

Hate Speech Finds a Mainstream Platform

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It is not often that major international publications respond to crackpot opinion pieces in other newspapers. Yet Robert L. Bernstein's latest tantrum [against the Palestinians](#), which the Washington Post published instead of steering the author to an extremist website, was so far beyond the pale that [The Economist](#) felt compelled to issue a rejoinder.

Beneath the layers of dehumanization, delegitimization, distortion, and outright deceit, Bernstein's argument is straightforward in tone yet crooked in reasoning: Israel is the victim of the Palestinians it has dispossessed and occupied; Palestinian (and Arab) hostility to Israel is—and is motivated by—anti-Semitism rather than dispossession and occupation; and anyone who disagrees with his putrid nonsense is an accomplice to incitement to genocide. His proof consists of a blend of his own imagination and assertions, and quotes from [Palestinian Media Watch](#) which is a propaganda outfit run by radical Jewish settlers that has been thoroughly discredited by serious scholars on every continent save Antarctica.

Bernstein concentrates his bile on the United Nations and human rights organizations, particularly Human Rights Watch which he apparently established. He accuses these organizations of being “accomplices” to the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, which he re-defines as a campaign to commit genocide. The claim is laughable at best.

Rather than being an enemy of Israel, the UN established it. In the decades since 1948, the UN has systematically failed to redress the resultant ethnic cleansing of the vast majority of Palestinians from the territory that became Israel. Moreover, its Security Council has been instrumental in promoting Israeli impunity with respect to systematic violations of the UN Charter and other UN conventions.

This year alone, the Security Council, courtesy of yet another American nyet, ensured that Israel could continue expanding illegal settlements in occupied territory—a grave breach under international law—without consequence. Washington is currently working overtime to ensure that the Arab state in Palestine specified by the same resolution that led to Israel's founding is not admitted to membership in the world body.

For Bernstein, that most of the world has already recognized this state means the planet is wrong and Israel is right. Anything he doesn't like, after all, is evidence of an anti-Semitic conspiracy—and nothing more so than global support for Palestinian rights. One wonders how Bernstein would characterize the UN if it actually held Israel accountable for its actions the way it has Arab states like Iraq and Libya, and translated its annual confirmation of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination from ink to reality.

It is certainly true that the UN has devoted more column inches to the Palestine question

than perhaps any other. This reflects not only the conflict's unjustifiable longevity, but also the UN's direct involvement and responsibility from its very outset—making Palestine the international question par excellence. This is a rather different reality from Darfur or Tibet. If the world body were genuinely hostile to Israel, the latter simply would not exist, let alone remain an active member that is simultaneously the world's longest-serving occupying power.

The record of the human rights community on this issue is even worse than that of the UN. Until the eruption of the (first) Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s, Israel's conduct—whether in the occupied territories, Lebanon or towards its Arab citizens—elicited barely a peep. Industry leaders like Bernstein, who never let the pursuit of justice get in the way of their politics and/or political calculations, played a crucial role in this respect. It was in fact primarily on account of Israel's globally televised barbarism that it became impossible for Bernstein's organization and others to continue lending Israel two blind eyes.

Even today, the record of many such organizations, and that of Human Rights Watch in particular, remains deeply problematic. As any serious reading of HRW literature confirms, the organization has been more—and more openly—critical of Arab states and even occupied Palestinians than it has of Israel. In HRW reports, Israel, unlike its neighbors, is neither explicitly condemned nor directly accused of war crimes, even when the evidence it has collected itself leaves room for no other conclusion. Bernstein aims to denounce HRW, but unintentionally helps explain the organization's [persistent shortcomings](#).

Like fanatic ethno-nationalists everywhere, Bernstein clearly believes Israel should be held to a different standard than other states—the standard of total impunity and a complete absence of accountability. But to suggest that his own outfit holds it to the same or higher standards than others reflects pure ignorance—if not his own then his reliance on that of others.

In this respect, one would do well to judge Bernstein by his ludicrous assertion that such organizations have “chosen to focus primarily on Israel.” A brief perusal of [HRW's Middle East page](#)—which he either does not read or willfully misrepresents—reveals that a grand total of two of HRW's sixty-five most recent statements on the region concern Israel/Palestine, one of them a condemnation of Hamas' harassment of Palestinian activists.

Bernstein is perhaps at his most comical when invoking his settler friends from Palestinian Media Watch to denounce Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas for rejecting Israel's recent and novel demand, without precedent in international relations, for explicit recognition as a Jewish state. If his bizarre tantrum on this issue holds any water, surely it applies equally to the rest of the planet, including even the United States, which also has yet to formally indulge Binyamin Netanyahu on this score.

There are, needless to say, legitimate points that can and should be raised about the manner in which Palestinians and Arabs have responded to Israel's usurpation of their rights. Yet Bernstein's tirade relies primarily on gross exaggeration and outright falsification. And in refusing—like the settlers he champions—to even acknowledge that these same points apply in plentiful abundance to Israeli leaders, opinion makers, and educational curricula, he disqualifies himself from participation in the debate about Israel and Palestine, particularly where human rights are concerned.

Since Bernstein claims to be motivated by opposition to hate speech, he would do well to

first desist from this reprehensible practice. Pending such an unlikely transformation, mainstream media such as the Washington Post have a moral as well as political obligation to deny such loathsome sentiment a platform.

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