

One Step Forward

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Responding to the growing criticism of its biases, particularly in *The New York Sun*, Human Rights Watch released a 147-page report on July 1 which they say is "balanced." The headline of the report, "Indiscriminate Fire: Palestinian Rocket Attacks on Israel and Israeli Artillery Shelling in the Gaza Strip," is a sharp contrast to HRW's skewed report last year on the war with Hezbollah, "Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Lebanon." The inclusion of criticism of the Palestinian attacks, including terms such as "war crimes" and "violations of international law" are important steps for HRW to take since for years the organization denied such statements.

Beyond the language, this report marks a major change from HRW officials condemning Israelis, Americans, and others for responding to mass terror.

In explaining HRW's repeated allegations of Israeli war crimes between 2001 and 2002, an HRW official told a television journalist and documentarian, Martin Himel, that the NGO's reports did not discuss terrorism by "militant groups." The HRW official explained, "It is not a state force, in the case of Palestinians ... there's a difference between a state sanctioned if you like, or state controlled individuals, groups, militant groups unfortunately are not — the Palestinian authorities are not able to control them." This was the standard excuse offered by the executive director of HRW, Kenneth Roth, and other HRW officials.

The good news from HRW's July 1 report is the reduction in double standards . The leaders of Hamas, Fatah, Jihad, and others are now subject to the same moral and legal requirements as others. HRW has now expanded its criticism to include Palestinian terrorists. And Israelis who are killed by these terror attacks are finally included as victims of human rights violations — another important step for HRW.

But cynics will urge caution regarding a major change in HRW's agenda. One report and a few other minor statements hardly constitute convincing evidence. The latest HRW report on Gaza repeats the old problem of immoral equivalence. Palestinian aggression and Israeli defense are treated as two sides of the same coin. Mr. Stork and HRW also glossed over the fact that daily Palestinian rocket attacks continue while the Israel Defense Forces ceased artillery shelling after November 2006.

Regarding the issue of HRW's use of evidence and credibility, some sections of the current report reflect the central defects of previous methods used for reporting that are displayed in the 2002 Jenin report, and "Razing Rafah," a publication released in November 2004. In HRW's most recent report, they write that there was "the fatal explosion on a Gaza beach on June 9, 2006, and the fatal shelling of the Nada Apartments complex during the week of July 24, 2006." These reports are based on the mix of "eyewitness" and selective press accounts,

as well as claims of military expertise that cannot be verified while ignoring evidence to the contrary — mistakes HRW has made in its past reporting accounts. These claims would have benefited from the warning that HRW has made before regarding the lack of "sufficient information" printed in the body of the report. There are many other issues to consider in this 147-page report, including tendentious explications of international law, and it needs careful analysis. The bottom line, however, is clear and important: If this report is evidence of an initial change in HRW's agenda and policies, and to be followed by sustained reports, opeds, campaigns, and other activities that reverse the biases and double standards that stripped the context of terror, and unfairly condemned legitimate defense by Israel, America, and other countries, HRW deserves credit for trying.

The faults in this report can be corrected, and progress will be made. But if this report is followed by a barrage of HRW's old-style political attacks that exploit the rhetoric of human rights, as occurred between 2000 and 2007, the cynics will be proven correct once again. And HRW's leaders will be seen as having played a key role in extinguishing the principles of universal human rights and basic morality.

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