

## Our Selective Moral Outrage

Why does Israel face more opprobrium than Russia?

Bret Stephens (21/4/2009, Wall Street Journal)

Few places on earth have been as systematically brutalized over the past decade as Chechnya. So you might have thought that the Russian government's decision last week to declare an end to its "counterterrorism" operations in the territory would have been an occasion for somber reflection in the Western media. Forget it. It's a 600-word news item at best.

Here's a contrast to ponder. Since the beginning of the second intifada in the autumn of 2000, roughly 6,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire. That figure includes combatants, as well as those killed in January's fighting in Gaza.

As for Chechnya, there are no solid figures for the number of civilians killed since the second war began in late 1999; estimates range anywhere between 25,000 and 200,000. Chechnya's population, at a little over one million, is about one-third or one-fourth that of the Palestinians. That works out to between 25 to 200 Chechen deaths per 1,000, as against 1.5 to 2 Palestinian deaths per 1,000.

Now type the words "Palestine" and "genocide" into Google. When I did so Monday, I got 1,630,000 results. Next, substitute "Chechnya" for "Palestine." The number is 245,000. Taking the Google results as a crude measure of global outrage, that means the outrage over the Palestinian situation was 6.6 times greater than over the Chechen one. Yet Chechen fatalities were anywhere between 13 to 133 times greater.

Final calculation: With an "outrage" ratio of 6.6 to one, but a proportional kill ratio of one to 13 (at the very low end), it turns out that every Palestinian death receives somewhere in the order of 28 times the attention of every Chechen death. Remember that in both cases we're mainly talking about Muslims being killed by non-Muslims.

I'll admit this math exercise is a bit of a gimmick. But it raises a worthwhile question: Why is Palestinian life so dear in the eyes of the world -- and Chechen life so cheap?

Maybe the answer is that the Palestinian cause is morally worthier than Chechnya's. But that can't be right. Yes, Chechen terrorists have committed spectacular atrocities, notably the 2004 Beslan school massacre. Yet modern terrorism is a genre Palestinians practically invented. As it is, Chechnya has been suffering grievously under Russia's thumb since the 1800s. (Just read Tolstoy's "Hadjji Murat.") If colonialism is your beef, the case for Chechen independence is inarguable.

Maybe, then, the answer is that there is no shortage of imagery of Palestinian death, and thus it engages more of the world's attention. By contrast, the Russians imposed a virtual media blockade on Chechnya, and journalists who covered the story, like Anna Politkovskaya, had a way of ending up dead.

But imagery need not simply be televised to be vivid, nor does the world lack for testimonials of Russian brutality. "I remember a Chechen female sniper," a Russian soldier told L.A. Times reporter Maura Reynolds. "We just tore her apart with two armored personnel carriers, having tied her ankles with steel cables. There was a lot of blood, but the boys needed it."

Maybe it's that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is simply more important strategically than Russia's war against Chechnya, in the same way that the attacks of 9/11 mattered more in the scheme of things than, say, Tamil Tiger atrocities in Sri Lanka.

Yet even before 9/11, there was evidence that al Qaeda was feeding money and arms to Chechen fighters, putting Chechnya squarely into the context of what became the global war on terror. Evidence of al Qaeda involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is sparser, and only came to light in 2007.

Of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict inflames the Muslim world in a way the Chechen one does

not. But why is that, when so many more Muslims are being victimized by Russia?

Then too, why does the wider world participate in the Muslim world's moral priorities? Why, for instance, do high-profile Western writers like Portuguese Nobelist José Saramago make "solidarity" pilgrimages to Ramallah, but not to the Chechen capital of Grozny? Why do British academics organize boycotts of their Israeli counterparts, but not their Russian ones? Why is Palestinian statehood considered a global moral imperative, but statehood for Chechnya is not?

Why does every Israeli prime minister invariably become a global pariah, when not one person in a thousand knows the name of Chechen "President" Ramzan Kadyrov, a man who, by many accounts, keeps a dungeon near his house in order to personally torture his political opponents? And why does the fact that Mr. Kadyrov is Vladimir Putin's handpicked enforcer in Chechnya not cause a shudder of revulsion as the Obama administration reaches for the "reset" button with Russia?

I have a hypothesis. Maybe the world attends to Palestinian grievances but not Chechen ones for the sole reason that Palestinians are, uniquely, the perceived victims of the Jewish state. That is, when they are not being victimized by other Palestinians. Or being expelled en masse from Kuwait. Or being excluded from the labor force in Lebanon. Things you probably didn't know about, either. As for the Chechens, too bad for their cause that no Jew will ever likely become president of Russia.