

Selective Human Rights – NGOs and the Delegitimization of Israel

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The delegitimization of Israel by NGOs did not begin at Durban in September 2001, although that conference was doubtless a peak in the process. At the UN-sponsored NGO Forum, the terminology and rhetoric of morally based claims to delegitimize Israel were the central themes, and the slogan that “Zionism is racism” was revived. Present at that forum were four thousand individuals representing fifteen hundred non-governmental organizations, including highly active, powerful groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW), and FIDH from Paris. Israel was described at Durban as apartheid and racist, and accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide were the main currency.

This was not an isolated event to be disregarded, but rather it clearly articulated the foundations of ongoing campaigns by human rights groups against Israel. This article will discuss the role of charitable groups that allegedly promote human rights and offer humanitarian assistance, such as Oxfam, Amnesty International, and HRW, in the delegitimization of Israel.

A 2008 report by five major British charities, including Amnesty and Christian Aid, accused Israel of carrying out collective punishment in Gaza. This report was not only a distortion and abuse of the language of international law, but many of the facts included therein were simply wrong. And this was not an isolated incident or a new development, but a link in a chain of repetitions. Similar political attacks using the language of ethics and morality have taken place in connection with false massacre claims related to the intense fighting in Jenin during Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, on the issue of “housing demolitions” related to terror infrastructure (Human Rights Watch published a full report on this topic that included patently false claims), and in many other cases. The accusations made in such reports are then taken up by the UN and the media, become headlines, and are even used by diplomats. They are repeated *ad nauseam* until they become part of the accepted background

information. Almost nobody checks their accuracy, and this process is a central pillar in the war to delegitimize Israel.

Many of the most disturbing examples of this process are to be found in the statements issued and reports produced concerning the Second Lebanon War. In the six-week period of the war, self-proclaimed “human rights” and humanitarian NGOs issued over one hundred statements. Of these, 90% were directed against Israel. Although a few did criticize Hizbullah, this was usually couched in softer terms. Almost all of the statements used the same stereotypical language – “disproportionate force,” “war crimes,” “indiscriminate bombing,” “collective punishment,” and “violation of international law” – in their allegations against Israel. None of these terms have clear definitions; they are used inconsistently but frequently applied to Israel with obvious double standards.

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This delegitimization is one of the top priorities on the agendas of human rights organizations – the topics of their so-called research reports disproportionately focusing on Israel are usually set well in advance of publication. NGO Monitor’s detailed research discovered that between 2004 and 2006, NGO ideological attacks against Israel took up one-third of the entire activity of HRW in the Middle East, far more than was spent on Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Syria together. In light of the data presented by this group, Israel appears to be by far the largest violator of human rights in the world. And this is not unique to HRW. NGO Monitor’s analyses indicate that Amnesty International distorts the facts even more.

New York-based HRW has a total budget of about \$50 million a year, much of which is used to wage its propaganda war (the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s annual budget for countering all of the NGO and other attacks is probably less than 10% of that sum). With such massive resources, NGOs produce glossy, professionally produced booklets that are handed out at press conferences and quickly gain attention from journalists.

For example, during the 2006 Lebanon War, in addition to the statements issued almost every day of the war, HRW published a forty-five-page report in Arabic, French, and Hebrew entitled *Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Lebanon*. Almost every word in the title of the report reflects the battle to delegitimize Israel. There is no criticism of Hizbullah: in this invented and distorted version of events, Israel began the war and used every illegitimate means to win it. On the front cover is a picture which allegedly shows the coffins of the civilians killed in Israel's attack on the rocket launchers at Kafr Kana (which appears to be staged, in a manner similar to the cover of an earlier HRW report on landmines). This was one of the major events of the war, and the allegations of civilian casualties forced Israel to suspend air operations for forty-eight hours. Initially HRW claimed that there were dozens of deaths. A few days later, as more information became available, they reduced the number to twenty-eight. It is still unclear today exactly how many people were killed. What is doubtless, however, is the propaganda aspect of these claims, which also erased Hizbullah's missile attacks from the region. This application of "soft power," through the use of double standards and the language of human rights and morality, is more powerful than military action because it can put a stop to military progress, as happened in this case. One study published by Harvard University claimed that the Kafr Kana incident was the critical media event of the war. In most cases the journalists who repeated HRW's false reports did not revisit it later to note that the initial claims were shown to be false.

