

Immoral Equivalency

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Articles & Testimony

On March 6, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called on both Prime Minister Sharon and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to end "the cycle of violence." Annan placed blame equally upon the two leaders. To do otherwise would be undiplomatic.

The moral-equivalency labeling of both sides as equally at fault is increasingly in vogue at the UN, in European capitals, and at the US State Department. Diplomacy is about smoothing ruffled feathers, not taking sides in conflict. But do morality and equivalence go together? Perhaps, but only if catalyzing conflict and encouraging terror is moral. Arafat sponsors terror. His complicity in recent attacks is too great for all but the most ardent opponents of Israel to ignore. It was the Aksa Martyrs Brigade, affiliated with Arafat's own Fatah movement, which claimed responsibility for the March 9 attack in Netanya that killed three and wounded 50. In the year 2001, Arafat's Tanzim militia carried out 54 attacks.

But, when it comes to the peace process, the Arab world, France, and European allies urge Washington to "be more balanced." In July 2000, at Camp David, Arafat turned down a deal that would have granted the Palestinians an independent state on 98 percent of the West Bank and Gaza, including parts of Jerusalem. Instead, Arafat chose violence to try to win new concessions. Moral equivalency means that Israel shares equal blame for Arafat's lack of vision and political will. For the sake of Foggy Bottom nicety, the Palestinian bombmaker and students socializing in the Moment Cafe become equal.

Rather than promote peace, moral equivalency encourages war. When warring parties' positions are automatically morally equalized, then both sides might as well take more extreme stances. Why should Arafat negotiate in good faith, if suicide bombings can legitimize his call to make final agreements the starting point for new negotiation?

Moral equivalency's disastrous track record goes beyond Israel and the Palestinians. Since 1983, a civil war has raged in Sudan between the Islamic north and the Christian and animist south. More than two million have died. Why the fight? The Sudanese government seeks to impose Islamic law and deny non-Muslims freedom of religion. Government militias raid villages, kill men, and rape and enslave women and children. Khartoum has spurned regional peace initiatives that call for religious freedom.

Clearly, the Sudanese government is wrong, yet the West's diplomacy of moral equivalency mandates treating both sides equally. But why should freedom of religion and opposition to slavery be ideas that can be compromised?

Treating Khartoum as anything but a pariah simply takes heat off the military government. It should be no surprise that Khartoum actually increased its attacks on civilians. On February 20, a Sudanese military helicopter machine-gunned civilians receiving UN food aid, killing 17.

Diplomatic criticism evenly distributed is without meaning. In Afghanistan, too, the US State Department's inability to define terror as black and white has contributed to bloodshed. On October 16, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested that a compromise might be reached to bring "moderate Taliban" into the government. His suggestion was far more than an insult to Afghans oppressed by the Taliban. Powell's offer prolonged the war by creating

disincentive to surrender. Why should a member of the Taliban give up if he knows, win or lose, he'll still get the same reward -- a good job in government? Powell's suggestion likely delayed the mass defection of the Taliban by two or three weeks. Wars continue when losing becomes meaningless.

In Iraq, former UN officials like Denis Halliday suggest that sanctions are as bad if not worse than Saddam. But the West should not forget that sanctions only remain on Iraq for the simple reason that Saddam has not fulfilled his international cease-fire obligations.

And contrary to Baghdad's propaganda, sanctions do not starve people. According to a 2000 UN report, half the population of Iraq is overweight. Yet, for the sake of neutrality, the UN is willing to negotiate Saddam's commitments. Since Saddam, like Arafat, understands that the reward for intransigence is compromise, he has little incentive to stick to commitments.

While it sounds noble, the rhetoric of moral equivalency is not only empty, but also destructive. To equate blame is to deny responsibility. And to deny responsibility is to remove disincentive for violence.

The quickest way to end terrorism is not to spout platitudes, but rather to create consequences. ❖

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