**For biased critics of Israel, even its defensive actions violate human rights**

Legitimate debate is one thing. But reflexive bias against Israel means even basic security efforts to defend innocent civilians are criticized as violations of human rights.

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In 1947, when excusing Soviet totalitarianism had become quite the rage in fashionable progressive circles, George Orwell eviscerated a British politician who consistently defended totalitarians but nevertheless denied that he was a defender of totalitarianism. “But of course he does,” Orwell wrote. “What else could he say? A pickpocket does not go to the races with a label ‘pickpocket’ on his coat lapel, and a propagandist does not describe himself as a propagandist.”

Orwell’s point holds true for today’s debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His pickpocket metaphor seems particularly applicable to those critics of Israel who can always be counted upon to decide that Israel has behaved miserably in defending herself, regardless of the suffering of Israeli civilians that their government is seeking to prevent and regardless of the actions of those who have caused that suffering.

These are individuals who nonetheless stoutly deny that they are in any way biased against Israel.

In fact, these critics view the very pointing out of what looks very much like anti-Israel bias as an affront.

Those who point out the critics’ seeming inability to ever locate a justification for Israeli actions, let alone a legitimate Israeli interest in self-defense, are dismissed as part of the “pro-Israel lobby,” who simply cannot tolerate anyone who has “the temerity to criticize Israel.” And as for the suggestion that they harbor any bias against Israel, very much like Orwell’s defenders of totalitarianism, they deny it, adamantly.

To be sure, there ought to be ample room for legitimate debate about Israeli policies. But there does appear to be a determination in certain quarters to hew to an anti-Israeli line on every issue, without exception.

Where's the context?

Often, this occurs through a failure to explain the rationale or context for Israel’s actions – even actions that are emphatically defensive in nature.

For example, earlier this month, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof managed the feat of devoting an entire column to calling upon Israel to lift the blockade of Gaza, while mentioning not one word about the rocketing of Israeli civilians that had brought about the blockade, and whose recurrence the blockade is intended to prevent.

Indeed, for much of the past decade, Israel has been forced to defend itself from charges that defending itself is a crime.

From 2000 to 2004, the Palestinian leadership organized a suicide bombing campaign aimed at killing and maiming as many Israeli civilians as possible. Innocent Palestinians were recruited to kill innocent Israelis, using bombs packed with nails to do the maximum harm.

About 1,100 Israelis were blown to pieces and 5,000 more were wounded or maimed. This is the rough proportional equivalent of about 55,000 Americans killed and 250,000 Americans wounded or maimed. The launching of this campaign followed the Palestinian rejection of major Israeli concessions at the 2000 Camp David Summit, including an independent Palestinian state consisting of all of Gaza, virtually all of the West Bank, and a capital in East Jerusalem.

After asking the Palestinian leadership to stop this bombing campaign, and calling upon others to call upon the Palestinian leadership to stop it, and waiting for nearly two years in vain for it to stop, the Israelis began to construct a fence intended to bring the bombing to an end. A bombing campaign whose very purpose was to take innocent human life should have triggered universal condemnation of Palestinian violence.

Double standards

It didn’t. In progressive quarters, the Palestinian bombing of Israeli civilians for the purpose of taking innocent life and terrorizing civilians wasn’t deemed a human rights violation. But Israel’s construction of a purely defensive fence was. That, according to several critics, was the real human rights violation.

Similarly, from 2000 to 2008, the working class families of southern Israel were subjected to somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 rockets, missiles, and bombs fired at them by Hamas gunmen embedded in civilian neighborhoods in Gaza. The use of innocent Palestinians as human shields from which to fire rockets at innocent Israelis surely constituted the Daily Double of human rights violations.

And yet for that 8 year period the progressive community remained largely silent – silent about the Palestinian use of civilians as human shields, and silent about the targeting of innocent Israeli civilians, who were doing nothing more than trying to live their lives and send their children to school in the morning with some confidence that they would return alive in the afternoon.

When in late 2008, the Israelis finally acted to stop the missile fire, here is what Richard Kemp, the former commander of Britain’s military forces in Afghanistan, had to say about their efforts to minimize the harm done to Palestinians while trying to protect Israeli civilians from the attacks: “I don’t think there has ever been a time in the history of warfare when an army has made more efforts to reduce civilian casualties and deaths of innocent people than the Israeli Defense Forces is doing today in Gaza.”

Now, had it not been for the 8 years of rocketing of Israeli civilians from Gaza there never would have been any need for an Israeli response at all. Yet, those who had remained largely uninterested in the attacks on Israeli civilians for 8 years found themselves appalled that the Israelis had actually taken steps to stop them.

It turned out that it wasn’t the 8 years of targeting Israeli civilians that was the human rights violation.

It was the Israeli effort to stop the attacks.

So it has gone with issue after issue when it comes to the Mideast conflict. Those who from all appearances have to stifle a yawn when it comes to the suffering endured by Israelis can, with perfect predictability, be expected to criticize Israel for trying to stop that suffering.

And so it was only weeks ago with the flotilla incident off the coast of Gaza.

Virtually no mention was made of the broader issue of the smuggling of rockets, missiles, and bombs into Gaza, which were used against Israelis, are presently being used against Israelis, and will be used against Israelis in the future. It was hardly as though the dilemma of the Israelis, who are trying to protect their civilians from ever more dangerous weapons with ever greater range, should be taxing to understand, and yet the basic Israeli reasons for the blockade went all but unmentioned.

Reflexive bias

Thus, when nine members of the Turkish boat died after its passengers began attacking Israeli sailors, The Boston Globe – epitomizing reflexive, rather than considered, judgment – immediately urged the Obama administration to condemn Israel, without even asking first for an investigation, let alone waiting for one to take place.

The anti-Israel fashion that is so enthralling to so many in so many places provides a comfortable setting for those who are determined to indict Israel whatever the facts, whatever the circumstances. Those doing the indicting deny that they are biased.

And that is understandable. “Bias” is not the sort of label one wants on his coat lapel.

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