

Human Rights Watch (HRW): Hypocrites Representing Washington

Part I

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Global Research, August 01, 2014

[New Eastern Outlook](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU, USA](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity, Police State & Civil Rights, US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Unlike previous centuries and epochs, modern warfare is not restricted solely to the battlefield. Rather, it extends into the information sphere where the dissemination of propaganda and the construction of narratives are of equal importance to weapons and soldiers. For today, the legitimacy of a war in the eyes of public opinion in many ways determines victory or defeat. It is here, in the realm of public opinion, that an organization such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) becomes indispensable to the Empire, not so much for the facts that it presents, but the narrative that it shapes.

Put another way, HRW serves as intermediary between the facts on the ground and the western public who rely on the organization (and similar NGOs such as Amnesty International) to accurately tell the story of a given conflict. It is precisely this position as an “information middleman” that makes HRW both relevant and dangerous for the simple fact that the manner in which it presents information, along with the critical facts it chooses to omit or otherwise distort, can have a tremendous impact on how the world views a conflict and, consequently, how the world responds.

By examining the way in which HRW documented, investigated, and presented findings from the conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Ukraine, Libya, Syria, and Venezuela, it becomes clear that the organization, though theoretically objective and “disinterested,” is in fact an integral part of the western imperial system. Though HRW has done some good work, and likely will in the future, this cannot be taken as evidence that the organization is somehow not a part of the Empire. On the contrary, without HRW and similar organizations, Washington and its allies would not be able to champion themselves as “defenders of human rights,” “beacons of democracy,” and “humanitarian powers.”

HRW on Israel/Palestine

In analyzing HRW’s findings and, perhaps most importantly, the way in which they are presented, one conclusion becomes inescapable: when the facts are damaging to the western powers, HRW dilutes the impact of its own conclusions, and when its findings advance the western agenda, HRW exaggerates them. What can one call such obvious service to power under the guise of truth-telling? Words like cynical, insidious, and treacherous certainly come to mind.

On the subject of Israel/Palestine, HRW has consistently placed itself in the “condemn both

sides” camp. That is to say, it makes an equivalence between the violence and barbarism of Israel’s colonial-style occupation of Gaza and the West Bank on the one hand, and Palestinian armed resistance on the other. The cynicism is painfully obvious. By making such equivalence, HRW effectively reduces the scope and scale of Israeli crimes which are, objectively speaking, far more widespread, systematic, and devastating.

As renowned Palestinian journalist and Middle East analyst Mouin Rabbani [wrote](#) in 2009:

In the years since 2000, HRW pursued a consistent — and consistently effective — formula: criticize Israel, but condemn the Palestinians. Challenge the legality of an Israeli aerial bombardment, preferably in polite, technical terms, and vociferously denounce the Palestinian suicide bomber in unambiguous language — especially when raising questions about the latest Israeli atrocity. In HRW publications, explicit condemnations and accusations of war crimes were almost wholly monopolized by Palestinians. With Israeli citizenship a seeming precondition for the right to self-defense, the right to resist was for all intents and purposes non-existent.

Rabbani here correctly points out not only the false equivalence between the violence perpetrated by Israel and the armed resistance of the Palestinians, but also the question of legitimacy and legality in regard to the latter. HRW portrays Palestinian resistance, in whatever form it takes, as illegitimate and a violation of international law, often referring to the rockets and, when it was still applicable the “suicide bombers,” as war crimes. In contrast, HRW very rarely, if ever, expressly uses the term “war crimes” to refer to any of the atrocities committed by Israel that undoubtedly are such.

Perhaps here it would be relevant to point out that, according to international law and UN precedent, all Israeli so-called “self-defense” (bombing civilian targets, laying siege to Gaza, etc.) constitutes war crimes. By contrast, the Palestinians have a legal right to resist their occupation by a foreign power by any means necessary. Indeed, this point has been reiterated countless times by the United Nations. One particularly relevant example comes from the [43rd resolution of the 37th UN General Assembly](#) held in 1982 against the backdrop of Israel’s vicious war on Lebanon which, “Reaffirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial and foreign domination and foreign occupation by all available means, including armed struggle.”

