

Partners in failure

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Gerald M. Steinberg: Partners in failure



The carnage in Syria, mass bombings in Lebanon and Iraq, deadly clashes in Egypt, and similar events throughout the Middle East confirm the bankruptcy of the global human rights network. Every day, the impotence of the United Nations Human Rights Council and its officials, as well as numerous high-visibility non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, stand exposed.

The construction of an international human rights structure began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, after half a century of particularly brutal wars, employing technology that extended the radius of destruction to many parts of the globe (thereby earning the label of “world wars”). The failure to stop Nazi Germany’s systematic mass murder in the Holocaust added another urgent factor, leading in 1948 to the International Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention. The international enforcement of these moral instruments was to be among the primary objectives of the newly created United Nations.

But the UN has been a dismal failure, and a monument to the ease with which political interests overwhelm moral principle. This framework long has been controlled by a majority of UN members with dismal human rights records, led by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and stalwart allies such as Cuba, Russia and China. This alliance shifted the focus to a flood of allegations targeting Israel — a convenient politically motivated diversion from the moral crimes of totalitarian regimes.

Groups such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International are, in least in theory, designed to be neutral watch-dogs, reporting on and organizing campaigns in response to the moral crimes of states. For this reason, NGOs claiming to promote moral agendas such as human rights and international law are given special status in the United Nations, as well as in the foreign ministries and parliaments of democratic countries. On this basis, they are invited to give testimony, submit reports, and make recommendations in order to improve human rights practice, while “naming and shaming” those governments with the worst records.

But the records of HRW, Amnesty and many similar groups show that instead of providing independent criticism and credible reporting of violations, they became an integral part of the political theater of the absurd. Instead of focusing on the violations in closed regimes, HRW has been infected by the UN's anti-Israel obsession. Amnesty International isn't much better.

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The world's most prominent NGOs had no significant projects to create human rights support structures in closed Middle Eastern regimes. Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, Yemen, and other Arab countries were largely ignored in their human rights campaigns. HRW held fund-raising events in Saudi Arabia, not in order to promote the principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration in this closed Kingdom or among its allies, but to fund the organization's Israel-bashing campaigns. HRW's leaders also traveled to Libya and held media events in which they pronounced Muammar Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, to be a "human rights reformer."

Journalists also share responsibility. In reporting on human rights issues, most simply followed the leads of the UN and the NGOs. In 2006 and 2009, during and after Israel's Lebanon and Gaza wars, the media copied the flood of condemnations of Israel. The discredited Goldstone report on Gaza, published under UN auspices, consisted primarily of unverifiable NGO "evidence" and invented claims regarding international law.

The NGOs are a central part of the failure of international human-rights norms. An entirely new foundation for enforcing these norms is necessary. The institutions and processes that were created 65 years ago have failed, and many of the officials who speak in the name of human rights are tainted beyond rehabilitation.

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Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg is the president of NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institute, and co-author of Best Practices for Human Rights and Humanitarian NGOs, Nijhoff Publishers, 2012.