

1 June 2003

MONITORING THE POLITICAL ROLE OF NGOs

Gerald M. Steinberg

- One of the harshest fronts of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the information war, in which powerful non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with major influence on the international media consistently display a biased approach.
- The hijacking of the Durban anti-racism conference in 2001 by anti-Israel NGOs illustrated the dangers of politically motivated humanitarian groups that derive credibility simply on the basis of mission statements promoting "universal human rights."
- In spite of the hypocrisy of Durban, and the highly visible distortions in NGO reports of the IDF's military operations in Jenin in April 2002, many of these NGOs, some of which enjoy observer status at the UN, continue to raise hundreds of millions of dollars from governmental sources, especially the EU, as well as from private donors.
- Their influence is particularly felt when NGOs direct political discourse by misquoting international law and overusing the terms: "war crimes," "genocide," and "ethnic cleansing."
- The [*NGO Monitor project*](#) was initiated to examine how certain humanitarian NGOs covering Israel and the Middle East deviate from their mission statements and fund-raising activities that claim to support universal human rights values, in order to engage in overt political and ideological activities.

The Growing Influence of NGOs

In recent years, thousands of "non-governmental organizations" (NGOs) have been formed with the goal of influencing policy decisions and shaping global political perspectives on issues ranging from humanitarian law to protecting the environment. Human rights NGOs have become the most powerful and well-funded members of this large community. Through relentless campaigning, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Ford Foundation, alongside thousands of much smaller organizations, have succeeded in gaining immense power in placing human rights issues - as they interpret them - high on governmental agendas. The UN and related international organizations, governments, the international media, and the academic community consult daily with NGOs with a view to incorporating their reports into policy. Amnesty's campaign for Soviet prisoners of conscience was so influential that President Gorbachev invited representatives from Amnesty to visit Moscow to discuss reforming the Soviet Union.

At the same time, the absence of democratic accountability and transparency has not blunted their prominence or removed their "halos" of perceived objectivity.

The following analysis explores how humanitarian NGOs that include Israel and the Middle East in their campaigns have played a major role in the ongoing ideological campaign to delegitimize Israel. Their impact on the 2001 Durban UN Conference Against Racism, their statements delivered at the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), and their regular reports on violence in the Middle East illustrate how several NGOs that claim to deal with universal human rights are distorting basic norms and at times even promoting the antithesis of their important and noble aims. For this reason, *NGO Monitor* has set itself the task of monitoring the activities of such NGOs to generate greater public debate on the complexities of human rights issues and to avoid the subjugation of universal human rights values to partisan interests.

What are NGOs?

NGOs are generally defined as autonomous non-profit and non-party/politically-unaffiliated organizations that advance a particular cause or set of causes in the public interest. The range of causes on which an NGO can focus is unlimited, but a cardinal principle is that NGOs operate in a manner consistent with the objectives for which they receive funds. Donations are an NGO's lifeline because they are independent organizations. Funding can come from governments, the UN, private trusts and philanthropies, individual donations, religious institutions, and, in many cases, other NGOs.

NGOs can contribute to democracy through challenging governments and promoting social interests, but they themselves are not democratic institutions and have no democratic accountability. An NGO is only accountable to its particular funding organizations and members. Meanwhile, criticism of a human rights NGO is often dismissed as an attack on the values of human rights themselves.

Monitoring the Three Types of Humanitarian NGOs

*NGO Monitor*¹ was founded to address these issues by tracking the activities of humanitarian NGOs. In this framework, it is important to distinguish between three types of NGOs. The first group consists of international bodies such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, whose operations are truly global and very influential. Amnesty International, for example, claims a membership of one and a half million, and an annual operating budget of \$30 million with projects in 140 countries. The second group is made up of region-specific NGOs such as Miftah,² Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR),³ Physicians for Human Rights - Israel (PHR-I),⁴ and LAW.⁵ These regional "humanitarian" NGOs restrict their activities to the Arab-Israeli conflict and, in most cases, to criticism of Israel. The third group consists of NGOs that collect funds for a variety of projects and areas, and provide financial and technical support to smaller regional NGOs. Examples include the Ford Foundation, International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), New Israel Fund, Christian Aid, and the Advocacy Project.