Amnesty International's version was packaged in a less impressive format, but it used almost the same language: "deliberate destruction" and "Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure." A much more significant and detailed report published by Amnesty International came later, in the form of a glossy monograph, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 war. On the cover is a very clearly staged photograph which demonstrates the "suffering of the Palestinians," in front of the separation barrier. The report uses language such as "the wall of death," describing what it calls "collective punishment" and "war crimes" in terms that elicit images of the Holocaust and depicting the Israelis as the new Nazis. This report did not mark forty years since the Six-Day War, or forty years since the attempt, as Nasser put it at the time, to drive the Jews into the sea. It marked forty years of "occupation," and not of the "three nos" of the Khartoum conference of Arab foreign ministers. The historical framework is totally erased, leaving only snapshots that add to the delegitimization of Israel.

Many of the claims in such NGO reports lack credibility, since they routinely use local eyewitness testimony to support their claims. In order to understand the inherent bias, it is necessary to identify who these witnesses are, and what they actually saw. Alan Dershowitz investigated this question, using NGO Monitor's analysis of some such reports, and came to the conclusion that these "testimonies" are anecdotes, carefully chosen in order to make the political case, rather than an attempt to present a factual set of images. The reports also use claims from local NGOs, each of which has its own agenda and bias. For example, they often utilize material from B'tselem on Palestinian casualty counts, numbers which B'tselem received from Palestinian officials or eyewitnesses. Information such as this cannot be corroborated, yet it is used by international organizations, buttressed and quoted in every report by Reuters. The figures of Palestinian deaths are also often compared to the number of Israeli casualties and used to present a very false picture of indiscriminate fire and killing.

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There is no mention of terrorism in most of these NGO reports and therefore no reason for Israel's use of military force is noted. In this distorted world, every casualty is necessarily the result of Israel deliberately trying to kill Palestinians. The image of the blood libel, which is familiar from classical anti-Semitism, is reinforced to the point where it becomes accepted wisdom in the UN, in diplomatic corridors, among journalists and others. On a Christmas card produced by an important British charity (War on Want), the Israeli occupying forces were depicted as indiscriminately harassing and mistreating innocent Palestinians in Bethlehem. Christian Aid (UK) did not market Christmas cards but created a poster as part of a major campaign on the suffering of Bethlehem's children. The narrative that accompanies the poster is that the Jews, the Israelis, attack, kill, and wound innocent Palestinians without any reason. The Palestinians become the substitute for the Jesus

image. Other contributions to this propaganda campaign are Oxfam's posters of a blood orange calling for a boycott of Israel, or the use of pop stars at photographic opportunities, writing graffiti on the hated security wall in the same, oft-repeated language. These examples also pull the younger generation into the cycle of delegitimizing Israel.

To counter this soft-power war against Israel waged by the NGO network, NGO Monitor has adopted the strategy of naming and shaming the perpetrators. Using the same methods that the human rights organizations claim to employ, we are beginning to force these organizations, and more importantly their funders, to take a look at what they are doing. Much of the responsibility for these activities lies with those who provide the organizations that promote this demonization and false claims with huge amounts of money. European governments provide at least \$150 million to these organizations every year (the exact amount is not known, since despite EU claims of transparency, a large part of it is hidden). This topic has been raised in the European Parliament, but requires further investigation.

Such an investigation is to be provided by NGO Monitor's report (published in 2008) on the subject of EU funding of Israeli, Palestinian and European NGOs involved in radical political activities. Many of them are among the most active in using terms like "apartheid," "war crimes," and "collective punishment" and in making false accusations against Israel. This report forms the basis for much-needed accountability in this area. As a starting point for this, it will offer a very detailed analysis of where EU funds for NGOs involved in the conflict are channeled.

At each stage of the process European officials claim to be promoting peace and dialogue, yet they give money to organizations such as the Israel Committee Against Housing Demolitions (ICAHD). The leader of ICAHD, Jeff Halper, is highly political, using the terms "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing" in demonizing Israel. He also appears jointly with the heads of Sabeel, a Palestinian NGO leading the divestment campaigns as part of the Durban strategy, thus providing that organization with legitimacy. The BBC very often goes to these officials for comments, so Halper is better known abroad than he is in Israel. Most of his funding is provided by the EU. In this case, and others similar to it, there is no accountability, no address to approach in the EU and question the process; it is all very carefully hidden in and manipulated by the EC bureaucracy.

Today there is also some awareness amongst journalists of the need to check claims made by NGOs, just as they check the statements given by government spokespeople. There is some degree of understanding that NGOs are not sources of indisputable facts. But this must go much further.