

Watching the Watchers, Part Two

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Human Rights Watch is a powerful nongovernmental organization, whose reports, press releases, and submissions to the United Nations carry a great deal of weight. In the 1970s, HRW made its mark by leading campaigns to free political prisoners in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

But after the Cold War, this organization, which has an annual budget of over \$50 million, seems to have lost its way. Its strident reports and condemnations of America and Israel have led to growing criticism, including questions regarding the accuracy of HRW's reports, and the use of human rights rhetoric to pursue a radical political agenda aimed at democracies.

In 2002, I discovered that there was a need to "watch the watchers" and their political agendas, beginning with, but not limited to, Arab-Israeli issues. This led to the founding of NGO Monitor, in cooperation with the Wechsler Family Foundation. NGO Monitor examines the claims and reports published by powerful groups such as HRW.

Rejecting the halo effect that has shielded self-proclaimed human rights groups from investigation, we found many examples of false and biased allegations made by HRW, and a consistent double standard in their human rights reporting. Our investigations provide numerous examples in which HRW's reports are routinely based on statements from partisan "eye witnesses" whose allegations turn out to be false or unverifiable.

NGO Monitor highlighted HRW's credibility gap during last summer's conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. As in other terror-based conflicts, Hezbollah systematically embedded its forces, including those responsible for firing missiles, within the Lebanese civilian population — a practice known as "human shields." To protect its citizens from the massive bombardment, the Israel Defense Force had no choice but to strike targets, including missile launchers, located in "civilian areas." Rather than acknowledging this complex moral issue, however, HRW's almost daily statements during the war hammered Israel for attacking civilians "indiscriminately," and for "war crimes." The evidence provided by Israel was dismissed by HRW's emergencies director, Peter Bouckaert, as "a convenient excuse."

HRW's 49-page report, headlined "Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Lebanon," and published on August 3, 2006, quoted dubious claims by individuals in areas controlled by Hezbollah. On this basis, HRW "found no cases in which Hezbollah deliberately used civilians as shields to protect them from retaliatory IDF attack." NGO Monitor examined HRW's claims in this report, comparing them to evidence provided by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center in Israel, including aerial photographs.

This evidence, which is available on the Internet, clearly showed that in contrast to HRW's claims, Hezbollah placed 20 bases and five weapons storehouses in Bint Jbeil, near the border with Israel. Eighty-seven rockets were fired from within village houses, 109 from within a 200 meter radius, and 136 within 500 meters. Similarly, in Aitaroun, the ITIC report shows 18 rockets fired from within village houses, 23 within a 200 meter radius, and 54 within a 500 meter radius. But according to HRW's "eye witness" reports, "There was no presence of the [Hezbollah] resistance inside the village."

HRW even ignored the statements of Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. In a May 2006 interview broadcast on Al Manr television, Mr. Nasrallah said that "[Hezbollah fighters] live in their [civilian] houses, in their schools, in their churches, in their fields, in their farms and in their factories. ... "

The clearest example of the impact of HRW's lack of credibility concerned the events on July 30, 2006, in the village of Qana in southern Lebanon. After rocket barrages were launched from this area, Israel's air force responded by attacking the buildings. Local sources claimed that a massacre had taken place, and HRW immediately issued a press release labeling Israel's response a "war crime," and citing eyewitness claims that at least 54 civilians had been killed.

After other reports showed that these claims were false, HRW issued another report halving the number of casualties, but there are still conflicting reports on many of the details including the number of Hezbollah bodies.

Yet, even after HRW revised its discredited initial report, officials repeated the "war crimes" charge without mentioning that Hezbollah fired rockets from within civilian houses — 36 rockets within a 200 meter radius and 106 rockets within 500 meters. HRW experts and researchers also "missed" the aerial photograph of a weapons storehouse next to a mosque.

A study published by Harvard University shows, "Most reporters used the higher of the two [Qana] estimates, some describing the scene as a massacre. It made for more sensational copy." Assisted by HRW, Hezbollah's Qana propaganda became another landmark in the demonization of the Jewish state.

Reflecting the impact of these events on HRW's credibility, HRW's executive director, Kenneth Roth, has been active in defending his organization's record. To counter the evidence of bias, in a March 2007 article in Tikkun magazine, Mr. Roth presents examples of support for Israel, claiming that HRW "put to rest" the "massacre" myths in Jenin during the 2002 anti-terror operation. But the record shows HRW not only accused Israel of "indiscriminate and excessive force" and "summary executions" in Jenin, but also criticized the United Nations for not being anti-Israel enough by failing to echo HRW accusations that civilians were "willfully killed" in Jenin by Israeli forces and subjected to "intense and indiscriminate" fire from helicopters.

As in the case of the Lebanon conflict, these HRW accusations were based on dubious claims from "first-hand observers," and erased the indispensable context of the disposition and fighting practices of Palestinian terrorists.

In defense of HRW's methods, Mr. Roth also claimed that "after a researcher returns from an investigation and writes up a report it must go through a series of experts: legal experts, policy experts, and people who double-check the fact-finding." Supporting the decision to rely on "eyewitness testimony," Mr. Roth said that HRW researchers check such claims with "an enormous dose of skepticism."

But the evidence to the contrary clearly shows that HRW warrants skepticism, not only regarding its reports on Israel, but also regarding all of its activities.

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