftermath of each atrocity. The Olmert government's Qana propaganda campaign follows a long tradition of such operations in the history of the Zionist state.



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