Manchester Bombing Highlights UN Hypocrisy on Terror

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As thousands of teens and young adults enjoyed an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester Arena, Salman Abedi, a 23-year-old detonated a bomb he had strapped to his body. That he packed the bomb with nails made his goal clear: He not only wanted to kill as many innocents as possible, but maim many times more.

The Manchester attack is terrorism, plain and simple. There is no justification nor would any self-respecting politician nor diplomat even attempt to offer one.

But what if someone detonated a nail-packed bomb amidst a crowd of children and other civilians and both the human rights community and European diplomats said it was justified?

That's exactly what happened 15 years ago when the United Nations Human Rights Commission, operating under the leadership of [former Irish President Mary Robinson](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mary-robinson-war-criminal-an-appropriate-career-move1), did just that against the context of a wave of suicide bombings in Israel.

In an April 15, 2002 vote, 40 countries — including Austria, Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain and Sweden — [argued](http://www.unitedjerusalem.org/index2.asp?id=93208&Date=4/16/2002) that Palestinians could engage "all available means, including armed struggle" to establish a Palestinian state. That U.N. Human Rights Commission resolution enshrined the right to conduct suicide bombing in international humanitarian law. After all, many academics, diplomats, and human rights activists argue that the U.N. and its human rights wings set the precedent that becomes the foundation for international humanitarian and human rights law.

When the Human Rights Commission voted, Israel was weathering a months-long suicide bombing campaign that, at its height, saw multiple bombings of buses, cafes and other public buildings every week. Many European diplomats might have been frustrated with Israel's counter-terrorism policies and unwillingness to accept the European view of the peace process, but to channel that frustration into a resolution that legitimized deliberate targeting and murder of civilians created a precedent which went far beyond the politics of the day.

European diplomats and many academics might hold their nose and [sneer at Israel](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/20/israel2) and attacks on its citizens. A German court [recently even ruled](http://www.timesofisrael.com/german-court-affirms-ruling-synagogue-arson-not-anti-semitic/) that the firebombing of a local synagogue was not anti-Semitic but rather an expression of anti-Israel protest. But they should recognize that Israel is not a pariah to isolate and condemn but rather the canary in the coal mine for the civilized world. Violence that they legitimize inside Israel or against Jews will not be limited to Israel. Legitimacy is easy to grant, but once granted, it tends to bleed outward upon the skids of moral equivalence and is hard to take away.

Alas, Robinson's 2002 legitimization of suicide bombing was not the only time human rights advocates excused terrorism. The American Friends Service Committee, the non-governmental organization of the Quakers, [has done it](http://www.aei.org/publication/putting-politics-before-pacifism/). [Amnesty International](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/culture-civilization/religion/islam/amnesty-international-doubles-down-on-islamism/) and [Human Rights Watch](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/foreign-policy/middle-east/terrorists-mirror-human-rights-activists/) researchers and employees [still do it](https://www.aei.org/publication/human-rights-watch-doubles-down-on-terror-apologetics/). Some academics and activists have even proposed [talking to Al Qaeda](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-alqaeda-dialogue-idUSL1183375220070913).

What happened Monday night in Manchester is a tragedy. It is terrorism. And it is evil. There can be neither moral justification of Abedi's actions nor any mitigating factors for those who indoctrinated, trained, and equipped him; they are just as guilty.

But, on a broader level, it is essential that policymakers see terrorism as a black and white issue. To see it in shades of gray — as not only political activists but also many American [diplomats are tempted to do](https://www.brookings.edu/events/terrorism-the-current-threat/) when they counsel engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah and dialogue with state sponsors of terrorism — is to imply that some terrorism is more legitimate than others. To allow any terrorist group to reap reward from its violence, however, legitimizes murder.

It is neither sophisticated to erode moral clarity nor moral to allow a cause to legitimize murder. There is no difference between a nail bomb in Manchester and one in Baghdad, or a bus bomb in Tavistock Square and one in Tel Aviv. It is time to take a united front, even if it means dismissing those who squander humanity while confusing their own political axes with human rights law.