

FIRST, DO NO HARM: A DEMOCRATIC-REALIST CRITIQUE
OF THE HUMAN SECURITY APPROACH TO ARMS CONTROL

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***“Resolved: Human security should be the fundamental basis for
multilateral disarmament and arms control negotiations.”***

When the President of Iran calls for “wiping Israel off the map”, while his country provides weapons and training to terror groups, and violates the core commitment of the Non-Proliferation Treaty prohibiting the development of nuclear weapons, what can the advocates of human security and multilateral disarmament offer in response? Do they have an effective means of preventing suicide bombers from attacking a wedding in Amman, blowing children to bits on Israeli busses, or bombing civilians in New York, Madrid, London, or Bali? Can we expect reliable assurances that civil programs involving dual-use technologies and materials are not being used to hide illicit weapons efforts?

I do not stand here – on the 25th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations Institute on Disarmament, and in the building that once housed the League of Nations – to disparage or diminish the importance of arms control, human rights or humanitarian assistance. On the contrary, these goals continue to guide our efforts. More than 2700 year ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke in Jerusalem – the City of Peace -- of the day when “nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn to make war any more”.

But this activity must be realistic, going beyond messianic visions that promise salvation, but that lead to disappointment, disillusion, and genocide.

Advocates of disarmament – both the traditional form based on negotiations between sovereign nations, and the more recent attempt to fashion an alternative under the banner of “human security” – are morally bound by the same oath taken by doctors: “First do no harm”. Sadly, some activities undertaken in the name of arms limitations, humanitarian action and human rights cannot pass this critical test. At times, powerful NGO officials, diplomats, and academics become advocates in ongoing conflicts, and promote ideological agendas that reject democratic values, and lead to even more failed states. The goals of human security and arms control are undoubtedly worthy, but implementation has been slow, and sometimes counterproductive.

A REALISTIC VIEW OF DISARMAMENT AND ARMS CONTROL

The proposition before us today has two central components – one dealing with the ends -- multilateral disarmament and arms control, and the other with the means – human security. In presenting the case for a realistic approach to the very difficult questions of war and peace, which recognize the basic moral distinction between free and closed societies (fear states, to use Natan Sharansky’s term), I will address the realistic consequences of disarmament first, before considering the questions raised by the human security approach.

As a moral objective, no one will argue against disarmament. But in practice, the state of nature described by Hobbes remains an accurate description of the human condition in many parts of the world. Immanuel Kant’s vision of “perpetual peace”, based on a common morality anchored in agreed norms that do not depend on the use of military power remains a distant dream.

In this reality, such idealistic efforts have yielded very meager results, and have, at times, contributed to catastrophe. For over a century – beginning with the Hague Conventions -- conferences, petitions, marches, negotiations, and treaties have not led to results worthy of celebration. Instead, the people who were responsible for the abundance of protocols and treaties after World War 1 – some of which were signed in this building –share responsibility for the carnage that followed. They did not prevent German rearmament under the Nazi regime, and mass marches for pacifism that took place in Britain blocked a credible deterrent.¹ The moral principle “First do no harm” was egregiously violated.

What has been learned from this tragic history? Seventy years later, there was no effort to deter Saddam Hussein as he acquired the largest army outside of NATO to invade his neighbors, and missiles armed with chemical weapons to “burn half of Israel”, as he boasted. In 1991, after the invasion of Kuwait, the military response stopped outside of Baghdad and regime change. In its place, economic sanctions were imposed to prevent Saddam from resuming these activities. But instead of *human security*, these non-military measures disintegrated in the face of *human greed*.

In contrast, during the Cold War, mutual deterrence was an essential element in preventing another even more horrendous conflagration. We can wish that it were otherwise, but we are not free to ignore the facts before us. Deterrence was far from automatic or simple, but was the least bad option under the circumstances. Then, as now, the realistic alternative to carefully managed deterrence – including against non-state actors, such as Al Qaida – is not perpetual peace, but devastating conflict.

Indeed, the nuclear arms race ended and substantive arms reductions began when the Soviet regime collapsed. The opening of the political system, a government that was more accountable to its citizens, and the end of the conflict, allowed the objectives of disarmament to move towards reality. Arms control and human security cannot be removed from this essential context.

