

Human-Rights Schizophrenia

Human Rights Watch shows a disturbing disparity in its treatment of Israel and China.

By Gerald M. Steinberg

Kenneth Roth, the longtime head of **Human Rights Watch**, published a powerful piece on China coinciding with President Hu's recent visit to the U.S. It was an eloquent defense of the need to press China to implement basic human rights, and it was evidence that HRW, when it is not influenced by personal political agendas, can be an effective advocate of human rights. Unfortunately, when it comes to Israel, this has not been the case.

HRW has been criticized in the past for Israel-bashing. This has been the source of intense disagreements between Roth and me. I went so far as to call for his replacement, accusing him of exploiting human-rights norms in promoting a radical anti-democracy agenda. In his article on China, however, I found myself agreeing with his every word. And the same has been true with respect to HRW's recent emphasis on Sudan, Syria, and Iran. So either it is I, along with other critics of HRW, who blindly oppose legitimate criticism of Israel (it might be dismissed as part of a neoconservative ideology), or it is Roth and HRW who apply different and unique criteria that single out Israel unfairly. The evidence shows that it is the latter.

As a detailed **NGO Monitor study** has shown, between 2001 and 2004, during the height of the terror attacks against Israel, HRW focused one-third of its entire Middle East effort on condemnations directed at Israel. This went far beyond legitimate criticism, and suggested an obsession. Far more pages, reports, press conferences, letters, films, and photography-exhibits sponsored by HRW were devoted to allegations against Israel than to the slaughter taking place in Sudan, or the Palestinian terror campaign. Roth and other HRW officials adopted the false characterization of an "all powerful and aggressive Israel" in contrast to "Palestinian victimization." In the process, human-rights norms were reduced to instruments used to promote personal ideologies and entirely subjective perceptions of power.

The most infuriating instance of HRW's bias came in 2004, when Roth went to the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem to promote "Razing Rafah," a one sided denunciation of Israeli policy. Its contents were based primarily on unsubstantiated reports of Palestinians, selected journalists, and so-called experts on tunneling. (The IDF actions were in response to the smuggling of weapons and explosives through tunnels under the border with Egypt.)

Apart from the tendentious reporting, the extensive use of loaded terms, such as "war crimes," "violation of international law," etc.—used far more often in HRW reports on Israel than in reports on all other Middle East states—fed anti-Israel divestment and boycott campaigns. HRW officials participated actively and directly in demonstrations to promote the Caterpillar boycott, and in pressing the U.N. resolutions referring Israel's security barrier to the misnamed International Court of Justice.

As a result, it is questionable whether HRW's reports on and activities concerning China and elsewhere can be considered credible. The answer, which is far from satisfactory, lies in the recognition that Israel is increasingly treated emotionally, making for an exceptional case in almost every sphere. In contrast, there is no such political or ideological framework that taints HRW's activities with respect to China. After the Cold War, Robert Bernstein, who founded Helsinki Watch (HRW's original name) in the 1970s, has focused much of his energies and attention on China. For him, and for many other HRW's founders, opposition to China's oppression of dissidents is a direct continuation of Helsinki Watch's original mission. Moreover, HRW's activities concerning China are overseen by serious professionals, such as Harvard Professor Merle Goldman. As a result, HRW's articles and reports on China are focused, credible, and do not reflect personal agendas and emotions.

This is not the case for HRW's activities with respect to Israel. In addition to Roth, Reed Brody, who served as legal counsel, has shown a particular antipathy to the Jewish state. Brody headed HRW's delegation to the NGO forum of the 2001 Durban Conference, which adopted the strategy of labeling Israel as an "apartheid state." He was also among the leaders of the effort to bring Prime Minister Sharon to trial in Belgium. (Brody's candidacy for a position on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights was recently withdrawn.) HRW's Middle East group also includes Joe Stork, who had been a senior figure in the radical **MERIP**, Sarah Leah Whitson, whose anti-Israel agenda was reflected in her work with **MADRE**, and Lucy Mair, who had previously written for the **Electronic Intifada**. These are not professional appointments, and do not create confidence in the credibility of HRW's reports on Israel.

This bifurcation, or even schizophrenia, in HRW's approach to evaluating human rights is disturbing. The absence of credibility in one area inevitably spills over into the others, as HRW's board members increasingly recognize. In the past year, they have imposed a control mechanism on activities dealing with the Middle East, leading to a noticeable (if belated) emphasis on Darfur, as well as adding Syria, Libya, and Saudi Arabia to HRW's agenda. The hostility toward and distortions concerning Israel continue—as seen in recent public letters with the standard condemnations—but the volume has been reduced significantly.

Nevertheless, if HRW wants to be seen as credible, and to have the moral impact on China, Darfur, and elsewhere that its founders and main supporters seek, the emotional anti-Israel agenda that goes far beyond legitimate criticism must go. Beyond rehabilitating this important organization, these measures will help to restore the tattered reputation of human-rights worldwide.

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