

NEW VILNA REVIEW

Israel, Legitimacy and Human Rights: An Interview with Professor Gerald Steinberg of NGO Monitor

March 16, 2011

While many organizations in the Jewish world have expressed concern about on-going efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel, one group which has been at the forefront of this effort to fight the demonization of the Jewish State is NGO Monitor. In this interview, Professor Gerald Steinberg, President of NGO Monitor and a faculty member of the Political Studies Department at Bar Ilan University, discusses how his organization is responding to this threat and offers his opinion on some of the ways in which certain international human rights NGOs are potentially giving a veneer of respectability to efforts aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Israel.

NVR: For our readers who may not be familiar with the work of NGO Monitor, can you tell us a little about how and why the organization was founded?

The organization was founded in 2002 – a few months after the UN “World Conference Against Racism” in Durban, South Africa. The 1500 organizations that participated in the NGO Forum at this Conference adopted a Final Declaration that revived the notorious 1975 UN resolution declaring Zionism to be a form of racism. In the Durban declaration, the NGOs painted Israel as an “apartheid” state, guilty of “war crimes”, genocide, and ethnic cleansing, and similar accusations. On this basis, the document called for the international community to impose a complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state through boycotts, exploitation of legal frameworks, and other measures.

As a student of international politics and power, I discovered that these NGOs were using the façade of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to systematically promote a radical ideological agenda, and becoming very influential. As an academic, I looked for analysis of NGO power, and after finding almost no substantive work in this area, initiated my own research. Large-scale funding was clearly central to this development, and I found that significant support came from Western governments, primarily in Europe (and, at that time, also Canada), as well as major foundations. However, it was apparent that most donors had no independent information on what was being done with this funding – the NGO network was largely immune from the requirements of accountability and transparency.

In parallel, the leading NGOs involved in the Durban Conference, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, were moving forward with a broad campaign to delegitimize and demonize Israel. These and other NGOs were clearly manipulating human rights principles, and the media, as well as many diplomats and academics, generally blindly accepted and quoted the unsubstantiated NGO allegations and publications. It was this initial realization and research that expanded into the founding of NGO Monitor.

NVR: What is the mission of NGO Monitor? What are the goals of the organization over the next 5-10 years?

NGO Monitor is a research organization – we provide detailed information and analysis regarding the reports and activities of NGOs claiming to advance human rights, particularly in the Middle East. This process involves finding

and disclosing funding sources for politicized NGOs, and noting when their rhetoric and reports are inconsistent with their claimed principles or missions. As the only independent source of NGO evaluations and accountability, our research is often cited by media, government officials in Israel and abroad, diplomats, and other organizational heads. While political NGOs and their supporters often react angrily to our reports, the research is always shown to be entirely accurate and complete.

NGO Monitor is still the only such research framework in the world, and the issues are extremely wide and growing. Over the next 5 to 10 years we hope to expand our capabilities and impact, in order to end the exploitation of human rights as a weapon against Israel; establish best practices to offset NGO reporting bias and double standards; and promote the restoration of the universal moral foundations. The principled guidelines that we wrote were influential in changing the funding practices of the Ford Foundation after the Durban fiasco, and more recently, the leaders of Jewish Federations and the New Israel Fund have also started to adopt NGO Monitor's recommendations, particularly regarding ending support for groups involved in BDS and demonization. This cooperation across the Jewish political spectrum (with the exception of the extremes) in funding guidelines for NGOs is a major objective.

NVR: Why is the work that NGO Monitor is doing important in both Israel and the Diaspora?

Our work is founded on the values embodied in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in the shadow of the Holocaust. Tragically, hundreds of these NGOs, in a coordinated campaign launched at the Durban conference, have exploited these values in close coordination with the UN Human Rights Council, dominated by the worst perpetrators of abuses, including Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iran and their allies. As our research reports demonstrate, the NGOs disproportionately focus on anti-Israel allegations, while giving far less attention to the extensive human rights violations in the region. Human Rights Watch, for example, has issued only six substantive reports on Libya since 1991, and more than 45 on Israel.

