

Human Rights Watch's Lost Credibility

February 26, 2012 2:39 pm

Author: Gerald Steinberg

It is always painful to discover that an organization proclaiming liberal and moral values is not what it claims to be, but this is precisely what has happened to Human Rights Watch (HRW). For many years, in the absence of any systematic analysis of HRW's activities and impacts, few questioned the claims made by the leaders of this organization. But recently, as a number of detailed examinations have been published, the difference between HRW's public relations claims and the reality have become inescapable.

Our organization, NGO Monitor's systematic analysis of HRW's activities in the Middle East demonstrate a consistent credibility gap between HRW's universal moral objectives, and the reality of its Middle East political agenda – including obsessive focus on Israel, and unseemly cooperation with brutal dictatorships. And despite the extensive use of genocidal threats by the Iranian regime, HRW has not found the time or resources to condemn this and other forms of hate speech.

In 2011, according to NGO Monitor's annual report on HRW's output of materials, "Israel and the Occupied Territories" (as termed by HRW) still received more attention than Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. In 2010, as in previous years, HRW published more documents on "Israel and the Occupied Territories" than on any other country in the region. Clearly, HRW's disproportionate attacks on Israel came at the expense of focusing on the worst human rights abuses in the region.

An examination of HRW's op-eds, press conferences, and other activities shows sustained campaigns attacking Israeli responses to terror as war crimes, as compared to a few one-off statements condemning the Palestinian terror attacks themselves. HRW issued its first report on suicide bombing in November 2002, almost a year and a half after the Dolphinarian atrocity. Prior to this report, HRW head Ken Roth used the excuse that universal standards of human rights applied only to states and not to terror groups. (When they finally did the report on Palestinian attacks, HRW ignored documents clearly showing that Arafat had authorized terror attacks.)

This token report was quickly forgotten by HRW, which failed to organize a campaign or press for sanctions against Palestinian terrorists. Instead, their campaigns returned to attacks and allegations against Israel, including accusations of "war crimes" in the IDF operation against the suicide bombing center in Jenin.

This agenda has closely reflected the final declaration of the notorious NGO Forum at the 2001 Durban conference, in which HRW officials played a central role. This document called for a program of action to promote the "complete international isolation of Israel" through the façade of human rights. After their Jenin campaign, HRW launched campaigns based on false claims during the 2006 conflict with Hezbollah (such as the Qana incident), and the 2008/9 Gaza war, as reflected in the discredited Goldstone Report. Such attacks continue – on January 30, 2012, HRW released a statement attacking the Israeli High Court as undermining human rights – and is a central part of the Durban strategy. The few largely invisible condemnations of Palestinian violations – and every one of the rockets fired from Gaza towards Sderot is a war crime – are lost in the noise.

This dismal record led founder Robert Bernstein to publish an op-ed in the New York Times denouncing his own organization as morally bankrupt. Similarly, in a 2010 Human Rights Day speech,

Bernstein emphasized that citizens of repressive Arab regimes “would most benefit from the kind of attention a large and well-financed international human rights organization can provide,” but which is instead “ignored as Human Rights Watch’s Middle East division prepares report after report on Israel.”

HRW’s Executive Director Kenneth Roth, Sarah Leah Whitson (director of the Middle East and North Africa Division), and Joe Stork (deputy director) have long records of bias. Roth referred to Jewish religious texts as “primitive,” and Whitson’s “credentials” include praise for Seif Islam Qaddafi as a “reformer.” In 2010, HRW issued 19 largely minor documents on Libya, compared with 51 on “Israel and the Occupied Territories”. Whitson also held a fundraising dinner in Saudi Arabia, exploiting the specter of “pro-Israel pressure groups” to solicit funds from “prominent members of Saudi society.” In 2011, MENA co-chair Kathleen Peratis met with members of the Hamas terror organization.

HRW’s warped agenda is not unique to Israel. Iranian-born journalist Maryam Namazie took HRW executive director Ken Roth to task for stating “Islamist parties are genuinely popular in much of the Arab world, in part because many Arabs have come to see political Islam as the antithesis of autocratic rule.” As Namazie noted, “A majority don’t support Islamism unless you believe that people like to have their rights and freedoms limited and are different human beings from those sitting in the plush Human Rights Watch offices. It isn’t rocket science to understand that after autocratic rule and the suppression of dissent and banning of political parties, it is impossible for secular forces and those representing the true spirit of the ‘Arab Spring’ to organize and win ‘elections’.”

The tragedy here is not only due to the demise of HRW as a moral and significant framework for promoting human rights and other universal principles. Rather, when groups like HRW exploit these moral values as political and ideological weapons, the wider respect for human rights in any society, including Israel’s, is replaced by cynical dismissal. Anyone who is truly concerned about these values should be demanding that groups such as HRW immediately end their double standards and false claims of “war crimes”, and return to the universal principles of human rights.

Gerald Steinberg is president of NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institution dedicated to promoting universal human rights and to encouraging civil discussion on the reports and activities of nongovernmental organizations, particularly in the Middle East.