

The Source of Ignatieff's Myths

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As an Israeli, I do not have a horse in the race between Canada's major political parties and their leaders. But when the contest extends to allegations related to human rights, as in the case of Michael Ignatieff's off-hand reference to alleged Israel "war crimes" during the recent bitter conflict against Hezbollah, you've got our attention.

Ignatieff's statements, or rather misstatements, are important not only because of his position as a contender for the leadership of the Liberal Party, but also due to his background as a noted academic specializing in human rights. Seen as a neutral expert, his words on this topic carry a great deal of weight.

And this is precisely the problem. Ignatieff's condemnation of Israeli actions betrayed an ignorance of the biases that have become prevalent in the human rights business. In response to the criticism, Ignatieff argued that he was merely repeating "responsible criticism" made by groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW).

An expert in human rights law should have known that the leaders of these groups and their reports are political, and lack credibility (to understate the case), particularly with respect to Israel. As noted by Prof. Irwin Cotler, another world-renowned expert in this area, human rights is the religion of the 21st century. Political superpowers with huge budgets measured in tens of millions of dollars are the churches, and as in other religions, the power of dogma and belief can be more important than logic and accuracy. This particular dogma includes a great deal of anti-democratic, anti-American and anti-Israel rhetoric.

In the case cited by Ignatieff, HRW and Amnesty condemned Israel for a missile attack in Hezbollah stronghold in Southern Lebanon known as Qana. Lebanese sources at first claimed that over 50 civilians had died, and this was repeated without question in HRW's press release and by officials in interviews. HRW later lowered the number of alleged victims to 28, but the information was no more reliable. Some of the caskets prepared for burial were draped with Hezbollah flags, and Lebanese reported that some of the bodies were brought in from outside Qana.

In fact, HRW and Amnesty officials have no idea what really happened at Qana. The best they could do was to repeat the claims of "eyewitnesses", who may, or may not be inventing a tale designed to promote the political war against Israel. While Israeli civilians were bombarded by almost 4000 rockets, HRW's "researchers" claimed to have found **no cases** in which Hezbollah deliberately hid weapons or launched attacks from houses, schools, fields, stores, or mosques. Having already found Israel guilty, they were not looking very hard.

This lack of credibility or consistency is not new – as an expert, Ignatieff should have known the details. For over a decade, Amnesty and HRW leaders have been involved in campaigns to denounce Israel as one of the worst violators in the world. In the Middle East, the main focus of their publications is not Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Libya or the suicide bombers sent by Palestinian leaders, but rather the one democracy in the region – Israel. HRW and Amnesty were active participants in the infamous NGO Forum of the 2001 Durban conference on "racism and xenophobia". The Canadian government (particularly officials in Foreign Affairs) actively promoted this conference, ignoring warnings that it would be abused to demonize Israel.

Since then, the participants have continued to promote the Durban agenda, claiming military expertise that they do not have, and exploiting the rhetoric of international law. In Lebanon, as during the Palestinian terror campaign which took over 1000 Israeli lives, every defensive action was denounced as "indiscriminate", and every weapon was declared to be immoral. In contrast, it took HRW three months to finally discover that Hezbollah was using cluster bombs to hit Israeli cities (Amnesty was only two months behind).

In order to restore the moral basis of universal human rights, it is necessary to end the ease with which unsubstantiated allegations are repeated without question by journalists, academics and politicians. To undue some of the damage, Ignatieff should lead the way.

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