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York U and HRW: naming and shaming

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Is the political war to demonize Israel losing ground? Are some of the organizations and participants, particularly Jewish academics, starting to understand that they were wrong or exploited?

It's far too early to celebrate a return to sanity, but the exposure of Human Rights Watch's (HRW) illicit romance with Saudi Arabia and the widespread ridicule of York University's recent anti-Israel conference do suggest that some cleansing and moral restoration has begun.



HRW, which has an office and donors in Toronto, has led in the exploitation of human rights to attack Israel for the past decade. The organization was founded as Helsinki Watch in the late 1970s by Robert Bernstein in order to campaign for the release of prisoners of conscience, particularly Soviet Jews. But in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet empire, the group and its leaders lost their moral compass.

To keep the money flowing and maintain political influence and ready access to the media, HRW's leaders found another mission as the arbiters (along with London-based Amnesty International) of international law in different contexts, including military invasions, guerrilla wars and ethno-national conflicts.

And few have noticed that these organizations had no professional expertise to deal with complex issues. The judgments of HRW and Amnesty have been accepted at face value, including by the CBC. (On the July 1 edition of CBC Radio's *As it Happens*, an HRW official received seven minutes to indict Israel for "war crimes" in Gaza. Interviewer Barbara Budd didn't question Marc Garlasco's limited credentials or his bias. Reuters news agency, to its credit, exposed the contradictions and pseudo-technical analysis.)

For HRW, Israel-bashing has been very profitable – budgets have grown and officials are welcomed in United Nations human rights organizations chaired by Iran and Libya. Their constant anti-Israel condemnations, dressed up as "research reports," provide automatic media access and prestige.

But like other power brokers, HRW officials became arrogant and have now been caught in a corruption scandal, following a fundraising dinner in Saudi Arabia in which the main dish was HRW's record of Israel-bashing. (Its Jewish executive director, Ken Roth, did not participate, and Sarah Leah Whitson, director of HRW's Middle East and North Africa division, has not revealed whether she wore a veil or was allowed to drive while in the country.) This escapade highlighted HRW's moral failure, leading to a closer examination of its history of bias and methodological manipulation. In response, HRW officials covered up the facts, claiming that they met with private Saudi citizens who were interested in human rights in their own country, and were not focused on Israel. But uncomfortable donors weren't buying this, and one of the guests was revealed to be a member of the Shura council. The probe grew to include all of HRW's Middle East activities, and the group is likely to undergo a total reorganization and change in officials, particularly for the Middle East, in order to regain its lost moral credibility.

Similarly, York University's "one state" conference, which took place at the end of June, led to the exposure of this gross abuse of the academic framework to promote hard-core Israel-bashing. In this case as well, the language of human rights was abused, and like HRW, those responsible tried to cover up the evidence, digging themselves in deeper. Detailed academic reports (in contrast to the emotional and counterproductive denunciations by some opponents) put faculty organizers and university administrators on the defensive.

Prof. Naama Carmi, a conference participant from Haifa University, wrote a sharp critique in the *Toronto Star*, and she expanded it in her blog, condemning the "ostensibly academic conference" in which she said Jews

were “silenced and marginalized.” (Prof. Carmi is on the left of the political spectrum and was once active in a number of Israeli groups claiming to promote human rights.) Like HRW, York’s credibility will only recover when the officials responsible for this fiasco are no longer in positions to do further damage.

These are only two examples out of dozens, but they’re important. Both show that carefully considered strategies exposing the false rhetoric of peace and human rights can unmask those responsible for these abuses in powerful institutions.

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