

Human Rights Watch takes its campaign against Israel to Fifa



The Jewish Chronicle

Gerald Steinberg

January 19, 2017

In November 2016, Fifa met to discuss the Palestinian effort to evict Israel from the international football federation, using the excuse that a few lower league teams are located across the 1949 “Green Line”.

Understandably, the delegates to the Fifa conference demurred, preferring not to try to referee one of the most complex and confusing political disputes in the world.

For Human Rights Watch (HRW), this response was irrelevant and this Israel-obsessed organisation continued its attack, this time during a Fifa meeting on January 10 called to consider expanding the number of teams in the World Cup. To mark the occasion, Sari Bashi, HRW’s “Israel and Palestine Advocacy Director,” published an opinion piece (‘Fifa must take strong stance against Israeli settlement club’, International Business Times, January 10, 2017). In it, Ms Bashi recycled the standard anti-Israel slogans, alleging, “West Bank Palestinians are not allowed to enter the settlements to play, coach or even watch the matches.” In this, she totally erased the context of terror, and the fact that Israelis are not allowed to “play, coach, or even watch the matches” in areas under Palestinian control.

HRW’s obsession with a handful of lower league football clubs is strange and out of step for an organisation that prides itself on its “effective use of media, and targeted advocacy” and self identifies as one of the world’s leading international human rights organisations. Of all the human rights disasters plaguing the world at this moment, why is HRW choosing to focus so much attention on low-level football? And why does it appear that HRW is falling into step with the Palestinian Authority in its political war against Israel?

The reason for this HRW opinion piece, and campaign in general, can be best understood in the context of the organisation’s long-term and biased targeting of Israel,

mixed with apologetic behaviour for some of the world's worst human rights abusers, as documented by NGO Monitor.

For example, in 2009, HRW held a fundraising dinner in Saudi Arabia, a monarchy that routinely violates basic human rights, in order to solicit funds from "prominent members of Saudi society," to finance the group's anti-Israel campaign.

Earlier that year, HRW's Middle East Division director Sarah Leah Whitson visited Libya where she praised Gaddafi's dictatorial regime for its "spirit of reform" in Foreign Policy.

With regards to Israel, the organisation has long lobbied the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and other international frameworks such as Fifa, promoting false, distorted, and unverifiable allegations against Israel. HRW also played a major role in the creation of the discredited Goldstone report and submitted numerous statements to the commission equating Israel to Hamas, and falsely accusing Israel of "wilfully" killing civilians.

On the football issue, despite the numerous conflicts and "settlements" in occupied territories throughout the world, including Cyprus and Morocco, HRW has never campaigned on these issues. HRW has no problem working with repressive regimes and rights abusers (such as the ones mentioned above) and will choose to look the other way to further the biased agenda.

What do Ms Bashi and her boss Ken Roth hope to accomplish? Do they seriously think that the settlements will simply disappear and the conflict will end if lower league football clubs and their youth teams are closed? If anything, the only realistic result would be to punish underprivileged children who participate in such leagues.

Moreover, Fifa does not directly license the six teams in question. Rather, they are members of the Israel Football Association, which is a member of Fifa. In HRW's dizzying logic, however, this ought to be Fifa's most pressing issue, and not the corruption or the issues surrounding the 2018 World Cup, to be held in Putin's Russia.

We should not expect a sports organisation to draw borders or interfere in the most contested geopolitical conflict of the modern era. It is time for the Fifa management to make it clear that external ideological advocacy groups, such as HRW, are not going to bend the rules of the game.

Gerald Steinberg is president of NGO Monitor and professor of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University