Because Human Rights Watch and other NGOs are perceived as moral and reliable "watchdogs", many journalists and diplomats accept their reports as factual, and adopt the NGO agendas. As a result, NGO biases against Israel feed the delegitimization campaigns and are highlighted in media reports around the world. This is a form of political warfare, as declared at the Durban conference, and has severely impacted Israel's image internationally.

The infamous Goldstone report on the Gaza war (December 2008 – January 2009) was based on an entirely biased UNHRC mandate, and is largely composed of NGO claims that lacked credibility and were not verified independently. This publication calls for legal action against Israel and Israelis, and is often seen as a modern "blood libel". Similarly, when "war crimes" charges are brought against Israeli officials, this extends the assault, and can limit future Israeli self-defense capability through efforts to restrict the export of technology from some countries.

Diaspora Jews who identify with and care about Israel's welfare are very aware of this demonization. They witness the growth of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaigns, often involving trade union activists and radical church groups that have been hijacked by anti-Israel activists. This battle is about the legitimacy and survival of Israel, and is an extension of the 1947 rejectionism – war by other means. This is not a narrow "right wing" concern. The Zionist Left, including supporters of the New Israeli Fund, also want to ensure that their NGO contributions are not abused for BDS and demonization.

At the same time, concern about NGO bias goes beyond Israel. Robert Bernstein, the founder of Human Rights Watch, has criticized his own organization for violating its core principles. HRW, he notes, was founded to "pry open closed societies" and help citizens in countries where forums to fight for their own rights do not exist. Instead, HRW has become an organization that focuses on open, democratic societies, such as Israel, that

already have numerous human rights groups in place. When HRW sends delegations to Saudi Arabia – not to promote the rights of women and minorities, but to raise funds to attack Israel – it is clear that this powerful NGO has lost its moral compass. And when they promoted the myth of the Ghaddafi regime as reformers, even marketing a false “Tripoli Spring”, the evidence of moral failure was reinforced.

NVR: This past fall you spoke at the national CAMERA (Committee for Accurate Middle East Reporting in America) Conference at Boston University – one of the main themes of this gathering was that there is a concerted and growing effort by various groups and individuals to push for the deligitimization of the State of Israel – how widespread is this problem? What are its roots, and what, if anything, can people do to speak out against this movement?

This is a highly coordinated, and well funded political assault led by NGOs, beginning with the 2001 UN “World Conference Against Racism” in Durban, South Africa, and expanding to include Israel Apartheid week and similar activities. We estimate that between 50 and 100 million euro annually is given to the NGOs in the region that are part of this campaign, in various forms. The money comes from foreign governments – primarily the EU and European – as well as from foundations, such as the New Israel Fund and the Ford Foundation, often via secretive, non-transparent frameworks. There is very little oversight, parliamentary hearings, or evaluation on this massive funding for political advocacy NGOs.

By researching and exposing the funding sources (“naming and shaming”) including governments, we are gradually reducing the resources used in this vicious war. And we have had some major impacts – the Canadian and British governments have reassigned millions of dollars of NGO funding, and the Dutch government launched an investigation after NGO Monitor uncovered the information showing that a government-funded church development organization was funneling government funding to the NGO Electronic Intifada. The research is difficult, and often our impact takes place behind-the-scenes, but it is effective.

NVR: NGO Monitor is frequently critical of organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International when it comes to statements these groups issue about events in the Middle East - is this a critique of these organizations as a whole, or only about their reporting on Middle East issues? Are there time when NGO Monitor and Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch have been in agreement on certain issues or topics?

