

# Rights and democracy: Learning from Canada's NGO experience

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There are fewer starker examples demonstrating the vital need for NGO transparency and accountability than the ongoing revelations about the Canadian "Rights and Democracy" (R&D) organization. In the last three years, the Canadian government spent \$500,000 investigating how R&D used the \$11 million CAD yearly allocation it received in taxpayer funding, or well over \$100 million during its two crisis-ridden decades.

R&D was [created by Canada's Parliament](#) in 1988 to "encourage and support the universal values of human rights and the promotion of democratic institutions and practices around the world." However, revelations in recent years have shown that many decisions at R&D were taken through secret processes, and without necessary checks and balances, including funding for radical organizations whose activities are entirely inconsistent with human rights principles.

In 2009, R&D's leadership used what was called an "Urgent Action fund" to grant \$10,000 CAD each to the Palestinian groups Al Haq and Al Mezan. These grants were made in secret, unlisted in official reports, and even lacked board supervision.

According to the [National Post](#), upon discovering the grants, some members of the R&D board were shocked by the support given to these "vicious organizations."

Al Haq director Shawan Jabarin had been described by the Israeli Supreme Court as a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a human rights defender by day and a terrorist by night," for his alleged "senior" association with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) terror group. Similarly, Al Mezan, an NGO that operates in Hamas-controlled Gaza, is very active in political warfare, accusing Israel of "[genocide](#)," "[crimes against humanity](#)," "[apartheid](#)," "[ethnic cleansing](#)," "[massacres](#)," and "[slaughtering civilians](#)," and [refers](#) to "resistance" and the "Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF)".

Independent research shows that Al Mezan used the R&D funding for a report on "[Cast Lead](#)

[Offensive in Numbers](#),” which compiled unreliable, unverifiable, and false “statistics.” The allegations in this report, along with significant amounts of “information” from Al Haq, were provided to the UN for the now-discredited Goldstone Report on the Gaza conflict.

After learning these facts, the board of R&D did the right thing by voting overwhelmingly to “repudiate” these secret grants to Al-Haq and Al Mezan. Belatedly, they realized the dangers resulting from the absence of transparency and accountability.

Another controversy arose with the revelations regarding covert meetings held by R&D President Rémy Beaugregard and members of the terrorist organization Hezbollah at a 2008 conference held at the Arab League in Cairo. R&D co-sponsored the conference, and its logo was prominently displayed on the conference program, thereby lending legitimacy to the gathering and to the participation of Hezbollah. This is entirely inconsistent with a mission of promoting rights and democracy around the world.

Finally, and crucially, allegations emerged linking R&D funding to the UN's Durban Review Conference (Durban II) that took place in Geneva in 2009. Canada had played a central role in the infamous 2001 Durban Conference, but under Prime Minister Harper, Ottawa led the world in boycotting the Geneva event, due to its blatantly anti-Israel and anti-human rights agenda.

Canadian government agencies were also instructed not to provide any assistance to this anti-Semitic event. While there were rumors that the leaders of R&D had secretly violated this directive, they vocally denied any role in the Durban II conference. Under its new management, R&D hired an external auditing company to examine these allegations. The audit concluded that it was “impossible to determine” whether some \$140,000 CAD that R&D had given the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2009 (and over \$700,000 CAD during the previous few years) had been used to finance the Durban II conference.

On March 2102, the Canadian journalist Terry Glavin, writing in the [Ottawa Citizen](#), exposed and cited internal R&D documents showing that the organization had indeed used government funds in support of Durban II. According to Glavin, a former senior member of R&D had “prepare[d] the agenda and draft the minutes for each meeting of the UN Human Rights Council panel that was setting the rules and making arrangements for the Durban ‘civil society’ groups in Geneva. It was also the R&D staffer's responsibility to manage the Durban NGO panel's correspondence, write Durban planning newsletters, brief NGOs on the registration and accreditation process, and explain how to get funding to attend.”

These major revelations demonstrate that the veil of secrecy surrounding R&D has been highly destructive. Indeed, these events provide a case study of how an organization created to promote human rights can be hijacked and its mandate abused. A halo of lofty principles allowed secret processes and the lack of accountability to subvert taxpayer funds in a manner entirely inconsistent with the human rights objectives ostensibly promoted by R&D.

Canada should be praised for its systematic examination of R&D's past mistakes. This high standard is part of Canada's role at the forefront of fighting the exploitation of human rights and humanitarian aid organizations for political warfare.

However, cases like R&D highlight the dangers inherent in government-funded NGOs that propagate biased agendas under the mask of human rights. If Canada's leaders decide to continue funding for R&D, despite the previous failures, this step should be taken with great caution, and must ensure total transparency and accountability from the outset. The oft-quoted adage by the late US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis – “*Sunlight is the best of disinfectant*” – is particularly valid for government-funded groups claiming to promote moral agendas.

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