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Watchdog puts no bite on despots

Gerald M. Steinberg and Dan Kosky

The recent call for reform at Human Rights Watch (HRW) by its founder, Robert Bernstein, elicited a frenzied response from the organization's officials and supporters. A concerted campaign of articles and rebuttals published in major publications presents a gross distortion of Mr. Bernstein's carefully considered argument.

In attacking Mr. Bernstein's moral critique, HRW is attempting to defend itself but actually highlights the wide gap between the organization's behavior and the moral standards it claims to promote. The result is a deeply flawed argument and a reminder of how far HRW has deviated from and betrayed its founding ethos.

The HRW onslaught charges Mr. Bernstein with seeking to limit human rights monitoring to closed despotic regimes, while democracies are "spared criticism for human rights abuses." In reality, Mr. Bernstein and other critics focus on HRW's warped distribution of resources between reports on open societies, and Israel in particular, in contrast to the minimal interest in closed countries ruled by despots.

As Mr. Bernstein notes, Israel, like the United States, has a vigorous critical press, an independent judiciary and a myriad of human rights organizations. As a result, in setting priorities, Israel, like other open democracies based on the rule of law, should logically get less attention than brutal regimes where these elements are missing entirely. This is clearly not the case for HRW.

HRW's defenders consistently repeat a standard claim that the focus on Israel accounts for just 15 percent of its Middle East activities - which, even if accurate, would be disproportionate in a region where HRW covers 17 countries. But the "15 percent" claim is highly misleading, based on a simplistic count of all HRW documents on the Middle East since 2000, as if a 125-page report and a two-paragraph press statement had the same impact.

In contrast, NGO Monitor's systematic weighted analysis, covering 2004 to 2008, clearly shows that detailed reports accompanied by press conferences and public relations campaigns are the norm for HRW condemnations of Israel and the exception for serial human rights abusers such as Syria, Saudi Arabia and Libya. So far in 2009, HRW has published five reports and released 90 statements on Israel, far in excess of any other country in the region. NGO Monitor's study of terminology found that in 2008, HRW attacked Israel for "violations of human rights law" or similar terms 33 times, compared to 13 such citations for the Palestinians, six for Hezbollah and five for Egypt. HRW likes to claim that it holds "all to the same standards," but this clearly is not the case.

By dismissing as "dangerous" the basic distinction between "wrongs committed in self-defense and those committed intentionally," HRW's position is clearly immoral. Surely there is a crucial ethical difference between the aggression of Nazi Germany and Winston Churchill's defense of Britain? In HRW's distorted world, both were equally reprehensible. These judgments are complex and challenging, but without differentiating between aggression and self-defense, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or Gaza, the ethical basis of international law and human rights is stripped away.

HRW's defense is also notable for what it is missing. The most important points of criticism are ignored, including Mr. Bernstein's condemnation of HRW for "helping those who wish to turn Israel into a pariah state" and for having "lost critical perspective" on the genocidal goals of Iranian sponsored groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. Safe in the expectancy that they are unlikely ever to change, HRW gives very mild rebukes to these terror groups, instead opting to denounce Israel as a softer target. The

same is true for HRW's frequent jibes at American policies designed to prevent another mass attack by al Qaeda.

This moral vacuum that characterizes HRW's agenda, particularly in the Middle East, and has been repeated in the organization's recent media offensive, highlights the importance of Mr. Bernstein's critique. Instead of attacking him, human rights advocates would do well to join Mr. Bernstein in demanding that the organization "resurrect itself as a moral force."

Gerald M. Steinberg is president and Dan Kosky communications director of NGO Monitor.

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