Though certainly not the only example of international law and UN precedent legitimizing the armed resistance of the Palestinian people, the above resolution makes it quite plain that the argument that “ Hamas rockets constitute a war crime ” is little more than a rhetorical flourish from those who attempt to make an equivalence between Israeli and Palestinian violence in order to justify the former by discrediting the latter. It goes almost without saying that such faulty reasoning must be rejected entirely.

But this issue of rhetoric and language is also crucial to understanding how HRW is able to criticize Israel without actually condemning its atrocities or exposing it to charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In response to the most recent round of Israeli crimes, renowned scholar and activist Norman Finkelstein [wrote](#):

In its first press release on 9 July 2014, [Indiscriminate Palestinian Rocket Attacks; Israeli Airstrikes on Homes Appear to be Collective Punishment](#), HRW stated that “Israeli attacks

targeting homes may amount to prohibited collective punishment.” In its second press release on 16 July, [Unlawful Israeli Airstrikes Kill Civilians; Bombings of Civilian Structures Suggest Illegal Policy](#), HRW states that “Israeli air attacks in Gaza...have been targeting apparent civilian structures and killing civilians in violation of the laws of war. Israel should end the unlawful attacks that do not target military objectives and may be intended as collective punishment or broadly to destroy civilian property.” It then proceeded to legally define the meaning of war crimes, but artfully avoided accusing Israel of committing them...In these statements HRW doubly distanced itself from alleging Israeli war crimes: first, it qualified the weight of the incriminating evidence – “appear,” “may,” “apparent,” “may be,”; second, it recoiled from explicitly charging Israel with war crimes and instead settled for lesser or vaguer charges – “collective punishment,” “violation of the laws of war,” “unlawful attacks.”

As Finkelstein correctly notes, the language that HRW employs is, at least superficially, supposed to provide a veneer of objectivity by using qualifier words such as “may” and “apparent.” However the reality is that such language is deliberately designed to allow HRW to avoid correctly ascribing terms like “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity” to Israeli actions. In this way, HRW dilutes its own findings, pleasing the powerful corporate and political interests in the US that fund it.

Indeed, here it is important to reiterate how HRW creates a false equivalence between Israeli war crimes and Palestinian “war crimes.” HRW has gone [on record](#) saying that “ Hamas rocket attacks targeting Israeli civilians are unlawful and unjustifiable, and amount to war crimes... As the governing authority in Gaza, Hamas should publicly renounce rocket attacks on Israeli civilian centers and punish those responsible, including members of its own armed wing.”

So, let’s just be clear here. Israeli bombings of Palestinian civilian targets through systematic campaigns “may” constitute “collective punishment” (not war crimes according to HRW’s language), while Hamas rocket attacks “amount to war crimes.” The transparently hypocritical use of double-standards in terms of language exposes a deeply rooted bias in HRW against the justness of Palestinian resistance. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Hamas’s military (and political) tactics, the legal and moral righteousness of their resistance cannot be disputed by anyone objectively evaluating the conflict.

More to the point, HRW accusing Palestinians of war crimes implies yet another distortion perpetrated by the Empire and its media and NGO toadies: that the conflict in Gaza is a “war.” This is no war, it is a one-sided slaughter. One could point to the casualty figures, the absence of an army, navy, or air force on the Palestinian side, the complete lack of indigenous economic activity to support a “war economy” in Gaza, or any of the other myriad material reasons why this is not a war.

If one is being honest, then it is clear that it is the western media (which includes of course Israeli media) which distorts the reality of the situation, calling it a “war” so as to justify the horrific crimes being committed. Because, as is self-evident, only under conditions of war can Israeli actions be justified in the minds of westerners. This is willful self-deception of the highest order. Indeed, self-deception is one of the most potent weapons that Israel’s supporters, along with HRW, have at their disposal.

HRW on Ukraine

✘ The armed conflict between the US-sponsored regime in Kiev and the anti-Kiev rebels in the East of the country has devolved into a bona fide civil war. However, it should be noted that, though the term “civil war” is used to describe the fighting, it should not be taken to mean that there is equivalent force on both sides. Rather, the Kiev regime has the full force of an organized military with air power, heavy weapons, tanks, artillery, and a host of other military materiel. In contrast, the anti-Kiev forces possess very few of these same weapons, with no air power whatsoever, despite the continued allegations of Russian support. And so, as with the so called “war” between Israel and Hamas, the conflict is far more one-sided than most media is willing to admit.

