

Viciousness Regnant: Humanitarianism as a Weasel Word

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It may be time to reconsider the use of such words as "humanitarian" and "humanitarianism". There has been little of that sort evidenced in the Israel-Hamas War, marked by industrial-mechanised atrocities, enforced deprivation and starvation, orders to evacuate (read expulsion and banishment), preceded by massacres most haunting and visceral. Its constant evocation by various sides of the conflict have given it a diminishing quality, leaving international relations stirring with cant.

Mind you, the term humanitarian had already been pipped and emptied of any solid meaning in the aftermath of the Cold War. Humanitarian intervention became a vicious, evangelised concept, enchanting such figures as the **former British Prime Minister Tony Blair** with its near biblical promise of saving souls and punishing the wicked in NATO's Kosovo War. "I saw it as essentially a moral issue," he [claimed](#) in his memoirs. He would [also go on to claim](#) that war was "never civilised" but could be "necessary to uphold civilisation."

In justifying the use of heavy weaponry under the cover of humanitarianism, civilian populations could be attacked, ostensibly to prevent a manic despot or genocidal tyrant from imposing his will. It was used repeatedly in the wars connected with the breakup of Yugoslavia, but it made a boisterous, full-throated showing in NATO's 1999 bombing campaign, when jets became priests administering death to the unwashed and unbelieving.

The use of sinisterly named "smart bombs" and select targeting became the expressions of a war waged in order to protect a select ethnic group (in this case, the Kosovar Albanians) despite the crude destruction of Serbian critical infrastructure, the crippling of the economy, and the killing of journalists who, for the most part, did not necessarily agree with the government of the day. Along the way, it also meant that NATO could provide exculpatory cover for the violence of the Kosovo Liberation Army against those pedestal-placed nasty Serbs who had fallen behind the very train of history that had venerated them in 1914 and

1941. That's humanitarianism for you.

Little wonder, then, that the right of a state to intervene in the affairs of another citing humanitarian grounds was turned on its head by that cunning, monstrous conceit we now know as the Responsibility to Protect. Its dumpling, soft character [was outlined](#) by the Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Responsibility co-chaired by **former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans** and Algerian diplomat **Mohamed Sahnoun**.

The commission kneaded the brutal, self-interested formula of force into a saccharine, floury mix that could be sold to bleeding hearts and stony neoconservatives. "The Commission is of the view that the debate about intervention for human protection purposes should focus not on 'the right to intervene' but on the 'responsibility to protect'." Politicians, smelling votes and a place in posterity, could feel good about killing again.

R2P, as it came to be known by the technically minded and those sweetly watered by the conference set, has had an abysmal record. A good argument can be made that it needs urgent retirement, if not calm, steady euthanising. It was tried, and failed, with disastrous results in the Libyan intervention of 2011 that did, at least initially, have Security Council approval. Those applying force to protect a select, carved out number of civilians from the ghoulish, eccentric **Colonel Muammar Qaddafi** (the US, France, the UK) eventually decided that regime change - the very thing injuncted against in such interventions - might not be such a bad idea after all. It was.

The Israel-Hamas War is already heralding the demise of such doctrines. The gloves are off; the weapons are being applied generously; the civilians are dying with sanguinary promptness. Hair-splitters ponder whether human shredded remains can fall within, or without the laws of war. Dead babies rarely have much of a say at the roundtables of international law, but the Israeli Defence Force never shies away from a chance in pretending to believe that they do, especially when they are Israeli.

In such a situation, other weasel-words have made their way into regular usage, keeping company with the stretchy concepts of "terrorism" and the like. The latest is the idea of a "humanitarian pause," a truly cynical howler that is Washington's preference to an actual ceasefire that would suspend hostilities. One could only draw the conclusion that humanity's existence is viciousness stalled by such pauses.

A ceasefire was certainly the preference of the majority who voted for it in the UN General Assembly on October 27. Resolution [A/ES-10/L.25](#) titled "Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations" is also part of the General Assembly's demand for what it terms a "humanitarian truce". From those who voted, 120 were in favour, 14 against, with 45 abstentions.

Israel's representative, **Gilad Menashe Erdan**, heatedly [denounced](#) the UN as no longer having "even one ounce of legitimacy or relevance". The US representative, **Linda Thomas-Greenfield**, [expressed exasperation](#) that Hamas and hostages had been omitted from the resolution. "It is outrageous that this resolution fails to name the perpetrators of the 7 October terrorist attack." These were "omissions of evil."

Perhaps the most interesting observation and view in this volcanic splurge and splutter came from Pakistan's representative, who [called the resolution](#) a "humanitarian" (that word

again) text. Attempts made by Canada to return the focus to Hamas as the cause of the whole bloody affair ignored the issue of Israel's historical role and its occupation of Palestinian territory. "Name both or name either."

For Israel's backers, an actual cessation of hostilities is frowned upon because it, [according](#) to US **Secretary of State Antony Blinken**, would simply allow Hamas to regroup. This is a view pushed along by a number of Israel's standard bearers. It shows that the Palestinian cause is a dead feature, a deletion in the debate. The result: massacre unrestrained.

Having decided that Hamas must be destroyed, rather than treated as a protean, ineradicable presence that alters in the face of a vicious policy that refuses to acknowledge Palestinian ills (that policy being territorial, ethnonationalist, religious, and historical), Blinken can then pretend the Biden administration cares about the slaughter of innocents and the mass expulsion of a population.

To make a distinction between combatant and non-combatant, the molten fired freedom fighter and the mindful parent, is one of those fictional games that entertains the classroom of undergraduate fantasy but proves impossible to apply in battle. The agenda here is unmistakable: Israel, with the assistance and encouragement of the United States, is intent on burying any toothy, sprightly, worthy Palestinian resistance for the next generation. Should they succeed, they will only do so for a few years, if that.

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Featured image: A woman holding a girl reacts after Israeli airstrikes hit Ridwan neighborhood of Gaza City, Gaza on October 23, 2023. (Source: [Anadolu Agency](#))

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