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Stopping the Killing and/or Stopping Human Rights Violations

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Stopping the Killing and/or Stopping Human Rights Violations

Abstract

The relationship between promoting human rights and stopping wars can be perplexing. The 19th century origins of the Geneva Convention and the International Commissions of the Red Cross (ICRC) are warnings about the moral danger, ambiguities, or tensions of bringing war within the arena of human rights considerations. Human rights and war can be a toxic cocktail. One should not want to make war more likely or legitimate or deadly by seeming to say that the killing machine on one side or the other is acting humanely, as if that makes war okay. War is hell.

Keywords

Human rights, Geneva Convention, International Commissions of the Red Cross, War, War crimes, History, World wars, Gaza, Israel, Palestine, Hamas

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Stopping the Killing and/or Stopping Human Rights Violations

by Edward Friedman

The relationship between promoting human rights and stopping wars can be perplexing. The 19th century origins of the [Geneva Convention](#) and the [International Commissions of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC) are warnings about the moral danger, ambiguities, or tensions of bringing war within the arena of human rights considerations. Human rights and war can be a toxic cocktail. One should not want to make war more likely or legitimate or deadly by seeming to say that the killing machine on one side or the other is acting humanely, as if that makes war okay. War is hell.

A central reason why European governments responded positively to requests first to treat the wounded in war well and then also to treat prisoners of war “humanely” was because the power-holders feared that war was becoming so cruel, devastating and monstrous that citizens might reject war as a policy option.

It is also a serious question whether the ICRC, during the war to defeat Nazi expansionism, helped perpetuate the Nazi extermination machine by visiting POW camps but staying publicly silent about the mass murders being carried out by the Nazi killing machine. A singular focus on human rights which is not on the side of stopping the sources of the killing may not produce advances for humanity.

It is even dangerous to respond too quickly to tales of inhumanity. Claims of atrocities, as with the English portrayal of Germany under Wilhelm during the First World War, were part of a British propaganda campaign to bring Washington into the war on London’s side. It is quite easy to imagine better consequences for all sides had Americans not been moved by tales of German atrocities and had America instead remained neutral in the European war.

Opposition even to the worst of war atrocities should not be one-dimensional. The atomic bombings of the urban centers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Pacific War against Imperial Japan’s militaristic aggressions were, to me, [war crimes](#). The bombs indiscriminately killed non-combatant civilians. Yet those bombs saved the lives of at least half a million non-Japanese Asians who were dying in huge numbers in Japanese colonies and who would have kept on dying in increasing numbers if the war had been prolonged and not suddenly ended. The American war crimes sped the end of the killing of huge numbers of innocents. Tragically, there are worse things than war crimes.

In the Middle East, only a negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians can stop the killings so that the people of both nations can live normal lives. It is not easy to predict the future consequences of the very, very strong and murderous Israeli response at the end of 2008 to Hamas’ indiscriminate shelling of civilian Israeli populations, clearly a war crime. It is not obvious that singularly emphasizing a human rights approach to the conflict brings the day of peace closer. The big issue is a political compromise so people can live in peace with each other. It is not the human rights or wrongs of some battle that should be decisive.

It is well-recognized that in a human rights effort to protect refugees, the well-meaning can unintentionally succor a war faction and permit it subsequently to continue its killing, often

[ethnic-cleansing](#). Since the Arabs treated the U.N. creation of a Jewish homeland as a catastrophe and a pretext for war and since Israeli forces seized success in that war as an opportunity to force Palestinians to flee, Gaza has been just such a [refugee camp](#), eventually led by non-conciliationist Hamas killers of Jews. Does the 2008-2009 war with Hamas make it more or less likely that Hamas will be able to compromise for peace? That should be the goal. Peace and reconciliation are the only way to extinguish the long-lingering and explosive causes of endless abuses of human rights in that region.

Edward Friedman is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is a long time member of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China. In the 1980s he was on the staff of the Foreign Affairs Committee where the issues he worked on included human rights, death squads, arms embargoes, and peaceful and democratic reconciliation. At Wisconsin, he introduced courses on "The Politics of Human Rights" and "The Politics of Freedom." His most recent book is Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems.