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From Gulag Liberators to Saudi Retainers

Human Rights Watch has betrayed its original mission.

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By Gerald M. Steinberg

Human Rights Watch was founded in 1978 in New York (as Helsinki Watch) with the mission of using public demonstrations and other forms of “naming and shaming” to free prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Many Gulag denizens, including Anatoly (now Natan) Sharansky, later recognized HRW’s role in gaining their freedom. Shortly thereafter HRW began advocating on behalf of political prisoners and torture victims in other totalitarian regimes, including in Chile, Argentina, and Greece.

But since then, HRW has lost its moral compass, and the organization is using its substantial budget (\$42 million in 2008) to repeatedly attack Israel by exploiting the language of human rights and international law. Tendentious reports and press conferences, using distorted legal rhetoric in place of credible evidence, target Israeli responses to terror attacks from Arafat, Hamas, and Hezbollah.

My organization, [NGO Monitor](#), annually releases a [systematic analysis of HRW’s agenda](#), and our reports clearly show that HRW singles out Israel in the Middle East. For years, this arbiter of international morality and human rights had very little to say about Libya, Saudi Arabia, or Palestinian terrorists. HRW’s recent cautious criticism of Saudi policy came only after a reorganization of the organization’s board — and then only after receiving unwelcome attention for its see-no-evil treatment of the Kingdom. In May 2009, *Arab News* reported that HRW officials went to Saudi Arabia to raise funds, advertising the numerous condemnations and pseudo-research reports against Israel in the Gaza war. Some of the founders, including Robert Bernstein, are in strong disagreement with the organization they built.

How and why did this human-rights superpower turn into a major Israel-basher, along with London-based Amnesty International (which began with a similar mission at about the same time)? And why do such groups appear to be credible and moral — if not as vocal — only when it comes to human-rights violations outside the Middle East, such as those in China?

Part of the answer is the addiction to the influence, power, and money that lies just below the moral façade. The collapse of the Soviet empire forced groups like HRW to create new objectives if they wanted to keep the donations coming (and they succeeded; HRW executive director Ken Roth has a \$350,000 salary package). The struggle against South African apartheid was but a short-lived substitute.

HRW and Amnesty transformed from human rights groups to “research organizations,” claiming expertise in the complexities of international law and armed conflict. They added a few self-proclaimed experts in these fields, and began producing impressive-looking battlefield reports based on unverifiable “eyewitness testimony” and emotive graphics. The Arab-Israeli conflict was a prime target — and HRW’s agenda fit directly into the Palestinian political strategy of isolating and demonizing Israel through the vocabulary of human rights.

The campaign to label Zionism as racism, endorsed by the U.N. in the mid-1970s, returned in the late 1990s as the Oslo process exploded, giving the NGO network a powerful platform. For the Arabs and Iran, anti-Israel NGO activists who labeled Zionism as “neo-colonialism” and the “new apartheid” became convenient allies. Double standards promoting anti-Israel positions provided direct access to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (now Council), led by moral stalwarts such as Iran, Libya, Pakistan, and Cuba. In every round of violence, including the 2002 Jenin “massacre” myth, the 2006 Lebanon war, and numerous others, HRW officials called for international investigations of Israeli “war crimes” and “violations of international law.” Meanwhile, HRW’s annual income grew as fast as Bernie Madoff’s balance sheets.

Most recently, during the Gaza war, the U.N. Human Rights Council appointed HRW board member Richard Goldstone to head the inquisition. This highlighted the symbiotic relationship between powerful political NGOs and the anti-Western and anti-Israel regimes that control the relevant U.N. frameworks. And as a U.S.-based NGO with many Jewish donors, HRW was a welcome ally in Israel-bashing. (Goldstone resigned from HRW, and his name was quickly removed from the website, after NGO Monitor highlighted the conflict of interest.)

