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Human Rights NGOs Need a Monitor

Second Opinion

By Gerald M. Steinberg

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Most people prefer giving, rather than receiving, criticism. Leaders of powerful non-governmental organizations are no exception.

Human rights NGOs have long benefited from a “halo effect” that has protected them from scrutiny; reporters quote their research widely, assuming it is accurate. But in recent years, the protective coating has worn thin, and the heads of these organizations are finding themselves squirming uncomfortably in the spotlight.

Events of the past year have highlighted the vital need for accountability, transparency and informed debate on the activities of NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and B’Tselem. These NGOs have played a central role in charging Israel with “war crimes” and “collective punishment.” To the degree that these groups’ agendas and claims prove to be biased, unfounded or simply invented, their accusations against Israel also lose credibility.

Understandably, NGO Monitor’s research reports airing NGOs’ dirty linen often trigger intense counterattacks. There have been angry insults from HRW officials and crude accusations of “McCarthyism” from apologists for some of the groups that NGO Monitor has researched. (One such online attack was linked to prominently on the home page of the New Israel Fund.)

Then there are criticisms from more serious individuals, such as Forward columnist Yossi Alpher, author of the December 25 article [“NGO Monitor Needs a Monitor.”](#) To his credit, Alpher acknowledges the work that NGO Monitor has done exposing “the funding by European governments and reputable American philanthropies of NGOs that smear Israel with lies and classic antisemitic rhetoric.” He also affirms the validity of NGO Monitor’s complaints about Human Rights Watch. (Alpher doesn’t elaborate, but NGO Monitor has documented deep biases among the heads of HRW’s Middle East division, the dispatching of an obsessive Nazi-memorabilia collector to assess Israeli military actions and the group’s use of anti-Israel themes to raise funds in Saudi Arabia.)

Alpher, however, goes off track, making the bogus assertion that NGO Monitor is motivated by the goal of “eliminating human rights monitoring of Israel entirely.” He accuses us of “running roughshod” over groups “that are working to maintain Israel’s integrity in the context of its ongoing occupation of the West Bank.”

Yet for the majority of Israelis — who support territorial compromise and are not right-wing fanatics — NGOs’ abuse of human rights principles to condemn self-defense suggests that an end to the occupation would not stop the NGO-led war. In 2005, Israel removed every settler and soldier from Gaza, and it received 8,000 rocket attacks and a Hamas-led coup in response. Every attack was a war crime, but where were the self-appointed human rights guardians? And in the more than three years of Gilad Shalit’s captivity by Hamas in Gaza, the international human rights community has not given enough attention to his plight.

Israelis see that human rights organizations are propelling delegitimization campaigns against Israel — from the NGO forum of the United Nations’ 2001 Durban conference to the Israel-bashing sessions of the U.N. Human Rights Council — and waging “lawfare” against Israel’s elected officials. The most potent attack, in the form of the report by the U.N. Human Rights Council-mandated fact-finding mission on Gaza — headed by a judge, Richard Goldstone, who is closely affiliated with HRW — is largely a rehashed compilation of NGO allegations.

We also see NGO superpowers like HRW and Amnesty International and dozens of Israel-based NGOs that are

funded largely by European governments providing the ammunition used to attack Israeli leaders as “war criminals.” The latest low-water mark for this abuse was the arrest warrant briefly issued in London for Israeli opposition leader Tzipi Livni.

NGO Monitor’s criticism of organizations that abuse moral principles for gratuitous Israel-bashing is not evidence of a “right-wing” agenda, as Alpher seems to suggest. Rather, holding NGOs accountable should be a top priority for liberals. The left should be leading demands for an end to the corrosive double standards that have debased the moral currency of human rights and neglected the mass killings in Sudan and the Congo.

By the same token, the funders that enable the small group of ideologues who run these NGOs must also be held to account. Although they may see themselves as promoting progressive principles, benefactors such as the Ford and Soros foundations, the New Israel Fund, the governments of Sweden and Norway, and the European Union foot the multimillion-dollar bill for NGO press conferences, submissions to the U.N., media blitzes and speaking tours.

In an October op-ed published in The New York Times, Robert Bernstein, the founder of Human Rights Watch, wrote: “I must publicly join the group’s critics. Human Rights Watch had as its original mission to pry open closed societies, advocate basic freedoms and support dissenters. But recently it has been issuing reports on the Israeli-Arab conflict that are helping those who wish to turn Israel into a pariah state.”

Bernstein is the antithesis of a knee-jerk right-winger, and his was not a narrow, ideological stance, but rather a principled position. Wide cooperation among individuals of varied political views is necessary if we are to restore the moral force and credibility of the movement for universal human rights.

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