



## Terrorism's Silent Partner at the United Nations

By Joshua Muravchik

*With the Organization of the Islamic Conference defending any act committed on behalf of "national liberation," the United Nations cannot even issue an unequivocal condemnation of terrorism, let alone join the struggle to eliminate it.*

This month, the United Nations Security Council voted to condemn terrorism. The resolution was introduced by Russia, still grieving over the terrorist attack on a school in Beslan, and perhaps the unanimous vote will give it a measure of solace. But the convoluted text and the dealings behind the scenes that were necessary to secure agreement on it offer cold comfort to anyone who cares about winning the war against terrorism. For what they reveal is that even after Beslan and after Madrid and after 9/11, the UN still cannot bring itself to oppose terrorism unequivocally.

### Terrorism As a Right

The reason for this failure is that the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which comprises fifty-six of the UN's 191 members, defends terrorism as a right.

After the Security Council vote, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations John C. Danforth tried to put the best face on the resolution. He said it "states very simply that the deliberate massacre of innocents is never justifiable in any cause. Never."

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But in fact it does not state this. Nor has any UN resolution ever stated it. The U.S. delegation tried to get such language into the resolution, but it was rebuffed by Algeria and Pakistan, the two OIC members currently sitting on the Security Council. (They have no veto, but the resolution's sponsors were willing to water down the text in return for a unanimous vote.)

True, the final resolution condemns "all acts of terrorism irrespective of their motivation." This sounds clear, but in the Alice-in-Wonderland lexicon of the UN, the term "acts of terrorism" does not mean what it seems.

For eight years now, a UN committee has labored to draft a "comprehensive convention on international terrorism." It has been stalled since day one on the issue of "defining" terrorism. But what is the mystery? At bottom everyone understands what terrorism is: the deliberate targeting of civilians. The Islamic Conference, however, has insisted that terrorism must be defined not by the nature of the act but by its purpose. In this view, any act done in the cause of "national liberation," no matter how bestial or how random or defenseless the victims, cannot be considered terrorism.

This boils down to saying that terrorism on behalf of bad causes is bad, but terrorism on behalf of good causes is good. Obviously, anyone who takes such a position is not against terrorism at all—but only against bad causes.

## No Closer to Progress

The United States is not alone in failing to get the Islamic states to reconsider their pro-terror stance.

Following 9/11, UN secretary-general Kofi Annan pushed to break the deadlock on the terrorism convention. He endorsed compromise language proscribing terrorism unambiguously while reaffirming the right of self-determination, but the Islamic Conference would not budge.

Far from giving ground on terrorism, the Islamic states have often gotten their way on the issue, with others giving in to them. As early as 1970, for instance, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution “reaffirm[ing] . . . the legitimacy of the struggle of the colonial peoples and peoples under alien domination to exercise their right to self-determination and independence by all the necessary means at their disposal.”

Everyone understood that this final phrase was code for terrorism. Similar formulas have been adopted repeatedly in the years since. Originally, the

Western European states joined the United States in voting against such motions. But in each of the last few years the UN Commission on Human Rights has adopted such a resolution with regard to the Palestinian struggle against

Israel, with almost all the European members voting in favor.

Danforth may feel that the U.S. position was vindicated in the new Security Council resolution, but that is not what OIC representatives think. As Pakistan’s envoy to the UN, Munir Akram, put it: “We ought not, in our desire to confront terrorism, erode the principle of the legitimacy of national resistance that we have upheld for 50 years.” Accordingly, he expressed satisfaction with the resolution: “It doesn’t open any new doors.”

Who is right? Hours of parsing the resolution will not resolve that question. But in the end it does not matter. As long as the Islamic states resist any blanket condemnation of terrorism, we will remain a long way from ridding the Earth of its scourge. And the United Nations, in which they account for nearly one-

third of the votes, will be helpless to bring us any closer.

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