The Power of "Self-Appointed Moral Guardians"

The fundamental objectives of *NGO Monitor* are to analyze the core agendas, biases, and long-term goals of these three types of NGOs with regard to Israel and to chart the influence of, to cite Anne Bayefsky, these "self-appointed moral guardians."

On the one hand, the ease with which an NGO can depart from its principles, combined with the influence it enjoys, leads to very costly political and ideological attacks against Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflict is not only played out on the battlefield, but is also accompanied by a ferocious media war. In this context, NGOs often use loaded and unsubstantiated terms, such as "war crimes," "genocide," or "ethnic cleansing," while misquoting international law and removing the context of the dangers faced by Israel.

The most insidious practice is the dissemination of gross inaccuracies in their reporting. A prime example is Miftah, a Jerusalem-based "human rights organization" that brands itself "The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue & Democracy." Miftah's publications use terms such as "international reconciliation and cooperation," while its reports and press releases continually misrepresent Israel's democratic institutions, and misquote and fundamentally distort the policies of the Israeli government, portraying Israelis as racist colonialists. For example, the separation fence being constructed to provide security is branded the "Apartheid Fence." (See detailed analysis, "The Anti-Israel Agenda of Miftah."⁶) There is no call on the Miftah website for dialogue or reconciliation with Israel.

Significant members of the humanitarian NGO community have consistently violated their carefully crafted and politically neutral mission statements by compromising universal human rights values. Attacks on Israel on many different policies are standard themes in reports and press releases. The perceived moral authority of these NGOs has allowed them to ignore or distort the humanitarian, political, and strategic complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁷ For the most part, the Palestinians are portrayed by them as "victims of Israeli aggression."

It is not coincidental that both the international media and humanitarian NGOs devote disproportionate time to Israel and the territories. The press, academic institutions, UN diplomats, and policy-makers in individual governments rely heavily on NGO assessments and reports (and vice versa, so that the NGOs often quote diplomats, journalists, and academics). This closed circle does not always tell the full story - and the journalists, diplomats, and academics readily make use of the accessible and simplistic packaged information and political analyses that the NGOs efficiently supply and distribute. The NGOs recognize that cooperation with the press and the diplomatic community is vital for fund-raising, without which no NGO can function, and this results in a highly incestuous relationship, immune from external scrutiny.

In reality, Israel has been confronted with a brutal and violent wave of terror attacks, and under any reasonable definition of human rights and humanitarian law, the right of self-defense is basic and inalienable. Tragically, Palestinian terrorists seek safe havens in densely populated civilian areas, using their neighbors and families as human shields. These same areas are also used to build and operate bomb factories or workshops. Yet these basic facts are very rarely reflected in the reports and analyses produced by the NGOs. This has led to a situation where anti-Israel political lobbying and ideology have come to be accepted as the norm for NGO reports and analyses on the Middle East.

"Diplomatic Terrorism?"

Over and above their standing in the press and at international conferences, three prominent landmarks reflect the modus operandi of NGOs in the international arena. 1) The 2001 Durban World Conference against Racism (WCAR). 2) Reports produced by the NGOs concerning Israeli military action in Jenin in April/May 2002. 3) The events surrounding the annual meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva. These three landmarks provide clear evidence of the serious threat these self-styled "guarantors" of universal human rights have already posed to the free flow of reliable information in the media, academia, and the diplomatic community.

