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The Likudization of the World: The True Legacy of September 11

by Naomi Klein

Russian President Vladimir Putin is so fed up with being grilled over his handling of the Beslan catastrophe that he lashed out at foreign journalists on Monday. "Why don't you meet Osama bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks," he demanded, adding that, "No one has a moral right to tell us to talk to child-killers."

Mr. Putin is not a man who likes to be second guessed. Fortunately for him, there is still at least one place where he is shielded from all the critics: Israel. On Monday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warmly welcomed Russian Foreign Minister Sergie Lavrov for a meeting about strengthening ties in the fight against terror. "Terror has no justification, and it is time for the free, decent, humanistic world to unite and fight this terrible epidemic," Mr. Sharon said.

There is little to argue with there. The essence of terrorism is the deliberate targeting of innocents to further political goals. Any claims its perpetrators make to fighting for justice are morally bankrupt and lead directly to the barbarity of Beslan: a carefully laid plan to slaughter hundreds of children on their first day of school.

Yet sympathy alone does not explain the unqualified outpourings of solidarity for Russia coming from Israeli politicians this week. In addition to Mr. Sharon's pronouncements, Israel's Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom commented that the massacre showed that "There is no difference between terror in Beersheba and terror in Beslan." And the Associated Press quoted an unnamed Israeli official saying that Russians "understand now that what they have is not a local terror problem but part of the global Islamic terror threat. The Russians may listen to our suggestions this time."

The underlying message is unequivocal: Russia and Israel are engaged in the very same war, one not against Palestinians demanding their right to statehood, or against Chechens demanding their independence, but against "the global Islamic terror threat." Israel, as the elder-statesman, is claiming the right to set the rules of war. Unsurprisingly, the rules are the same ones Sharon uses against the Intifada in the occupied territories. His starting point is that Palestinians, though they may make political demands, are actually only interested in the annihilation of Israel. This goes beyond states' standard refusal to negotiate with terrorists —it is a conviction rooted in an insistent pathologising, not just of extremists, but of the entire "Arab mind".

From this basic belief several others follow. First, all Israeli violence against Palestinians is an act of self-defence, necessary to the country's very survival. Second, anyone who questions Israel's absolute right to erase the enemy, is themselves an enemy. This applies to the United Nation, other world leaders, to journalists, to peaceniks. Putin has clearly been taking notes, but it's not the first time Israel has played this mentoring role. Three years ago, on September 12, 2001, Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was asked how the previous day's terror attacks in New York and Washington would affect relations between Israel and the

United States. "It's very good," he said. "Well, not very good, but it will generate immediate sympathy." The attack, Mr. Netanyahu explained, would "strengthen the bond between our two peoples, because we've experienced terror over so many decades, but the United States has now experienced a massive haemorrhaging of terror." Common wisdom has it that after September 11, a new era of geo-politics was ushered in, defined by what is usually called "the Bush Doctrine": pre-emptive wars, attacks on "terrorist infrastructure" (read: entire countries), an insistence that all the enemy understands is force. In fact it would be more accurate to call this rigid world-view "The Likud Doctrine." What happened on September 11 2001 is that the Likud Doctrine, previously targeted against Palestinians, was picked up by the most powerful nation on Earth and applied on a global scale. Call it the Likudization of the world, the real legacy of September 11. Let me be absolutely clear: by Likudization, I do not mean that key members of the Bush Administration are working for the interests of Israel at the expense of U.S. interests —the increasingly popular "dual loyalty" argument. What I mean is that on September 11, George W Bush went looking for a political philosophy to guide him in his new role as "War President," a job for which he was uniquely unqualified. He found that philosophy in the Likud Doctrine, conveniently handed to him ready-made by the ardent Likudniks already ensconced in the White House. No thinking required. In the three years since, the Bush White House has applied this imported logic with chilling consistency to its global "war on terror" —complete with the pathologising and medicalising of the "Muslim mind". It was the guiding philosophy in Afghanistan and Iraq, and may well extend to Iran and Syria. It's not simply that Bush sees America's role as protecting Israel from a hostile Arab world. It's that he has cast the United States in the very same role in which Israel casts itself, facing the very same threat. In this narrative, the U.S. is fighting a never ending battle for its very survival against utterly irrational forces that seek nothing less than its total extermination.

And now the Likudization narrative has spread to Russia. In that same meeting with foreign journalists on Monday, The Guardian reports that President Putin "made it clear he sees the drive for Chechen independence as the spearhead of a strategy by Chechen Islamists, helped by foreign fundamentalists, to undermine the whole of southern Russia and even stir up trouble among Muslim communities in other parts of the country. 'There are Muslims along the Volga, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan...This is all about Russia's territorial integrity,' he said." It used to be just Israel that was worried about being pushed into the sea.

There has indeed been a dramatic and dangerous rise in religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world. The problem is that under the Likud Doctrine, there is no space to ask why this is happening. We are not allowed to point out that fundamentalism breeds in failed states, where warfare has systematically targeted civilian infrastructure, allowing the mosques start taking responsibility for everything from education to garbage collection. It has happened in Gaza, in Grozny, in Sadr City. Mr. Sharon says terrorism is an epidemic that "has no borders, no fences" but this is not the case. Everywhere in the world, terrorism thrives within the illegitimate borders of occupation and dictatorship; it festers behind "security walls" put up by imperial powers; it crosses those borders and climbs over those fences to explode inside the countries responsible for, or complicit in, occupation and domination.

Ariel Sharon is not the commander in chief of the war on terror; that dubious honour stays with George Bush. But on the third year anniversary of September 11, he deserves to be recognized as this disastrous campaign's spiritual/intellectual guru, a kind of trigger-happy Yoda for all the wannabe Luke Skywalker out there, training for their epic battles in good vs. evil.

If we want to see the future of where the Likud Doctrine leads, we need only follow the guru home, to Israel —a country paralyzed by fear, embracing pariah policies of extrajudicial assassination and illegal settlement, and in furious denial about the brutality it commits daily. It is a nation surrounded by enemies and desperate for friends, a category it narrowly defines as those who ask no questions, while generously offering the same moral amnesty in return. That glimpse at our collective future is the only lesson the world needs to learn from Ariel Sharon.

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