

The Human-Rights Lobby Meets Terrorism

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In this article, Adrian Karatnycky and Arch Puddington discuss the response of human-rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, to the terrorist attacks of September 11. They look at how most of the human-rights community has treated the question of terrorism in general in recent years, and also how it has treated the US.

IN the months since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the world's two leading human-rights organizations—Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch—have been very busy. And so they should have been. International law, to which these organizations are committed above all things, recognizes terrorism as a distinct and uniquely malevolent form of aggression against civilians; and the attacks themselves assuredly constituted a massive and horrendous violation of human rights, unprecedented in the history of the United States.

Yet, from the steady stream of reports, statements, and open letters the organizations have sent to leaders like President Bush and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, one learns little of this. Although both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued denunciations of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, not once have they spoken about the precise nature of these vicious acts, or called them by their proper name: terrorism. They have raised many concerns, to be sure, but terrorism itself has not been part of their agenda.

To understand what is going on, it helps to have some idea of how most of the human-rights community has treated this question in general in recent years—and also how it has treated the United States of America.

IT TURNS out that the organizations' reluctance to use the word 'terrorism' is not new. One can examine the hundreds of documents that Amnesty International has issued over the years on countries and regions victimized by terror, from Colombia and Kashmir to Spain and Great Britain, without ever encountering a straightforward refer-

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ence to the term. Instead, one reads of 'brutal' or 'horrific' acts, or of 'violent assaults'—phrases that could apply as easily to the aggression of one army against another as to the deliberate murder of civilians by political or religious extremists.

Occasionally, human-rights organizations have resorted to almost comical euphemisms. In speaking of

the 'war on terrorism,' Human Rights Watch has preferred to describe it as the 'war against indistinct enemies.' As for those cases when the word simply cannot be avoided, Amnesty International has invariably placed it in quotation marks, thus implying its own scepticism.

Pressed to explain this policy of evasion, spokesmen for major human-rights organizations argue that the term 'terrorism' lacks a clear definition in international law—which happens not to be the case. There are, in fact, several UN-sponsored agreements, including the International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings, that speak forthrightly of terrorism as a distinct and widely agreed-upon category of aggression. A better explanation can be found in the human-rights community's profound distrust of the governments around the world that face a terrorist threat—and in the reluctance to acknowledge that security is essential to any meaningful idea of freedom.

It seems that, whatever havoc terrorists may wreak on a society, the more serious human-rights problem in the eyes of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch lies in the methods that public authorities have adopted to combat these 'indistinct enemies.' Nowhere has this attitude been more pronounced than in the way human-rights groups have treated the challenge posed by radical Islam, which everywhere has resorted to

terror as a basic tactic. In a revealing statement, Kenneth Roth, the director of Human Rights Watch, observed last May that ‘violent Islam [today] is the Communism of ten years ago.’ By this he appeared to mean not only that radical Islam was a spent force, like Soviet Communism in 1990, but that apprehensions about it were greatly exaggerated, and as likely as not were being invoked by governments only as an excuse for repression.

IS THIS true? Let us consider, to begin with, Algeria and Uzbekistan, two places whose governments have been ruthless in dealing with violent Islam.

For most of the past decade, Algerian society has been brutalized by a fanatical and murderous movement of Islamic extremists. Islamic guerrillas have routinely invaded villages deemed unsympathetic to their cause, slaughtering an estimated 100,000 men, women and children. The response of the Algerian government has been, by any measure, ferocious. It has tortured or killed its enemies and harassed or imprisoned journalists and public figures who have criticized official policies.

From the standpoint of human rights for Algerian society as a whole, however, there can be no doubt that the triumph of the government is preferable to the triumph of its terrorist adversaries. Yet the overwhelming thrust of the criticism issued by the human-rights lobby has been directed at that government. Far more important to these groups than the extraordinary death toll exacted by terrorism has been the state’s unwillingness to prosecute abusive members of its own security forces. Missing, too, from the analysis of the major human-rights groups has been any acknowledgment that the Algerian government, having vanquished a formidable enemy, is moving gradually toward national reconciliation and the relaxation of state control.

A similar myopia has afflicted the organizations’ treatment of Uzbekistan, a country with its own deplorable record of human-rights violations.

Uzbekistan’s president, Islam Karimov, is one of Central Asia’s most pitiless strongmen, having retained power by jailing and torturing peaceful political opponents and making others ‘disappear.’ His crimes have been chronicled and denounced by human-rights investigators with justifiable regularity. But Karimov has also used the same tactics against threats to his power of an entirely different sort.