Durban

A UN resolution began the process leading to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held at Durban in September 2001. "Interested non-governmental organizations to be represented by observers, in accordance with UN Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31" were also invited to attend as observers. Large numbers of NGOs organized a parallel NGO Forum (sometimes confused with the conference) that overshadowed the formal proceedings thanks to the media attention generated by the NGOs. The NGO Forum produced what is known as "The NGO Declaration," which, while not an official conference document, was signed by groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

A regional conference in Tehran, intended to produce a composite Declaration against Racism and a Plan of Action, preceded the conference. Israel, along with Jewish NGOs, were excluded and, in their absence, Israel was accused of committing "holocausts" and being anti-Semitic.⁸ There was no public condemnation of the exclusion of Israel or the Jewish groups. Meanwhile, the NGO declaration at the Durban conference,⁹ written in highly politicized language, reflected a concerted effort to undermine Israel. Article 164 states "targeted victims of Israel's brand of apartheid and ethnic cleansing methods have been in particular children, women and refugees." Article 425 announces "a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state...the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training) between all states and Israel." Furthermore, Article 426 talks of "condemnation of those states who are supporting, aiding and abetting the Israeli apartheid state and its perpetration of racist crimes against humanity including ethnic cleansing, acts of genocide."

The constant comparisons with South Africa and apartheid are fundamentally flawed. Israel grants full legal and civic equality to its Arab minority. The status of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is subject to a final settlement and the issue of a Palestinian state is a matter of intense diplomatic energy and sensitive negotiation. Moreover, the Israeli army has a clear policy of avoiding civilian casualties. A fact of the war on terror is the concentration of suicide bomb-making factories in densely-populated areas. Moreover, the Palestinians have also shown a willingness to put small children directly in the line of fire. These reasons help explain the tragic number of Palestinian children and women killed. In cases where Israeli soldiers have shown excesses, they have stood trial and were removed from their positions. The NGO Forum omitted to mention any of these facts, and this pattern is seen in the NGO community repeatedly.

Jenin

NGOs were prominent in spreading false rumors of a "massacre" in the immediate aftermath of Israel's operation Defensive Shield in April 2002 against Palestinian terrorist networks within the Jenin refugee camp. A member of the Amnesty International team, Professor Derrick Pounder, a forensic expert, was quoted by the BBC immediately after the operation, saying the signs point to a massacre.¹⁰ Even though Amnesty International later admitted that there was no massacre, its instinctive and premature hints, taken up by the international media, contributed to the quick spread of the lie of the massacre that is still being exploited by anti-Israel organizations.¹¹

UN Commission on Human Rights

During its annual five-week session in Geneva, the UNCHR regularly adopts 5 to 8 anti-Israel resolutions, and more than 30 percent of its meeting time is devoted to one-sided discussions

of Israeli policy. Largely as a result of campaigning by NGOs that enjoy consultative privileges at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), such as the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR),¹² the commission ignores or gives inadequate attention to the world's most significant human rights abuses, largely for political reasons (this year the UNCHR has a Libyan chair while Israel is barred from membership). PCHR alone submitted six written interventions condemning Israel while rejecting counter-resolutions condemning Palestinian atrocities and use of terror attacks.¹³ As an organization, PCHR essentially serves the interests of the Palestinian Authority. While its mission statement promises criticism of all factors affecting Palestinians' human rights, its long reports make scant mention of the high levels of corruption in the Palestinian Authority including the embezzlement of many hundreds of millions of dollars of donor money. Yet, PCHR is funded by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)¹⁴ and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN),¹⁵ that itself receives 80 percent of its funding directly from the European Union. This grants it the authority of a human rights organization, despite its politicized work.

The UN has rules for granting ECOSOC accreditation to NGOs, but actual accreditation rests more on politics than commitment to human rights. China blocked the application of the NGO Human Rights in China, and the Arab and Islamic bloc sought to prevent the Jewish humanitarian NGO Hadassah from receiving accreditation.

Analysis of NGO Funding and Facilitator Organizations

Much of the moral authority of NGOs, as well as their political strength, comes from support from funding and facilitator organizations. The huge budgets that NGOs have acquired turn them into political superpowers. Although the funding groups have a responsibility to ensure that their funds and support are not being directed in covert ways to support terrorism or political campaigns, such as the one being conducted by the Arab world against Israel, this requirement is largely ignored. While funding organizations have taken great care to establish financial-transparency mechanisms to make sure money is not misappropriated, the substantive work that the NGOs engage in has been subject to far less scrutiny. As a result, funding institutions and individuals have granted significant political power to organizations that hide behind a veneer of "moral guardianship."

