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'War Crimes' or Political Warfare?

THE ATTACKS AGAINST ISRAEL following the IDF operation against the Hamas terror infrastructure in Gaza early this year employ the most deadly weapons in the NGO arsenal. Charges of “war crimes” are supported by reams of Palestinian “eyewitness testimonies” and “international law” rhetoric.

The offensive is led by the NGO superpowers – Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Oxfam – with help from a network of smaller Israeli and Palestinian organizations. This NGO war machine, funded largely by European governments, honed its Israel-bashing strategy at the 2001 U.N. Durban conference, through the myth of the Jenin “massacre,” in 2002, and in the 2006 Second Lebanon War. In contrast, until very recently, the Israeli government defenses were fragmented and lacked any coherent strategy to defeat this sustained attack.

The Gaza offensive has taken the confrontation further, with the U.N.’s Goldstone Commission and Israeli NGOs using soldiers’ allegations of war crimes joining the fray.

Setting up an inquiry, under the auspices of the U.N. Human Rights Council, led by human rights stalwarts such as Libya and Iran, was a central aim of the NGO network during the Gaza battles. Amnesty and HRW issued a stream of condemnations alleging “disproportionate force,” “collective punishment,” “deliberate attacks against civilians” and demands for “independent investigations.”

In parallel, the NGOs largely ignored Palestinian aggression and war crimes. Like Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas turned much of Gaza into a large human shield, launching rockets from schools, mosques and houses, and ensuring that legitimate Israeli counter-attacks would kill numerous Palestinians. But Amnesty’s reports ignore this issue. Incredibly, its “Middle East expert,” Donatella Rovera, explained that this was because she received no complaints from Palestinians living under Hamas rule. This says volumes about the NGOs’ “research methodology.”

Judge Richard Goldstone, who heads the U.N. Inquiry was a member of HRW’s board until NGO Monitor, the organization I head, pointed out the conflict of interest. His commission has given the NGOs yet another highly visible platform, and at least 15 Israeli and Palestinian organizations (all funded by European governments) submitted statements and arranged testimony for Palestinians. In addition, a few carefully chosen Israeli “victims” were invited, to create an illusion of balance.



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Taking advantage of the wave of publicity, the NGOs produced yet more pseudo-research. An Amnesty report included eight pages of criticism of Hamas out of a total of 127, along with a brief mention of Gilad Shalit in a footnote. Israeli NGOs issued similar statements. One report from “Breaking the Silence” consisted of 26 anonymous “testimonies” and rumors from Israeli soldiers, helping to augment the patently absurd image of the IDF as one of the least moral armies in the world.

Until recently, the Israeli defense against these calumnies has been largely non-existent. But a few months ago, the NGO assault stumbled, and the first signs of a coherent Israeli counter-strategy emerged. In May, HRW held a fundraising dinner in Saudi Arabia, one of the worst violators of human rights on the planet. During the gala event, Sarah Leah Whitson, who heads HRW’s Middle East

Division and leads its attacks on Israel, complained to the Saudis about a “shortage of funds because of the global financial crisis and the work on Israel and Gaza, which depleted HRW’s budget for the region.”

When her conduct was described in the Wall Street Journal and elsewhere as duplicitous and clear evidence of an anti-Israel agenda, HRW officials turned on the critics, while trying to cover up the evidence. Whitson and HRW Executive Director Ken Roth ludicrously denied that the wealthy Saudis at the dinner were connected to the regime and refused to release the participant list. Pressed for details, they revealed that the “human rights supporters” included an official of the Shura Council, which runs the religious police. This led board members to reexamine HRW’s other activities, including its biased agenda and manufactured “evidence” in its war on Israel.

Encouraged by this fortuitous opening, which spread like a virus in widely read Internet blogs, the Israeli government started at last to think strategically about this NGO war, including the role of European government funding. The Prime Minister’s Office issued statements condemning the NGOs’ double standards and false claims and proclaimed its intention to fight back. While it is still far too early to assess where all this is leading, the chances are that the NGO war against Israel will be slowed or even stopped. And that might even lead to the restoration of genuine universal human rights’ concerns to their proper place on the NGO agendas. ●

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