The most fearsome of these threats has come from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a radical guerilla group that, with the assistance of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, has sowed terror not just in its own country but

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throughout Central Asia. Uzbekistan has also seen the emergence of the Party of Liberation (*Hizb-ut-tahrir*), a fanatical Islamist group that operates through secretive five-man cells in more than a dozen countries, including Great Britain and Germany (where it is likely to have influenced Muhammad Atta and the other hijackers who attended German universities). Avowed supporters of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, members of the Party of Liberation reject democracy, religious freedom, human rights, and participation in political institutions they consider tainted by unbelief. If they have not yet joined

the armed opposition in Uzbekistan, it is because their tenets permit violence only when there is a likelihood of overthrowing the ruler.

Predicably, President Karimov has resorted to repression against the Party of Liberation and has jailed many of its followers without a semblance of due process or fair trial. In their assessments of Uzbekistan, however, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch treat these jailed Party of Liberation members not as would-be terrorists but as prisoners of conscience. They are routinely described as nothing more than ‘pious Muslims,’ ‘men who prayed at home or in small private groups,’ ‘non-violent religious Muslims,’ or ‘those who belonged to unregistered Islamic organizations.’ Entirely lacking is any serious description of the ideology of the Party of Liberation, its clandestine methods, or the danger that it might pose.

SINCE ALGERIA and Uzbekistan are violent and autocratic regimes, it may not be surprising—but it is deplorable—that the human-rights community should have declined to recognize their legitimate security concerns. In both situations, the task is to choose between the lesser of two evils, which is hardly these organizations’ forte. What, then, about the one case—Israel—in which a genuinely open and democratic society has also long confronted a threat to its survival from Islamic terrorists?

In recent years, the major human-rights organizations have been forthright, it is true, in denouncing the most heinous attacks committed by Palestinians. The suicide bombing of a busy pizza parlour, or the ambush of a school bus filled with children—these are unacceptable in their view, even if such acts, too, have never been described as terrorism. But these acknowledgments of barbarism are the exception. In report after report, the burden of responsibility for the violence, upheaval, and killing in the Arab–Israeli conflict, particularly during the *intifada* unleashed just over

a year ago, has been placed squarely on the shoulders of democratic Israel.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued protests against virtually every policy adopted by Israel in its effort to prevent further terrorist attacks against its citizens. Traffic blockades, border closings that keep Palestinians from reaching jobs inside Israel, restrictions on Bir Zeit University in the West Bank—all, we have been told, are violations of one or another fundamental human right. As for Israel's policy of seeking out and killing Palestinians who have participated in terrorist operations—a policy designed to avoid further civilian casualties—this, too, has come under severe criticism.

Indeed, although it is the Palestinians who have made an explicit strategy of drawing civilians on both sides into the heart of the bloody conflict, it is the Israelis who, in the reports of these groups, are much more likely to be blamed for civilian deaths. Thus, Israeli military authorities are censured for permitting 'indiscriminate' firing into areas containing Palestinian civilians, while little is said of the Palestinians' intentional use of such neighbourhoods as shields for their gunmen. Human-rights organizations have paid special attention in recent years to the use around the world of child soldiers, especially by irregular forces; but they have said nothing about the Palestinian practice of putting children in the front lines of violent demonstrations, a policy designed to create young martyrs and thus further inflame Palestinian and Islamic opinion.¹

The dismaying stand taken by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch is best symbolized in their agenda with respect to the leaders of the two sides. Both groups have called for a criminal investigation of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for his role in the killings by Christian militiamen that took place in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982—killings for which Sharon, even according to

his most severe critics, bears only indirect responsibility, and which were reviewed some time ago by an independent commission of Israel's democratic government. And Yasir Arafat? Somehow, neither of the leading human-rights groups has seen fit to demand his indictment for heinous crimes against humanity committed not simply on his watch but at his explicit direction, extending

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back in time for decades, and by now too numerous to catalogue.

IN THE wake of September 11, one might reasonably have expected Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to entertain second thoughts about their assessment of Islamic extremism. For, as we have had bitter reason to learn, the comparison of radical Islam to Communism has turned out to be in many respects quite relevant, if not in the sense construed by the human-rights community.

Like its worldwide Communist predecessor, Islamism functions by combining the armed struggle of a few militants with a support network whose hands reach around the globe. It too presents a major challenge to established democracies and an ominous threat to governments that are weak or whose grip on power is

insecure. Perhaps most pertinent of all, it employs methods that present extraordinary challenges to traditional military or police tactics.