In other parts of the world, the struggle continues between nations, religions, tribes, and ideologies. Exclusive religious and ethno-national claims, perceived injustices, and deep hatreds lead to catastrophic violence, both conventional, and in the form of mass terror aimed at civilians. Unrepresentative leaders and tyrants exploit such hatreds, using terrorism and threats of genocide to cling to power, and diverting internal pressures outward.² For the intended victims, such as Israel, deterrence has proven effective in the face of anarchy and the “war of all against all”. I doubt that I would be standing here today, were it not for the sobering threat of unacceptable retaliation.

In this environment, while we wait for the logic of cooperative security and arms control, based on rational national interest, to become apparent, can the human security approach, (“thinking out of the box”), can provide a realistic and effective alternative?

HUMAN SECURITY OR DEMOCRATIC PEACE

The announcement for this debate refers to “leveraging problems of security using individuals and local communities “as additional referent points”, and to “non-state actors” such as “international and regional organizations, NGOs, academic or professional experts, business, and individuals.”

Who are these individuals, community spokespersons, NGOs, etc.? How do they form security policies that elected national leaders have missed, without contributing to catastrophes as in the 1920s and 1930s, or more recently, the well intentioned but ultimately disastrous Oslo process in the Middle East, which led to so many tragic deaths? Who chooses, funds, and legitimates their claims to speak for others? To whom are they accountable?

The human security framework is similar to that invoked broadly under the label of “civil society”, and equally problematic. In democratic political systems, the only legitimate policy makers are those who stand before the electorate, are chosen for this task, and can be replaced by that same electorate. Others may and do participate in the public debate, but have no moral authority to decide, particularly on the most basic issues of war and peace, including arms control.

As a result, the basic constituents of the human security approach – individuals and NGOs – lack legitimacy. It is for good reason that, as some analysts have noted, “When core national security interests are involved, policymakers generally expect to retain tight control over decisions and ... publics have been largely content to let them do so,” particularly in democratic societies.³ Similarly, Barrie explains, “it is unrealistic to expect key players in the international system, like the United States, to remain committed to multilateral processes when they perceive their vital interests threatened”⁴

The problems of legitimacy and accountability in fear societies controlled by closed non-democratic regimes are more acute. In a few important cases, “individuals, local communities and NGOs” may reflect the views and interests of

parts of society that are not represented by the governing regime. But in general, particularly with respect to conflict-related issues, “civil society” is closely tied to the regime, and only those individuals and groups that follow the official line can participate in the public discussion. In the conference of states parties to the Ottawa Landmine Convention that I attended (as a private individual) a few years ago, the Egyptian, Palestinian, and North African from NGOs participants representing ICBL and HRW echoed a single position, which, not coincidentally, repeated the policies of their governments, promoting rejectionism and hatred. This experience highlighted the fact that many who use the terminology of human security are not interested in my security.

Instead, in many cases, the individuals and NGOs that claim to promote universal human rights, humanitarian norms, and international law exploit the rhetoric to pursue a biased post-colonial ideology. Democratic nations (particularly the U.S. and Israel) are disproportionately targeted, displaying unacceptable double standards.⁵

Their legitimacy is further weakened by the tendency towards a dogmatic absolutism and political manipulation. Meaningful moral judgements require context and a hierarchy of values. In contrast, the universal “one size fits all” approach to security in general, and disarmament, in particular, cannot distinguish between free states and fear states; between totalitarian aggressors and democracies; actors and victims. This was a fundamental moral failure of the disarmament movement during the Cold War.

Under these circumstances – a Hobbesian world (with the perhaps temporary exception of Europe) in which conflict and hatreds are endemic --- the human security approach to arms control⁶ cannot replace the centrality of nation states and the strategy of deterrence.

In some areas, such as land mines and trade in small arms and light weapons, non-state initiatives can supplement traditional national security.⁷ But as Atwood and others have noted, the Land Mine convention, while an important achievement, was an exceptional case. The weapons in question were ‘of relatively minor importance from a military security perspective....’⁸

Indeed, the attempt to turn the human security approach into the foundation for nuclear and other forms of disarmament is based on the perilous hope that “the security of the individual” can replace “the traditional unit of security—that of the state.”⁹

The concept of security is inseparable from modern nation states, which provided the only protection from a highly anarchic environment. No reliable system of regional commerce was possible without “hard” security, and the centralized police powers of the state were essential in overcoming these obstacles. Post-nationalist ideology is not only illusory – it is a recipe for yet more catastrophic warfare, resulting from the false belief that the state and deterrence have become irrelevant.