Given limited resources, we are focusing primarily on NGO agendas and activities in the Middle East, within a comparative framework. The evidence clearly demonstrates the degree to which Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch target Israel obsessively, and we see highly inconsistent applications of international law principles in different conflicts. At HRW, Ken Roth, who has been in charge for over 15 years, has shown a major personal bias against Israel, including a number of nasty op-ed articles while Israel was under attack. Under his leadership, HRW’s Middle East and North Africa division has been headed by two ideological activists, while their counterparts working in other regions do not come from such biased backgrounds, and generally have professional human rights training. So Israel is treated differently and singled out for attack by the officials who run these organizations.

But there are also wider biases in these organizations, resulting from what is often called a “post-colonial” anti-Western ideology. They tend to be hostile to the U.S., and sympathetic to groups that they define as “victims” of capitalism and oppression, often excusing or downplaying the use of mass terror. Additionally, our research has shown that despite the research façade, these are political advocacy groups. They have clear agendas in terms of creating and interpreting international law, granting undeserved importance to the UN Human Rights Council, and promoting their views of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And they use their significant power and influence to push their agendas in international frameworks and in the media.

The research and methodology failures reflected in HRW and Amnesty publications are not unique to the Middle East, although the systematic bias magnifies the problem. In general, their reports make claims, both factual and legal, that go far beyond the professional capacity of their employees. The resulting reports, as we see in the

cases of Gaza, the 2006 Lebanon war, and many other examples, should be taken with a healthy degree of skepticism, in contrast to the standard "halo effect" they receive by default.

NVR: If you could give some advice to Israeli leaders about how to best position themselves and the nation amidst a sea of regional uncertainty and change, what would you tell them?

Israeli leaders, in particular in the defense sector, have failed to understand the strength of the delegitimization campaign, and the means for effectively combating it. When an international incident is triggered, such as last year's Gaza Flotilla, Israeli officials need to get in front of the issue and implement an appropriate strategy. They need to realize that the NGO network is always ready to use those incidents as vehicles to advance the delegitimization campaigns.

NVR: Can you tell us a little about your own personal and professional background, and how you became involved with Israel Advocacy?

As a Jewish teenager in Northern California, in a community of survivors and refugees, Zionism, Israel and the demand for moral behavior in a post-Holocaust world were at the center of my identity. I moved my academic focus from astrophysics to international relations after realizing that the primary challenges to Jewish survival and morality were moving from strictly military to more political dimensions, and that most of our leaders and institutions were not particularly skilled or knowledgeable in this vital area. Like many of my contemporaries, I spent significant time in Israel in this period, moving here almost thirty years ago, and establishing my academic career in this framework. From the beginning, in my frequent trips to speak about Israeli realities, I also realized that the perceptions of the country and the conflict are very distorted, and that the complexities are generally erased. On this basis, I see myself and my activities not as "Israel advocacy" or hasbara, but rather continued education based on the exposure of myths and of the powerful interests that promote them. The NGO Monitor and human rights dimensions of my work are a direct outgrowth of this development and emphasis on confronting the central challenges to the Jewish people and Israel.

NVR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

The vicious diatribes, hate mail, and obsessive twitter attacks targeting NGO Monitor from people who call themselves liberals, progressives, enlightened, etc. is indicative of the façade of morality among many "human rights activists" and "defenders of democracy". These individuals and organizations invest huge resources in preventing a serious and informed debate on the role of these NGOs in the exploitation of human rights, and on the legitimacy of massive foreign government funding for this assault. Richard Falk, a professor of human rights at Princeton and the UNHRC's rapporteur on Palestine, condemned CNN for giving "TV exposure to Gerald Steinberg, the notorious founder and principal toxic voice of NGO Monitor...". And some officials of the New Israel Fund have posted offensive comments and obscene gestures, while rejecting civil discussion and the search for common ground on core issues. But among other NIF supporters and associated NGOs, there is a growing realization that the red lines of democracy and civility have been violated. NIF's recent adoption of language in NGO Monitor's moral guidelines is a positive sign of the return to civility, and suggests the potential for cooperation instead of conflict.