

The immoral agenda of Human Rights Watch continues

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In London today (January 31), Kenneth Roth, the powerful head of Human Rights Watch (HRW), will be holding a press conference and giving interviews to promote his organization's 2012 annual report. As in the past, Roth will paint a bleak picture of human rights around the world and castigate governments – particularly Western democracies – for not acting to prevent violations. But Roth is not likely to look inward, at himself and HRW, to consider their central contributions to turning human rights into a political farce.

The activities of HRW in 2012 epitomized the ongoing crisis and moral failure of the human rights network. Founded in 1978 by Robert Bernstein, with the goal of naming and shaming closed dictatorial regimes around the world, this organization lost its moral compass many years ago through biased ideological agendas and consistent lack of professionalism. Under the ongoing leadership of Kenneth Roth, these failings led Bernstein to condemn his own organization in the New York Times in 2009.

Roth has shown a consistent obsession regarding Israel and the right of the Jewish people to sovereign equality, including numerous articles and Twitter posts. In a recent piece ostensibly about eight countries other than Israel (“Barack Obama: Dump These 8 Unsavory Allies), Roth began with a lengthy attack against American support for Israel, including terms like “Jim Crow-like separate-and-unequal treatment of Palestinians.” In his Twitter account, Roth frequently invokes the Durban strategy of demonization, recalling the infamous antisemitic 2001 NGO Forum in which Roth and HRW played central roles.

In contrast, Roth cannot bring himself or his organization to condemn the torrent of genocidal threats emanating from the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, reflecting HRW's complete moral bankruptcy. In rebuke, HRW founder Robert Bernstein, Prof. Irwin Cotler, and Stuart Robinowitz published “Inciting Genocide Is a Crime,” in which they pointedly noted, “Silence is not a moral option when states threaten genocide—especially when they are on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons and boast that they can bring about a holocaust in a matter of minutes.”

Similarly, on December 4, 2012, David Feith published “Dancing Around Genocide,” which included quotes in which Roth claimed “Many of [Iran's] statements are certainly reprehensible, but they are not incitement to genocide. No one has acted on them.” As Feith concluded, “Tehran will continue to call for Israel's obliteration—and Human Rights Watch will continue to sit back and watch.”

Roth's ignorance, animus towards Israel, and moral failure were also on display when he claimed that “Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's statements [on Iran, Hezbollah, and Palestinians] are arguably more direct than those made by Iranian leaders, and Israel, unlike Iran, has the means to carry them out.” In an article published in the Tablet (“The Human Rights Watch Internal Battle on Iran”), Adam Chandler noted that Yosef's remarks were condemned by the Israeli government and that “he is neither a head of state nor an official who sets government policy,” in contrast to the leaders of the Iranian regime.

Roth and HRW are closely aligned with the UN's Human Rights Council, whose anti-Israel and anti-democracy agenda is led by a coalition of the world's worst dictatorships. HRW pushed the

appointment of Richard Goldstone – a board member – to head the UNHRC’s “investigation” of Israel, and provided Goldstone with much of the bogus evidence that was incorporated into the discredited report. Recently, Geneva-based UN Watch highlighted the fact that Richard Falk, a 9/11 conspiracy theorist, and the UNHRC’s resident Israel-basher and sources of antisemitism, was a member of an HRW committee. The UN Watch letter to Ken Roth stated, “By legitimizing this racist and enemy of human rights, your organization undermines its own founding principles. We urge you to remove him immediately.” Under the spotlight, HRW silently removed Falk from its list, but their central role in the UNHRC continues.

HRW’s record of ideological bias, lack of professionalism, and repeated use of false claims and unsupported allegations is prominent in its Middle East activities. On Israel, HRW issued fewer condemnations in 2012 in comparison to previous years, but in November, when Israel responded to escalating rocket and border attacks on civilians from Gaza (each one a war crime), the HRW propaganda machine went into action, and, as in the past, got most facts and legal claims wrong. This reflects the ongoing roles of Sarah Leah Whitson and Joe Stork, whose strong ideological agendas have severely distorted MENA’s priorities. Whitson remains MENA director, despite having endorsed the Qaddafi regime as human rights reformers – tainting all HRW statements on Libya – and having led HRW’s fund-raising trip to Saudi Arabia.

To repair HRW’s moral compass, the head of their board, James F. Hoge, Jr, and the other directors, will need to exercise their oversight responsibility, and make long-overdue personnel changes at the top, as well as in the Middle East and North Africa division. Instead of obsessive ideologues, HRW needs professionals with a commitment to universal principles, and possessing the required methodological expertise for fact-finding and analysis of international law, particularly in complex areas of armed conflict and responses to mass terror.