

The UN's Refugees

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Articles & Testimony

On Monday, France, Belgium and four other European Union members endorsed a U.N. Human Rights Commission resolution condoning "all available means, including armed struggle" to establish a Palestinian state. Hence, six European Union members and the rights commission now join the 57 nations of the Islamic Conference in legitimizing suicide bombers. By their logic of moral equivalence, terror is justifiable because its root cause is Israel's occupation. That Palestinian terror predates occupation, or that suicide bombings became a tactic of choice only after the initiation of the Oslo process, is too inconvenient to mention.

Unfortunately the U.N. goes beyond giving rhetorical support for terrorism. In a variety of ways, its agencies have been complicit in Middle Eastern terror. Start with the refugee camps.

The U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees began operation in 1950. The establishment of Israel, and its simultaneous invasion by five Arab states, resulted in the creation of approximately 600,000 Palestinian refugees. An equivalent number of Jews fled their homes in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and other Arab countries, and settled in Israel.

As disruptive as it was, the number of Jewish and Arab refugees pales in comparison to that created by the partition of India. There are today more than 100 million descendants of the original 15 million Indian and Pakistani refugees. The U.N. remained outside the conflict, and provided no political or economic incentive for refugees not to settle. Too bad the same restraint has not characterized the behavior of the U.N. and Arab states in the Middle East.

As it is, UNRWA and the Arab League hold Palestinian refugees in limbo. UNRWA operates 27 refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza, and another 32 camps in neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. It counts nearly four million Palestinians as refugees, including those whose grandparents never saw Palestine. (If U.N. High Commission for Refugees' criteria are applied, the figure is significantly lower). In 2001 alone, UNRWA spent \$310 million on the camps.

It is these camps that have been at the center of violence between Israeli forces and Palestinian gunmen. On Feb. 28, following a series of Palestinian terror attacks in Israel (including an attack on a young girl's Bat Mitzvah celebration), Israeli forces rolled into the Jenin and Balata refugee camps. They remained for three days. Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer explained the Israeli strategy: "We are interested in one thing only, to stop and disrupt this wave of suicide attacks. We intend to go in and get out."

U.N. officials were instantaneous in their condemnation. Kofi Annan called on Israel "to withdraw immediately." High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson labeled the incursions "in total disregard of international human rights." On March 21, a UNRWA spokesman called on Israel to compensate the agency for damage to its refugee camps.

Israel's raids did damage the camps. But as a result of the operation, Israel uncovered illegal arms caches, bomb factories, and a plant manufacturing the new Kassam-2 rocket, designed to reach Israeli population centers from the West Bank and Gaza. Confronted with evidence of illegal Palestinian mines, mortars, and missiles, no U.N. official questioned how it was that bomb factories could exist in U.N.-managed refugee camps. Either the U.N. officials were

unaware of the bomb factories -- a fact which would suggest utter incompetence -- or, more likely, the U.N. employees simply turned a blind eye.

Unfortunately, UNRWA is not alone in reinforcing the U.N.'s reputation as an organization incapable of fighting terror. On May 24, 2000, Israel unilaterally pulled back from southern Lebanon, a withdrawal the U.N. certified to be complete. Terror did not end, though. On October 7, 2000, Hezbollah guerillas crossed the border and kidnapped three Israeli soldiers (including one Israeli Arab), all of whom they subsequently killed. Observers from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon videotaped the scene of the kidnapping, including the getaway cars, and some guerillas.

Inexplicably, they then hid the videotape. Questioned by Israeli officials, Terje Roed-Larsen, the U.N. Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, chided Israel for "questioning the good faith of senior United Nations officials." When after eight months the U.N. finally admitted to possessing the tape, officials balked at showing it to the Israeli government since that might "undermine U.N. neutrality." The fact that U.N. observers protected and defended guerillas who crossed a U.N.-certified border, using cars with U.N. license plates while under the cover of U.N. flags, was apparently of no consequence to UNIFIL. Pronouncements aside, U.N. moral equivalency in practice dictates that terrorists are equal to states. Fighting terror compromises U.N. neutrality.

The U.N. has turned a blind eye to terror in Iraq as well. Throughout the spring and summer of 2001, a series of bomb explosions wracked the safe haven of northern Iraq. Kurdish authorities long suspected the complicity of certain U.N. drivers who crossed freely between the safe haven and Iraq proper. On July 19, 2001, Kurdish security arrested a Tunisian U.N. driver found in possession of explosives. A Yemeni national serving as deputy director of the U.N. mission in northern Iraq demanded that the driver be released before any investigation could be completed; he was. The U.N.'s reputation, in other words, trumps protecting innocents from Saddam Hussein's bombs.

The U.N. has a terrorism problem. Syria, a nation that hosts more terror groups than any other, sits on the Security Council. Along with Iran, Syria is a prime sponsor of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Just two months after Nasrallah declared that "Jews invented the legend of the Nazi atrocities" and that Israel was a "cancerous body in the region . . . (which) must be uprooted," Mr. Annan bestowed international legitimacy upon Nasrallah by agreeing to an unprecedented meeting.

U.N. officials can make all the high-sounding pronouncements they desire, but if the U.N. wishes to defuse regional tensions and signal that terrorism is not acceptable, then there must be no equivocation. Perhaps Mr. Annan can be forgiven for not being aware that U.N.-funded refugee camps housed arms factories, or for allowing U.N. complicity in terror cover-ups in Lebanon and Iraq. But in a Middle East where perception is more important than reality, Mr. Annan's silence is deafening and his moral equivalency is interpreted as a green light for terror. The main casualty is U.N. credibility. ❖

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