But the major human-rights organizations have in fact not re-considered. To judge by what they have said since September 11, they are far from recognizing the character of the enemy against which the civilized world now finds itself arrayed. Instead, at the core of their response has been a fear not of that enemy but of the United States, and in particular of the American reaction—or, as many seem to believe, over-reaction—to the events of September 11.

Thus, the initial declarations of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch focused on expectations of an upsurge of anti-Muslim hate crimes here at home, of racial profiling by law-enforcement officials, and of the mistreatment of immigrants. Subsequently, the organizations have attacked the temporary detention of suspects without charges and the establishment of military tribunals for trying terrorists—both of which they consider violations of fundamental rights. Human Rights Watch has gone so far as to issue a lengthy document reminding the Bush Administration—to which the news will no doubt come as a thunderclap—that international law prohibits the torture of prisoners.

To be sure, other commentators have raised objections to various anti-terrorism measures introduced by the Administration. But what distinguishes the human-rights world is its insistence on denouncing each and every proposal to secure the domestic front. This apprehension has been matched by concerns over the conduct of the war in Afghanistan itself, and other measures by the US and its allies to destroy terror networks.

Initially treating the attack of September 11 as a problem in law enforcement, Amnesty International urged President Bush to join with the United Nations in 'bring[ing] those responsible ... to justice within the framework of a fair and accountable

criminal-justice system, and with full respect for international standards for a fair trial.' Amnesty International went on record opposing the extradition to the US of Osama bin Laden and other terrorists should they be captured—unless the Administration could guarantee that they would not face the death penalty.

Once it became clear that the United States intended to use its military might to hunt down *al-Qaeda* and remove its Taliban protectors from power, the human-rights world trained its spotlight on America's tactics. Under international law, Human Rights Watch stressed, it was illegal to assassinate Osama bin Laden or other terrorist leaders. The organization likewise issued several urgent protests over America's use of cluster bombs, and, in one rather exotic statement, warned that the war was placing the rights of Afghan women in special peril because, among other things, the head-to-toe *burkhas* they were compelled to wear under the Taliban made it difficult for them to move quickly.

Of particular concern to both major human-rights organizations were reports of civilian deaths during the American bombing campaign. Amnesty International called for 'an immediate and full investigation into what may have been violations of international humanitarian law' arising from US military actions, and it also objected to the Pentagon's decision to bomb radio stations that were serving as propaganda vehicles for the Taliban leadership. This, according to Amnesty International, was insufficient justification for launching attacks on 'civilian objects.'

At one crucial point in the conflict, Amnesty International even insisted that special monitors be appointed to oversee the transfer of arms from the United States and other countries to Northern Alliance commanders, with a mandate to keep the guns away from commanders deemed unsuitable because of past human-rights abuses.

AFGHAN CIVILIANS did of course die from errant bombs in the initial phases of the war; the incidents were well publicized and, in fact, rare. But the reports from human-rights organizations conveyed no sense of the care that the United States took to avoid targets in civilian areas. Nor did they bother to acknowledge more generally the other steps taken by the Bush Administration to protect and promote basic rights both here and abroad—at least as far as innocents are concerned. So relentlessly critical have been the world's two leading voices for human rights and the expansion of liberty as to raise a question about their attitude toward the United States itself.

That question is, alas, all too easily answered. In the reports published in recent years by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, America

refused to sign a number of international human-rights treaties. And it is a country that, according to a sweeping indictment issued in 1999 by Amnesty International, deserves to be grouped with Tibet and Rwanda as a target of international protest and concern.

It has become a commonplace to say that, in matters of foreign policy, 'everything changed' after September 11. Yet for important segments of the human-rights world, clearly, nothing has changed at all. That the principal human-rights organizations should be singling out the United States as an international scofflaw was reprehensible enough yesterday. Today, it raises powerful doubts as to their fundamental sense of judgment, and says everything one needs to know about their political drift.

NOTES

- 1 In yet another example of the breathtaking double standard they apply to the conflict, both organizations have also endorsed the 'right of return' for Palestinians who have left Israel proper since 1948. What they blithely ignore is that most of these Palestinians fled at the insistence of their own leaders, that hundreds of thousands of Jews were themselves expelled from Arab countries upon Israel's creation, and, most of all, that so massive an influx would threaten, and may be designed to threaten, the very survival of Israel.

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