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Healing from War to End All Wars

Christien van den Anker

University of the West of England

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Healing from War to End All Wars

Abstract

The First World War was known as the war to end all wars. After the Second World War, and especially in reference to the Holocaust, the urgent slogan was "Never Again." Although these hopes to end war and genocide have not yet been fulfilled, they inspired the worldwide moral stance against war and a host of international instruments and bodies contributed to the protection of both civilians and combatants during war.

Keywords

Human rights, War, Gaza, Proportional use of force, Israel, Palestine

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Healing from War to End all Wars

by Christien van den Anker

The First World War was known as the war to end all wars. After the Second World War, and especially in reference to the Holocaust, the urgent slogan was “[Never Again](#).” Although these hopes to end war and genocide have not yet been fulfilled, they inspired the worldwide moral stance against war and a host of international instruments and bodies contributed to the protection of both civilians and combatants during war.

Often history is invoked to make the point that “there will always be war” or “they are always fighting in that region.” However, I would like to make a different point. History is important to heal from, as it is very hard to think clearly when there are still big emotions attached to the previous wars affecting the people involved.

In the current debates around the Israeli attacks on Gaza this is evidenced all the time. I was reminded of it not only in the media and public debate but also in teaching sessions on this issue. There is a lot of confusion and we are all pressured to take sides. Blame is either apportioned to the side of Israelis when accused of disproportional violence or to the Palestinians in Gaza for targeting civilians. This is then quickly linked to more general attitudes that are anti-Arab or anti-Jewish. These kinds of exchanges are not helpful. And human rights discourse is not free of the tendency to blame even if the starting-point of the human rights doctrine is equality and respect for the dignity of all peoples. And even if the context for the United Nations framework on human rights is the U.N. Charter which calls for peaceful relations between nations.

Not assigning blame is not the same as condoning the violence used by either party; it is still everyone’s responsibility to stop wrong actions and to reach for human rights-based solutions.

So what is a better way of looking at these outbursts of a longstanding conflict? We need to remember that both peoples are after the same thing: a peaceful, secure, and just solution in which the human rights of all are guaranteed. The majority of people in both places are aiming to live good lives and sometimes get confused about what measures may bring that about. Without dealing with our emotions about the past, the other side of the conflict may easily be demonized and seen as more threatening than is realistic.

In practice I have heard and read many stories of people coming together across divides and dealing with the strong emotions that this brings up for them. This is not easy, especially in times where the conflict is heated, but it is clear that there are brave people on both sides who are moving towards closer relationships between Palestinians and Israelis. They do this despite their conditioning from a young age to see the other as dangerous enemies.

How can the international human rights movement help? By organizing to:

support both peoples to live with peace and justice, see their humanity and how they have been set up to fight each other historically;

to hold out the bigger picture of international positioning around the Middle East and take responsibility for getting human rights-based policies agreed in our countries;

supporting peace movements and stating the message that there is no military solution to the current situation—only diplomatic solutions;

stand up against anti-Jewish and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim messages everywhere;

listen with encouragement to everyone about their experiences and memories of war, so that we react with fresh thinking to conflict and not based on old pain and fear; and

spreading information on the many initiatives and acts that Israelis and Palestinians carry out to support each other and collaborate effectively.

So let us not partake in the discouraged, confused and fearful debates that try to blame but instead contribute our privileged position of having information outside of the mainstream media that tells us more about the international manipulation of both peoples and the reality of actual peaceful co-existence to bring about more widespread belief in a just peace for the whole of the Middle East. Lack of trust makes every relationship suffer and is a basic ingredient for human rights cultures.

Finally, it may well be that despite all the suffering the latest round of the conflict brought, there will be increased attention for the issues and more possibilities for increased dialogue, leadership, mobilization for human rights as a result.

Dr Christien van den Anker is Reader in Politics at the University of the West of England. Her specialization is in Global Political Theory and Global Ethics. Her recent research has been on contemporary forms of slavery, migration and equality. Her most recent publications are "Human Rights in Iran." and "The Relevance of Ethnography of 'Others' for Global Political Theory" in the Journal of International Political Theory, (October 2008) and the cutting edge collection of essays W. J. Doornik (eds.) Trafficking and Women's Rights (Palgrave, 2006). Christien is founding co-editor of the Journal of Global Ethics (Taylor and Francis) and edits a book series on Global Ethics for Palgrave. More information can be found at her department website http://www.uwe.ac.uk/hlss/politics/staff_cVanDenAnker.shtml.