

Watching Human Rights

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Sixty years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its values have been reduced to political and ideological slogans. In the United Nations, the reformed Human Rights Council - headed by Libya, Cuba and Iran - is a travesty. Most reports attack Israel, a convenient target, thereby diverting attention and resources from Darfur, Saudi Arabia and China. Meanwhile, the UN's 2001 Durban Conference on Racism became a vehicle for anti-Semitism. As a result, human rights norms have lost both their universal character and moral authority.

The powerful nongovernmental organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are not much better. Both organizations devote disproportionate resources to media "hot spots," including Iraq, Afghanistan and the Arab-Israeli conflict, to attract attention and donors, but at the expense of human rights.

The references to international law in the current violence between Israel and the Hamas leadership in Gaza follow a familiar pattern. Last week, Amnesty International accused Israel of "reckless disregard for civilian life," "unlawful attacks" and "disproportionate attacks."

The terms are used in an arbitrary manner to express the political sympathies of the officials. Statements published by other prominent NGOs use almost the same terminology. And while the NGO reports and public relations campaigns now include some condemnations of Hamas for violating the human rights of Israelis, the core moral and legal distinction between aggressor and defender is entirely absent.

These champions of human rights have also ignored the strategy of using civilians as human shields in Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza and Lebanon.

In their moral pronouncements and press releases, the human rights NGOs and the UN groups that are charged with implementing human rights norms consistently fail to properly address the use of human shields. This failure is also an indictment of the human rights community.

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