

From Defenders to Defamers

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Monday, December 10 is International Human Rights Day - commemorating the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the members of the United Nations in 1948. Following the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust, the signatories pledged to protect the "inherent dignity" and the "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family."

But like other promises made during this period, this one was also soon violated.

In much of the world, human rights, including the basic right to life, are given short shrift. The watchdogs, both in the United Nations itself, and in the accompanying network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that claim to promote morality and human rights, have become a major part of the problem. The words that expressed revulsion at the crimes committed against the Jewish people - "war crimes," "collective punishment," "indiscriminate mass killing," "violations of international law," and so on - have become weapons in the political war accompanying the terror campaigns against Israel.

The "reformed" United Nations Human Rights Council, which is charged with implementing the 1948 Declaration, is run by many of the worst violators of human rights. Its reports are written by "experts" who are obsessed with attacking Israel. In 2001, the UN held a conference in Durban attended by thousands of delegates, ostensibly to combat racism and xenophobia. Following a preparatory conference in Iran, led by Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, this exercise became a vehicle for hatred and anti-Semitism.

Many of the NGO "superpowers" are guilty of aiding and abetting this disgraceful process. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Paris-based FIDH (International Federation of Human Rights), and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva, routinely exploit these norms to pursue their own narrow ideological agendas. They participated in the NGO Forum of the 2001 Durban Conference, which was even worse than the diplomatic session. Like the UN, the NGO reports focus obsessively on Israel, and erase the context of terrorism in order to

make false and frequent accusations. In 2002, an Amnesty official was quoted on the BBC confirming the false reports of a massacre in Jenin. In 2006, HRW published hundreds of pages attacking Israeli responses to Hizbullah attacks, and glossing over Hizbullah's aggression and use of human shields.

Similarly, Israel-based NGOs such as B'tselem, Bimkom, and Gisha, which claim to support universal human rights, use double standards to falsely and systematically portray Israeli responses to terror as violations of these moral norms.

The halo effect enjoyed by the UN and NGO human rights network two or three decades ago has also been eroded by reports which make headlines, but are later shown to be fabricated or unverifiable. Essentially lacking their own research capabilities, HRW and Amnesty rely on "local eyewitnesses" for evidence. These "eyewitnesses" know that their reports, regardless of the lack of evidence or context, will be used to promote boycotts, demonization and other political campaigns. In this way, human rights have become a vehicle to promote incitement, hatred and terror - the antithesis of the objectives proclaimed in 1948.

In order to change this dismal state of affairs, and restore the moral foundation and universality of human rights, the structure of the international diplomatic and NGO mechanisms must be overhauled. Kenneth Roth, who has headed Human Rights Watch since 1993, and Irene Khan, who has controlled Amnesty International since 2001, have been in power for far too long. The donors and members of these organizations must also act responsibly to ensure that their support is not abused. Donors to NGOs are like directors of corporations who are accountable for transgressions committed by the officers of their firms.

The Ford Foundation, which was threatened with investigation by the US Congress after funding the most virulent participants in the 2001 Durban NGO Forum, adopted guidelines to prevent a repetition. Some donors to HRW and the New Israel Fund (which funds B'tselem, Machsom Watch, Gisha, Bimkom, Adalah, and others) have cut or conditioned their donations on an end to the double standards, and some members and officials of Amnesty have resigned in protest. These are all steps in the right direction.

In the Spring of 2009, the UN Human Rights Council has scheduled a follow up to the infamous Durban conference. This provides a rare opportunity for the governments

that actually care about human rights, as well as the NGO community, to reverse course, and demonstrate that the lessons have been learned. If they succeed, this will mark an important step in the restoration of the values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But if they fail, the Declaration, and the foundation of an international moral code based on a single universal standard, may never recover.

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