If the real goal of human security movement is to replace the nation state, in the context of this ideology, this should not be disguised as a quick path to peace. In a state of anarchy, the legitimate sovereign state and the deterrence that is provided by defense forces remain the only credible insurance against Iranian threats to “wipe Israel off the map”. Arms control and the important contribution of UNIDIR and other institutions in this process can only begin when new leaders in Teheran and elsewhere recognize that their own survival depends on cooperation and

communication with Israel, based on the principle of sovereign equality.

Similarly, the hope that NGOs and like-minded individuals can somehow find a fast track to nuclear arms control or even disarmament, or produce a breakthrough covering other weapons of mass destruction, by closing their eyes to real obstacles, is misplaced. In regions characterized by deep hatred and protracted conflicts, and where freedom has yet to be achieved for most people, the attempt to erase the security provided by deterrence and defense violates the basic rule – first, do not harm. Citizens of states whose survival is threatened are not going to entrust their core security requirements to unaccountable and often biased NGOs or international bodies.

But this is not a hopeless situation. Human security and arms control can accomplish a great deal by directing energies realistically to strengthening free and functioning states. Democracies that share basic moral values are less likely to attack each other, or engage in genocidal campaigns. They do not need huge arsenals, or to divert public opinion. It is in this context that organizations such as UNIDIR can have a major impact – when accountable governments recognize the value of cooperative security and in reducing the instabilities of deterrence in their own self-interest. These conditions provide the most reliable foundation for security – and towards the day when nation will no not lift up sword against nation.

¹ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: McMillan and Co. 1939)

² Gerald M. Steinberg, "Realism, Politics and Culture in Middle East Arms Control Negotiations" *International Negotiation*, Vol. 10 (2005)

³ Cathleen S. Fisher, *Reformation and Resistance: Nongovernmental Organizations and the Future of Nuclear Weapons*, Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC, 1999, p. 67, cited by D. Atwood, "NGOs and Disarmament: Views from the Coal Face", in *NGOs as Partners: Assessing the Impact, Recognizing the Potential*, *Disarmament Forum*, 2002 no. 1, pp. 5 – 14 <http://www.unidir.org/pdf/articles/pdf-art5.pdf>

⁴ John Borrie, "Rethinking Multilateral Negotiations: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action", in J. Borrie & V. Martin Randin (eds.), *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making*, Geneva: UNIDIR, 2005, p. 7 http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-ouvrage.php?ref_ouvrage=92-9045-172-6-en

⁵ Gerald M. Steinberg, "The UN, the ICJ and the Separation Barrier: War by Other Means" *Israel Law Review*, (38:1-2, 2005)

⁶ John Borrie, "Rethinking Multilateral Negotiations: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action", in J. Borrie & V. Martin Randin (eds.), *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making*, Geneva: UNIDIR, 2005, pp. 7-37 http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-ouvrage.php?ref_ouvrage=92-9045-172-6-en

⁷ D. Atwood, "NGOs and Disarmament: Views from the Coal Face", in *NGOs as Partners: Assessing the Impact, Recognizing the Potential*, *Disarmament Forum*, 2002 no. 1, pp. 5 – 14 <http://www.unidir.org/pdf/articles/pdf-art5.pdf>; John Borrie, "Rethinking Multilateral Negotiations: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action", in J. Borrie & V. Martin Randin (eds.), *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making*, Geneva: UNIDIR, 2005, pp. 7-37 < http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-ouvrage.php?ref_ouvrage=92-9045-172-6-en>

⁸ D. Atwood, "NGOs and Disarmament: Views from the Coal Face", in *NGOs as Partners: Assessing the Impact, Recognizing the Potential*, *Disarmament Forum*, 2002 no. 1, pp. 5 - 14

⁹ Chapter 2 ("New Dimensions of Human Security") in *UNDP Human Development Report 1994*, New York: United Nations Development Programme, 1994, pp. 22-46, cited by John Borrie, "Rethinking Multilateral Negotiations: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action", in J.

Borrie & V. Martin Randin (eds.), *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making*,
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< http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-ouvrage.php?ref_ouvrage=92-9045-172-6-en >