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Right of Reply: Isolating Israel through language of human rights

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Gerald Steinberg , THE JERUSALEM POST

At a conference in Europe, Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim, the respected Egyptian human rights activist, stopped abruptly in the middle of his presentation to embrace Prof. Irwin Cotler, who had just arrived. Cotler had been active in the fight to secure Ibrahim's freedom from jail on trumped-up charges - one of many such battles that the former Canadian justice minister has led, including in behalf of Natan Sharansky and Nelson Mandela.

For this and many other reasons, readers should add more than the usual grain of salt in reading Kenneth Roth's article "**Don't smear the messenger**" in *The Jerusalem Post* August 26. As head of Human Rights Watch since 1993, Roth's accomplishments do not come close to Prof. Cotler's. Instead, Roth has led the politicization and erosion of universal human rights as a moral force.

The main focus of Roth's tendentious attack is to defend the legitimacy of Judge Richard Goldstone, head of the the United Nations "fact finding mission" whose report on the Gaza war earlier this year is expected to be released soon. But in his tirade, Roth forgot to disclose his relationship with Goldstone - a long-time member of HRW's board. And in many ways, the attempt to malign and disparage Goldstone's critics is also part of Roth's efforts to protect himself and HRW.

Indeed, as Goldstone is discredited, Roth has good reason to worry. The appointment of Goldstone was another step in the strategy adopted by the 2001 Durban NGO forum, with the goal of isolating Israel through the language of human rights. NGO Monitor's detailed research shows that HRW has promoted this strategy by issuing at least 68 calls for "independent investigations" of Israel - including Jenin (2002), Rafah (2004), the Gaza beach incident and the Lebanon war (2006). Roth lamely sought to avoid the evidence of targeting Israel, rather than doing more on human rights in Iran, Africa or Libya: "We've got to pick and choose - we've got finite resources."

THE GAZA war gave Roth the opportunity to expand these efforts, and HRW worked closely with the UN Human Rights Council in creating the "independent inquiry" headed by one of its own - Judge Goldstone. Since then, HRW has provided the investigators and the accompanying media campaign with three more tendentious "reports" accusing Israeli forces of "war crimes." (To claim "balance," HRW also published a belated report on Hamas, omitting Iran's role in supplying weapons and training.) In addition to the one-sided mandate (which Goldstone claims was revised by the president of the UNHRC to include an investigation of Hamas), the Gaza inquiry and HRW are tainted by bias among the people involved.

HRW's Middle East division is run by Sarah Leah Whitson, who had organized protests against Israeli

"brutality" at the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee before she was hired by Roth. At HRW, Whitson continued to promote anti-Israel boycotts, and in May 2009, Whitson led HRW's fund-raising trip to Saudi Arabia, where she denounced "pro-Israel pressure groups," which "tried to discredit" HRW's "work on Israel and Gaza," including its role in creating the Goldstone inquiry.

Furthermore, Joe Stork, Whitson's deputy in HRW, spent over 20 years as a founder and editor of MERIP, an anti-Zionist and anti-American organization. Following the Munich attack, Stork and his colleagues published an editorial headlined "Who are the real terrorists?" which denounced "Israeli terrorists, equipped with US-supplied jets and tanks" and "their policy of murder and destruction against the Palestinians." (The authors added a disclaimer that such acts were not "justification" for the Munich attack.) In 1996, Stork joined HRW.

The biases displayed by Whitson and Stork violate the basic principle of political objectivity for human rights fact-finding, as codified in the International Bar Association's "London-Lund" guidelines. Similarly, the appointments of Goldstone and Prof. Christine Chinkin to the UN's Gaza investigation are inconsistent with these common-sense rules. (UN Watch's call to disqualify Chinkin quotes a letter she signed declaring Israel the aggressor and perpetrator of war crimes, and "categorically rejecting" Israel's right to self-defense against rocket barrages.)

HRW'S REPORTS, like the NGO submissions to Goldstone, consistently reflect this bias and lack of professional standards. Behind the façade of "factual research," the work of the Middle East Division consists of multiple pages of carefully picked Palestinian "eyewitness testimony." These reports mix speculative, plausible Palestinian claims that are unverifiable, bad fiction and pages of irrelevant technical "facts" and contorted legal verbiage.

In HRW's latest publication, co-authored by Stork, which accused the IDF of the odious moral crime of deliberately killing civilians waving white flags, the first incident is based entirely on the claims of the Abed Rabbo family. However, Western and Arabic versions show that as the Palestinian "fixers" brought journalists and NGO officials, including HRW "researchers," for interviews, the story evolved with each telling.

In parallel, the videos and other evidence clearly showing Palestinian abuses, including routine use of "human shields" to protect terrorists and weapons, are omitted because they do not fit the desired conclusions. No serious court would accept this testimony as evidence, or the publications as "research."

There are dozens of similar examples repeating Palestinian claims in HRW publications. Every phase of this long war is also opportunity for promoting this agenda through reports, press conferences, letters and e-mails. These indictments (Roth was trained as a prosecutor) routinely repeat the odious charges of "indiscriminate attacks against civilians," "war crimes" and collective punishment. (HRW's "White Flags" publication uses the term "war crimes" 15 times.) This anti-Israel obsession is part of the broader transformation of HRW from its original goal of battling for the freedom of political prisoners in repressive regimes, to an ideological power directing its guns (\$42 million in 2008) against embattled democracies such as Israel.

HRW's warped agenda has also led to increasing disquiet among key donors and board members. In understated terms, Robert Bernstein expressed his anger over the direction taken by the organization that he founded in 1978 as Helsinki Watch. "The overall result of HRW's current work... is to say we're being evenhanded in a way that makes it come out that both sides are equal abusers of human rights - I don't agree with that."

The exposure of HRW's bias and research façade, and the resulting criticism from HRW's core

supporters and donors are the real source of Roth's angry outburst against Cotler. The fate of Roth and Goldstone's commission are closely connected, and exposure of one's failings unmask the other.

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