

HRW's Damage Can't be Undone

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During last year's conflict with Hizbullah, Human Rights Watch led the condemnation and political campaign against Israel, repeatedly using terms such as "indiscriminate attacks" and "war crimes," based on allegations that were unverifiable or false, and largely absolving Hizbullah.

This NGO superpower issued more statements and reports than any other group. One year later, HRW and Ken Roth, who heads this powerful organization, are still trying to answer critics, and to this end, they have published a 128-page report claiming to discover the details of the conflict. While it is heavily padded and repetitious - few people are apparently expected to read more than the summary and recommendations - the report tacitly acknowledges that the widely publicized claims made by HRW officials, including Roth, were wrong.

How did HRW make such fundamental errors during the war? Why were they so quick to condemn Israel without knowing the facts? Why did officials ignore Hizbullah attacks and obvious violations of the moral principles HRW claims to promote? And which officials are responsible for HRW's role in the demonization of Israel?

HRW'S REPORT, entitled "Civilians under Assault: Hezbollah's Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War" contrasts sharply with the political bombardment during the war. The major weapon at that time was a 49-page glossy booklet entitled "Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks against Civilians in Lebanon," including an apparently staged cover photo with numbered coffins, and accompanied by a public relations campaign.

This and other publications simply repeated the claims of "eyewitnesses" probably linked to Hizbullah, who declared that no rockets were being fired from any area in Lebanon that was hit by Israeli counterattacks.

Similarly, in columns and interviews, HRW "Emergencies Director" Peter Bouckaert condemned Israel's explanation of its attacks following Hizbullah missile attacks as "a convenient excuse."

Now Bouckaert's words are forgotten as the "excuse" has been verified by HRW's "expert researchers."

And while the role of Syria and Iran in supplying Hizbullah with thousands of rockets escaped HRW officials last year, they have now discovered this Middle Eastern fact of life. Better late than never, but the damage from HRW's assault cannot be undone.

For anyone with rudimentary knowledge of the events, this publication is banal, including the belated acknowledgement that Hizbullah "repeatedly bombarded cities, towns and villages without any apparent effort to distinguish between civilians and military objectives." As a result, "Hizbullah... violated fundamental provisions against deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against civilians."

Seventy pages of this report (most of the "meat") describe Hizbullah's arsenal, and the impact of the attacks against Haifa, Acre, Safed and numerous other parts of Northern Israel. The report also includes the bellicose statements made by Hassan Nasrallah and other officials, mentioning 89 "war time communiqués" declaring the goal of killing Israelis.

Too bad that during the war, HRW researchers were apparently too busy with their anti-Israel campaigning to notice them.

AS IN most HRW publications, the report includes a section with pseudo-legal jargon making the obvious case that Hizbullah (while never referred to as a terrorist group) is bound by the rules of war.

This is a welcome change from HRW's previous and morally absurd position, which exempted Palestinian terrorists and "non-state actors." However, the claim that the laws of war do not include discussions of aggression is nonsensical and insulting to anyone with common sense or knowledge of the UN Charter. But in this way, Roth and HRW were able avoid assigning moral responsibility to Hizbullah for this war, or recognizing Israel's "humanitarian right" to self-defense.

While HRW, and Ken Roth in particular, are used to making the accusations, issuing reports, determining international law according to their political preferences and calling for "independent investigations," the evidence from these reports highlights the need to investigate HRW. With an annual budget of over \$40 million, a disproportionate part of which is spent targeting Israel, the damage from its highly biased approach and lack of credibility is too serious to ignore.

HRW HAS played a major role in the exploitation of human rights norms in the pursuit of partisan and personal agendas, including the demonization of Israel. The anti-Israel campaign and false allegations during last year's war followed HRW's standard pattern that included participation in the NGO Forum at the 2001 Durban conference, which declared Israel to be an "apartheid state," the 2004 "Razing Rafah" publication, and accusations of "war crimes" in Jenin.

"Reports" that attempt to minimize criticism resulting from earlier anti-Israel activities are also part of the standard operating procedure - as seen in HRW's belated one-time publication on Palestinian suicide bombings. These also need to be examined by an independent commission.

When Ken Roth speaks at the Hebrew University on September 6 (under the presumptuous title: "The 2006 Israel-Hizbullah War: The Real Reason Civilians Died"), he should also be confronted with HRW's biases and lack of credibility.

The damage resulting from the political attacks on Israel, and from the continued exploitation of human rights, is too great to be ignored.

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