

## **The White Man's Burden?**

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**MICHAEL NEUMANN** ~If we look at the world through the eyes of a nouveau-imperialist, few things are more certain than that humanitarian intervention is the special and last prerogative of the white race (known in polite circles as The West). When the Americans, Canadians, British, French, Germans, Norwegians, Danes, Belgians, Spanish and Dutch go into Afghanistan, we can rest assured that the few dark faces will not spoil the party: the commanders, the decision-makers will be white, as will the the bulk of the crackers--crackers of every nation--who make up the rank and file. These are blessed circumstances. Killing, racial supremacy and morality--how often do we see these enjoyable items so closely, so irreproachably bound together?

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This is why the humanitarian imperialist is so deeply offended when non-whites insolently usurp the humanitarian prerogative. Perhaps it is worse when there is an Iranian connection, because then it is necessary to ignore the fact that Iranians are not only white but (if the term has any legitimate meaning) Aryan. But ignorance conquers all, and these subtleties are lost on the good ole boys of the West (and the pseudo-West, i.e., Israel): The Iranians wear funny turbans. Hizballah leaders wear funny turbans. People who wear funny turbans aren't really white. So these guys aren't really white. Such are the joys of redneck logic. Yet the White Man's

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humanitarian burden could be Hizballah's burden as well.

Hizballah's raid on Israel may have sparked the current conflict in Lebanon, but it is also a very plausible case of humanitarian intervention. In the first place, it was apparently intended to help the Palestinians in the occupied territories, who certainly could use some help. For over thirty years they have been under Israel's tyranny--there is no other word for a government which holds (and generously exercises) the power of life and death over a population which has no voice whatever in that government. They are brutalized; they are malnourished; they are continually threatened by a settler movement resolved to take every inch of land from them. This bloody occupation is, according to many Israeli military men, of no strategic value, and it is clear that Israel would do much better to mind its own borders than to spread its forces all over the landscape in order to defend settler enclaves. So this is just plain tyranny, not self-defense, and Palestinian resistance is justified. If it is justified, so is Hizballah's attempt to support it.

In the second place, Hizballah fights to keep Israel out of Lebanon. That it sometimes initiates attacks on Israel in no way undermines this claim: sometimes the best defense is offense. And here too, the strategy certainly seems to incorporate humanitarian aims.

Hizballah came into existence as a response to Israel's earlier invasion of Lebanon, to a man-made humanitarian disaster in which tens of thousands of innocent lives were lost, and which features the atrocity of Sabra and Shatilla, described here by the organization Jewish Voice for Peace:

"From September 16 to 19 [1982], the Maronite Phalangist militia rampaged through Sabra and Shatilla. The camps were sealed off by Israeli soldiers who remained outside. Some later reported unease at the noises they heard, but no sound emanating from the camps could have betrayed the horror that was taking place inside them. When it was all over, the number of dead was estimated by Israel at between 700 and 800, the Lebanese government issued over 1,200 death certificates in the camps and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society put the death toll at over 2,000. Subsequent attempts at estimating the dead ranged from the Israeli figure to as many as 3,500. But in the end, the number is not what is most important. Even if it were the low figure, which seems unlikely, this would not diminish the horrifying nature of the atrocity. Thousands of men, women and children were killed, beaten, raped and tortured. The stories that emerged from survivors of Sabra and Shatilla were as chilling as those from any war or atrocity in history."

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There is no proof but every reason to suspect that Israel's commander Ariel Sharon--and the much-admired Israeli intelligence services--knew very well what was happening. Certainly Israel had demonstrated, by its exuberant bombing of Lebanese civilians, that no decency would restrain it from such collusion.

So the Lebanese can reasonably expect Israel to invade when it likes, and to usher in a legion of atrocities: it is not as if Israel has subsequently found compassion or indeed anything else to restrain it in its treatment of 'Arabs'. The Lebanese army has again and again proven utterly incapable of defending the country. Only Hizballah has proven its ability to deal with the Israelis, and only by the sort of aggressive defence for which it is known. So here too, Hizballah fights on behalf of a helpless, threatened population; its insertion of military forces into South Lebanon can plausibly count as humanitarian intervention.

To some this may seem laughable. How can unprovoked attacks on a sovereign nation, one which made no obvious move to attack across its Northern border, count as humanitarian intervention? Whoever asks this is unfamiliar with the concept's wonderful elasticity. In terms of (how old-fashioned!) international law, humanitarian intervention is almost always aggressive and almost always contemptuous of sovereignty: it is not as if Afghanistan ever dreamed of attacking anyone, yet my Canadian newspaper is full of heart-warming stories about the fine young men and women who are travelling thousands of miles to kill as many inhumane Afghans as possible. In fact the lessons of Rwanda and Srebrenica, countlessly reiterated by large white people such as Michael Ignatieff, are that 'we're too fussy' about borders and sovereignty, too wimpy about shedding blood, too passive when we should be, not only aggressive, but pre-emptively so.

Now it may be true that Hizballah is also acting in its own interests and/or those of other countries seeking to extend their influence. Under the new rules of humanitarian intervention, as articulated by Ignatieff and others, that's just fine. Ignatieff mocks unmanly whiners who protest that America, in its humanitarian interventions, is following its own agenda--of course it is. Self-interest is part of what makes humanitarian intervention such great fun.

It may also be true that Hizballah's actions have led to a disaster for the Lebanese; perhaps for the Palestinians as well. (This may be the case even if it's odd to blame Hizballah for Israel's murderous excesses.) But failure doesn't seem to matter much for the humanitarian imperialist--only robotic ideologues would claim success for their humanitarian interventions in Afghanistan, Somalia or Rwanda. The response to failure is to 'stay the course', i.e., persist whatever the military and civilian losses, and Hizballah certainly seems ready to make just such a response.

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Finally it must be stressed that, against humanitarian intervention, a country has absolutely no right of self-defense. Israel's correct response to the raid, according to this doctrine, would be to free the Palestinians and respect the sovereignty of its neighbors. A criminal has no active right of self-defense and neither, it seems, does a criminal state.

Not everyone would agree that Israel is indeed such a state, but according to the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, it doesn't take much to fit the bill. Thus Serbia became a criminal state because of (i) uncertain connections to poorly understood massacres outside its borders, and (ii) concerns about its treatment of civilians in Kosovo, part of its territory but claimed by some to be occupied. The parallel with Israel in Lebanon and the occupied territories is unmistakable. Indeed the case against Israel is quite as strong as against other stigmatized nations: human rights organizations have held Israel guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes; international jurists have added violations of international law and defiance of UN resolutions.

The doctrine of humanitarian intervention is certainly flawed and certainly dubious. It is well on the way, however, to becoming an international article of faith, and it rests on the fateful precedents set by idiotic American ideologues and their spineless European catamites. Properly interpreted, it may have some merit: few can applaud the caution of Western powers in Rwanda. This must be borne in mind when it is said that, after all, Israel has a right to defend itself.

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(\*) Every country contributing forces is predominantly 'white' except perhaps for Turkey, a country which aspires to join the paradigmatically white European community.

Michael Neumann is a professor of philosophy at Trent University in Ontario, Canada. Professor Neumann's views are not to be taken as those of his university. His book *What's Left: Radical Politics and the Radical Psyche* has just been republished by Broadview Press. He contributed the essay, "What is Anti-Semitism", to CounterPunch's book, *The Politics of Anti-Semitism*. His latest book is *The Case Against Israel*. He can be reached at: [mneumann@trentu.ca](mailto:mneumann@trentu.ca).