This point about unequal force is critical to understanding just how HRW, though seemingly condemning the use of rockets by the US-backed Ukrainian military, in fact provides an important service to the western narrative on Ukraine. Specifically, HRW presents a “condemn everyone equally” perspective which unjustifiably condemns the rebel forces with as much fervor as it does Kiev’s military. In so doing, HRW once again makes false equivalence, thereby distorting the true nature of the conflict in the eyes of western observers.

In its report [Ukraine: Unguided Rockets Killing Civilians](#), HRW documents the use of “Grad” (Russian for “hail”) rockets by both sides in Ukraine. The report noted that “Unguided Grad rockets launched apparently by Ukrainian government forces and pro-government militias have killed at least 16 civilians and wounded many more in insurgent-controlled areas of Donetsk and its suburbs in at least four attacks between July 12 and 21, 2014.” In this initial assessment at the opening of the report, HRW is correct in pointing out that both sides of the conflict have been using such weapons, at least according to a number of independent reports from the region. However, again one must return to the question of equivalence between the two sides. In other words, are both sides equally accountable for the death and destruction wrought on the civilian population?

According to HRW and the language of the report, the answer is yes. Ole Solvang, senior emergencies researcher at HRW noted that, “Grad rockets are notoriously imprecise weapons that shouldn’t be used in populated areas. If insurgent and Ukrainian government forces are serious about limiting harm to civilians, they should both immediately stop using these weapons in populated areas.” Though of course one would agree that the use of such weapons by either side harms civilians, it presupposes that each side is equally responsible. Naturally, one should note that it is the Kiev regime’s military which is launching these rockets against a civilian population, while the rebels are using such rockets against military positions held by the Ukrainian army. This simple fact, conveniently left out of HRW’s report, should significantly alter how the issue is perceived. Rather than a war between two equally criminally responsible parties, there is undoubtedly an asymmetry in the violations of the rules of war.

To be fair, there are portions of the HRW report which do intimate, though perhaps stop short of explicitly stating, the fact that Kiev bears the majority of the blame. The report states, “Human Rights Watch called on all parties to the conflict in eastern Ukraine, particularly Ukrainian government forces, to stop using Grad rockets in or near populated areas because of the likelihood of killing and wounding civilians.” Indeed, the use of the phrase “particularly Ukrainian government forces” does suggest that Kiev is more culpable than the rebels. However, HRW quickly negates whatever value can be drawn from the above statement by following it with “Insurgent forces should minimize the risk to civilians under their control by avoiding deploying forces and weapons in densely populated areas.”

Such a statement is patently absurd considering that the war is undeniably being fought in densely populated areas (Donetsk alone has about a million residents).

How can HRW genuinely tell rebels who are protecting their homes, their families, and their communities, not to fight in densely populated areas? The Ukrainian air force and military have been [shelling civilian areas](#) with far more than just the Grad rockets (artillery, aerial bombardment, and possibly [white phosphorous bombs](#)), and HRW expects the rebels to simply allow this? Again, the report presents an equivalence between the force employed by both sides, an utterly disingenuous argument. The report notes, "Human Rights Watch said that insurgent forces have failed to take all feasible precautions to avoid deploying in densely populated areas, thereby endangering civilians in violation of the laws of war." In other words, though HRW condemned the use of the rockets by Kiev's military forces, ultimate responsibility lies with the rebels who are "endangering civilians."

This is backwards thinking. It is the equivalent of Israeli military spokesmen who argue that Hamas is responsible for Palestinian deaths because of where they place their rockets. The sort of mental gymnastics required to evaluate the situation in this way perhaps best illustrates what HRW is doing. Rather than assigning blame to Kiev where it is deserved, HRW condemns fervently the rebels for the actions of Kiev. In this way, HRW bolsters the western narrative that the "pro-Russian separatists" (as the western media is fond of calling them) are the ultimate cause of the conflict and the civilian deaths. This is not the first time that HRW has blamed the victims of aggression for the crimes of the aggressors.

Part 2 of this article will focus on HRW's propaganda and service to the Empire in Libya, Syria, and Venezuela. It will appear on New Eastern Outlook in the coming days.

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