

There Couldn't Be a More Perfect Time

Gerald M. Steinberg

Today, December 10, marks International Human Rights Day, and the presence in Israel of Irene Khan, head of Amnesty International, highlights the demise of once-lofty goals. Amnesty International is a superpower with an annual budget of almost \$200 million, used to promote radical political agendas and photo-ops for its leaders.

As a result, little remains of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in the shadow of the Holocaust. Officials of Amnesty and other non-governmental organizations focus their attacks on democracies attempting to defend against terror, with far fewer resources to oppose totalitarian and genocidal regimes such as Sudan and Iran.

The silence of Khan and other officials regarding the human rights of the Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Palestinians and by Hizbullah, and the human rights of Ron Arad, is damning. Amnesty and HRW (founded as Helsinki Watch) gained their legitimacy by campaigning on behalf of political prisoners, including Natan (then Anatoly) Sharansky. Genuine human rights groups would be leading the campaigns to win the freedom of Israeli prisoners held by terrorists.

THE HYPOCRISY and political bias of these NGOs, in collaboration with the United Nations Human Rights Council, is particularly blatant in the case of Israel. Amnesty, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Christian Aid (UK), and pro-Palestinian partners actively implement the 2001 Durban agenda using the rhetoric of human rights to demonize Israel. Adopting the version of history starting with "Israeli occupation," these groups advance an ideology that presents Arabs as victims and Israelis as aggressors.

The war between Hizbullah and Israel produced another wave in which defensive actions were automatically condemned as "war crimes," "collective punishment" or violations of international law. Amnesty and HRW together issued dozens of press releases, almost all of which focused on allegations against Israel. Without providing criteria, Amnesty statements declared that the Israeli strikes in Beirut were "grossly disproportionate," while acknowledging this was where "Hizbullah had its headquarters," directing the firing of thousands of rockets against Israel.

No one seemed to notice the logical disconnect.

THE "DISCOVERY" of Hizbullah's cluster bombs and human shields came weeks or months later. In another surreal statement demonstrating their detachment from reality, Amnesty officials observed that "No investigation into violations of international humanitarian law by Hizbullah is known to have been conducted by Hizbullah commanders...."

The NGOs that dominate the human rights discourse also feed journalists and diplomats with false or unverifiable claims. Their reports are based on "eyewitness testimony," such as by Palestinians in Gaza and Lebanese in areas controlled by Hizbullah.

During the recent war, HRW and Amnesty claimed to have found no evidence of Hizbullah activities in the areas struck by Israel. There is no reason to conclude that these "researchers" and "military experts" bothered to check the allegiance and credibility of their sources. But HRW's 49-page report - the largest PR effort during the war - entitled "Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Lebanon," was headlined without question by journalists around the world.

IN ADDITION, the European Union and its member states fund many groups that also use the language of human rights to promote conflict and demonization of Israel. The grandly named Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) issued a torrent of political statements and one-sided condemnations during the Lebanon War. Other EU-supported "human rights" groups campaign against Israel's security barrier, with terms such as "apartheid wall" and call for boycotts, sanctions and other measures that are part of the political war.

Some of these NGOs refer to "resistance" and "martyrdom" operations against "Israel Occupation Forces," meaning terror attacks and suicide bombers that have killed hundreds of Israeli civilians.

In this way, European governments, including Switzerland and Norway, are contributing to the destruction of human rights based on universal principles, and undermining peace efforts they claim to promote.

This moral decay is also evident in the activities of the newly reformed United Nations Human Rights Council, which has focused on gratuitous Israel-bashing. The pseudo-reform process was strongly supported by the NGO network, which criticized the US and Israel for warning that the new UNHRC was no better than the old, discredited version.

IT WAS ONLY after the activities of the new UNHRC brought the use of double-standards to record levels that these human rights NGOs finally began speaking out against the abuse. (HRW's recent criticism of the Palestinian use of human shields to protect terrorists was attacked by fringe groups seeking to paint this illegal practice as non-violent protest.)

To reverse course, and restore the credibility, universality and substance of human rights the credibility and accountability of groups like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch must also be restored. Ideology and political preferences can no longer dominate their agendas and publications, and human rights cannot use double standards which punish democracies and reward dictatorships.

Ethical norms must be freed from political and ideological agendas, particularly when these are used by those who declare the goal of "wiping Israel off the map." International Human Rights Day is an appropriate time to start.

The writer is the director of the Program on Conflict Management at Bar-Ilan University and executive director of NGO Monitor.