One can categorize three types of funding bodies active in the areas of human rights and humanitarian issues. The first consists of governmental bodies and UN organizations, such as the European Union, UNICEF,¹⁶ USAID, CIDA (Canada), and other ministries for overseas assistance. The second type, identified above, is made up of other NGOs that style themselves as "facilitator organizations," providing invaluable logistical, technical, financial, and professional support, such as the ICJ. The third type includes foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the German Fund for Palestinian NGOs.

Many well-meaning institutions may have unknowingly contributed political ammunition in the public relations war against Israel by continuing to finance NGOs that use a human rights facade to conduct a campaign to delegitimize Israel. There are even Jewish organizations, such as the New Israel Fund, that have been deceived into assisting allegedly "humanitarian and reconciliation organizations," such as the Arab Association of Human Rights,¹⁷ whose real activities focus on the propaganda war against Israel and are far removed from universal human rights issues.

Demand Accountability from NGOs

This problem can be expected to grow unless the accountability demanded from NGOs is increased significantly, including closer scrutiny by the press and by funding organizations. These NGOs' supposedly non-political nature and adherence to "universal human rights

principles" have bequeathed them a "halo effect" against criticism and scrutiny. It is for this reason that their success in setting the global agenda has been so powerful.

Unchecked authority has allowed several groups to blur the distinction between advancing universal human rights and promoting narrow ideological and political causes. The NGOs analyzed here contribute to the simplistic equation that Palestinian suffering begins and ends with Israel's military actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They thus ignore the moral dilemmas, political complexities, and the nature of armed conflict and terrorism.

The combination of perceived impartiality, their grassroots nature, and noble aims have granted NGOs immense moral authority. As a result, the need for independent external examination of humanitarian NGOs has become apparent, especially given their inherent absence of democratic accountability and the lack of capacity in funding organizations to monitor and evaluate the activities they support. Initiatives such as *NGO Monitor* can provide the foundation necessary in order to strengthen transparency, accountability, and moral balance.

* * *

Notes

* This *Jerusalem Viewpoints* was prepared in the framework of the *NGO Monitor* Project, a joint venture of the Institute for Contemporary Affairs, founded jointly with the Wechsler Family Foundation, and B'nai B'rith International.

1. <http://www.jcpa.org/ica/index.htm#ngo>
2. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-2-miftah.html>
3. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-6-ICJ.html>
4. See <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-1-PHR.html> and <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-5-IMA-PHR.html>
5. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-6-ICJ.html>
6. <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-2-miftah.html>
7. See *NGO Monitor* <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-9-joint.html> analyzing the joint declaration by six major NGOs on the treatment of humanitarian aid workers.
8. Prof. Irwin Cotler, <http://www.jafi.org.il/agenda/2001/english/wk3-22/6.asp>. The conference against racism that became a racist conference against Jews.
9. <http://www.racism.org.za/index.html>
10. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1937048.stm, April 18, 2002, BBC Internet site.
11. See <http://free.freespeech.org/americanstateterrorism/palestine/jeninmassacre/EyewitnessJeninMassacre.html> that has links with the human rights NGO, Partnership for Civil Justice.
12. See *NGO Monitor* analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-6-ICJ.html>
13. See analysis of the organization at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-6-ICJ.html>
14. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-6-ICJ.html>

15. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-9-EMHRN.html>

16. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-7-PYA.html>

17. See analysis at <http://www.jcpa.org/ngo/ngo-1-HRA.html>

* * *

Gerald M. Steinberg is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, editor of NGO Monitor, and director of the Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation at Bar-Ilan University. This Jerusalem Viewpoints was prepared in the framework of the NGO Monitor Project, a joint venture of the Institute for Contemporary Affairs, founded jointly with the Wechsler Family Foundation, and B'nai B'rith International.