Because the U.N. amplifies the role of NGOs, these organizations receive enhanced media coverage and exercise “soft power.” Journalists usually accept and repeat the obsessions and automatic condemnations published by human-rights superpowers, without bothering to check the “evidence” presented. And this media attention, in turn, helps the top NGOs get more money from foundations promoting radical agendas (like George Soros’s Open Society Institute, and the Ford Foundation), naïve donors, and now, perhaps, the Saudis. (HRW has also established a relationship with Qaddafi in Libya, praising the “spirit of reform.”)

But power and money are only part of the explanation for the radical political agenda. HRW, like other once-liberal organizations, has been captured by activists with anti-democratic ideologies, strong egos, and major chips on their shoulders. Following Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Joseph Massad, and others, the NGO world is filled with anti-nationalists and anarchists who define military power as inherently evil and victimhood as moral, regardless of context or behavior. Thus, an Israel that can defend itself is on the bad side of the moral ledger, along with the United States; Palestinians — the world’s most successful victims — are patronizingly excused from all responsibility to act morally.

Another factor in HRW’s disproportionate emphasis on Israel is the number of anti-Israel Jews among its top officials, beginning with Executive Director Kenneth Roth. Roth has often held press conferences in Jerusalem’s American Colony Hotel, home base for the pro-Palestinian media, in order to attack Israel. As suicide bombers were slaughtering hundreds of Israelis, Roth’s solution was to call for sending police into Gaza’s slums to arrest the perpetrators and bring them to trial. In 2006, Roth condemned Israel’s response to Hezbollah rocket attacks and kidnapping of soldiers as an “eye for an eye” approach resulting from “the morality of some more primitive moment.”

Reed Brody, another Jew, led the HRW delegation to the infamous 2001 NGO Forum of the U.N. Durban

Conference, which labeled Israel “an apartheid state.” Brody was also active in the case brought against Prime Minister Sharon in a Belgium court while hundreds of Israelis were being killed in Arafat’s terror campaign.

For many years, HRW’s founders and board members paid little attention to these dimensions, relying instead on Roth’s cool assurances, stage presence from the NPR studios to the salons of Davos, and unprecedented fundraising success. Some minor obsessions over Israel could be overlooked when measured against HRW’s status as an NGO superpower and moral arbiter.

But now the façade is thinning, and HRW has become a subsidiary of Saudi Arabia, one of the top human-rights abusers in the world. According to *Arab News*, Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of HRW’s Middle East and North Africa (MENA) division, and Hassan Elmasry, a member of both the HRW Board of Directors and the MENA advisory committee, attended a “welcoming dinner” and encouraged “prominent members of Saudi society” to make up the “shortage of funds” due to the global financial crisis “and the work on Israel and Gaza, which depleted HRW’s budget for the region.” Whitson has reportedly sought to reel in the Saudis by touting HRW’s (invented) “evidence of Israel using white phosphorus and launching systematic destructive attacks on civilian targets,” and by invoking the “pro-Israel pressure groups” that “strongly resisted the report and tried to discredit it.”

In response to extensive ridicule, Whitson and Roth lashed out at their critics (they accused NGO Monitor of lying), but they have not offered any details to contradict this version of events or the systematic analysis exposing HRW’s targeting of Israel. They have also tried to sell a distinction between soliciting the Saudi regime for money, and wooing wealthy private individuals and Wahhabi religious officials in Saudi Arabia who, we are assured, are genuinely concerned about human rights. Right.

In terms of its budget and ideological agenda, HRW’s embrace of the Saudis makes sense, because it can compensate for the group’s loss of support from liberal Jews. In addition, this new partnership is based on a shared agenda of attacking Israel and the legitimacy of a Jewish nation-state — while more than 50 officially Islamic countries are universally accepted.

But as a result, HRW’s halo has been tarnished, perhaps beyond repair. The long history of cynical manipulation of moral rhetoric notwithstanding, the absurdity of a Saudi-supported human-rights organization that targets Israel may be a step too far. For the first time, Roth and Whitson find themselves being held accountable and answering charges, rather than playing prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner. If this also becomes true of Amnesty International and the other human-rights superpowers that have gone bad, this will mark a major step in restoring the moral foundation of universal human rights.

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