THE CURRENT ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN-LEBANESE CONFLICT: THE VIEWS OF FOUR CHICAGO RABBIS

1. <u>Who Started It?</u>

On June 25, Hamas operatives tunneled from Gaza into Israel, where they killed two Israeli soldiers and kidnapped a third, demanding that Israel free more than nine hundred Palestinian prisoners, many of them being held for violent crimes. Two weeks later, Hezbollah forces crossed the international border from southern Lebanon to support Hamas' demand. They killed eight Israeli soldiers, and took two others hostage.   Neither attack was provoked.

In the past, some Christian leaders have tempered their criticism of Palestinian violence by casting it as the understandable response of an otherwise helpless people living under occupation. The current situation reveals serious flaws in this analysis. Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, and from Gaza in 2005. There is no Israeli presence in either locale.   Moreover, the Israeli government has announced plans to disengage from most of the West Bank, either through negotiations or unilaterally should the Hamas government persist in refusing to recognize Israel.

Rather than being a consequence of Israeli occupation, the present situation is a direct result of Israel having withdrawn from Arab lands, leaving Palestinian terrorist groups free to train operatives, manufacture weapons, and launch actions inside Israel.

2. <u>Background</u>

From the late 1970's until 2000, Israel maintained a 3-5 mile wide security zone inside Lebanon, to prevent Palestinian terrorists from shelling Israeli towns and crossing the border to attack civilians, many of them women and children. Periodic attempts at replacing Israeli troops with an international force failed. A contingent of U.S. marines positioned there in 1982 was withdrawn after 241 of them were killed in their barracks by a Palestinian suicide bomber. The United Nations force (UNFIL) is chronically undermanned and ineffective.   When Israel withdrew six years ago, Hezbollah moved swiftly to establish a state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon backed by Iran and Syria.   The Lebanese government has done nothing to implement a 2004 U.N. Security Council resolution (#1559) calling upon it to disarm Hezbollah and take control of southern Lebanon.

Israel's disengagement from Gaza last summer was intended to give the Palestinians an opportunity to prove their ability to build a self-governing Palestinian society prepared to live in peaceful co-existence with its Jewish neighbor. A Palestinian success would strengthen Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's case for placing most of the West Bank under Palestinian sovereignty, thus opening the door for full Palestinian statehood.

What actually ensued was catastrophic. Shortly after Israel departed, a virtual civil war erupted between Fatah