

Just a Few Questions for Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Kenneth Roth has been the head of Human Rights Watch since 1993, and in that position has for decades displayed an anti-Israel bias which, in its sheer relentlessness, is a wonder to behold. Not everyone is willing to let him get away with it. Chief among his opponents is Gerald M. Steinberg, the head of NGO Monitor, a group that conducts research and analysis about non-governmental organizations (NGOs), their funders, and other stakeholders, primarily in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Steinberg has been a longtime critic of Roth's role as head of Human Rights Watch.

An article by Steinberg [here](#) takes not just Human Rights Watch, but other NGOs to task for their anti-Israel bias. And here are excerpts from one of Steinberg's eviscerations of Human Rights Watch, and of Kenneth Roth:

Human Rights Watch is playing a leading role in demonizing

Israel through false allegations of war crimes. HRW supported the UN report condemning Israel on Jenin (2002) and the attack on the separation barrier as a violation of international law (2004), charged Israel with “deliberate” and “indiscriminate” attacks on civilians in Lebanon (2006) and issued a flood of such allegations about Gaza (2009).

HRW also claimed credit for Judge Richard Goldstone’s one-sided UN “inquiry” on the Gaza fighting. Goldstone is a close confidant of HRW’s executive director Kenneth Roth, and was a member of HRW’s board.

But HRW has been shattered following revelations of systematic factual, moral and ethical violations, particularly with respect to Israel. Marc Garlasco, HRW’s “senior military analyst,” who wrote many of the accusations about Gaza, including the white phosphorous libel, was fired. This followed discovery of his obsessive collection of Nazi war memorabilia, but the deeper issues relate to the credibility of his military analyses. (The investigation HRW promised six months ago never happened, and instead, it imposed a gag order on Garlasco.) Garlasco is a symptom, and after NGO Monitor’s systematic revelations of HRW hypocrisy, founder Robert Bernstein denounced his own organization for helping undermine the principles of human rights. Articles by Jonathan Foreman in the Sunday Times and Benjamin Birnbaum in The New Republic have further exposed the mythology.

Based on interviews with HRW board members, employees and others, Birnbaum documented systematic bias and factual distortions. Sarah Leah Whitson (who led a bizarre fund-raising trip to Saudi Arabia, invoking the specter of the “pro-Israel” lobby) was brought in by Roth to head the Middle East and North Africa division. Whitson is an admirer of Norman Finkelstein, who, as Birnbaum notes, is a “Hizbullah supporter who has likened Israel to Nazi Germany” and accuses Jews of exploiting the Holocaust. In an e-mail, Whitson wrote of her “tremendous respect and admiration for him, because...

making Israeli abuses the focus of one's life work is a thankless but courageous task..."

Whitson deputy, Joe Stork, has at least 30 years of experience as a virulent pro-Palestinian activist. And four other MENA staff members, past and present, have similar "solidarity" backgrounds, which accounts for the systematic bias in HRW reports on Israel.

As former HRW board member Edith Everett told Birnbaum: "There was a commitment to a point of view – that Israel's the bad guy." Other insiders noted "a palpable hostility toward Israel among the HRW brass," and the attitude that "Israel's sort of like low-hanging fruit.

These revelations have also exposed the façade of HRW's "research," which parrots Palestinian testimonies. Garlasco spoke of being "pushed by HRW headquarters to focus on white phosphorous [used by Israel]... because... it was regarded as a headline-generating story."

He also confirmed the suspicion that Roth, Whitson and others deliberately ignored "necessary context when covering war" – such as war crimes committed by Yasser Arafat, Hamas and Hizbullah. HRW's rare and low-visibility reports on suicide bombers, Hamas and Hizbullah were token efforts to counter evidence of bias.

Roth fostered a culture of intimidation to hide his immoral tilt. Sid Sheinberg, vice-chairman of HRW's board, noted that "I've had staff members come to me and tell me off the record that they're not happy with the way this particular thing is being done, but they're not going to say" anything."

A former board member noted HRW's "intolerance for open dialogue."

In contrast to the obsessive focus on Israel, HRW was relatively quiet on Iran and its incitement to genocide. Roth

refused to join others in condemning President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's calls for Israel to be "wiped off the map" by quibbling about the way the statement had been translated. Birnbaum cites Roth's excuse that "it was not HRW's place to render judgments on such rhetoric."

Gregory Stanton, a respected professor of genocide studies and prevention, noted that HRW also opposed the creation of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, and "refused to call the genocide in Darfur by its proper name."

With HRW's reputation in ruins, one might have expected Roth, Whitson, Stork and others to have resigned in embarrassment, or face removal by board members responsible for oversight. But Roth and his remaining supporters still cling to power, and to control over a \$40 million annual budget.

Indeed, board member Kathleen Peratis, a staunch Roth loyalist, issued HRW's official response to these revelations, filled with pious and patronizing slogans. After declaring her "love for Israel," Peratis announced: "There is no bias against Israel... except in the minds of those who erroneously believe Israel is harmed by honest criticism. Far from harming it, I believe this work strengthens Israel.

The best defense that HRW can produce is a collection of vacuous clichés.

HRW's abuses have damaged not only Israel, but the moral and ethical foundations of human rights and international law. Only a complete restructuring of the top management, beginning with Roth and the entire Middle East division, can restore HRW's reputation.

You can find many more of Steinberg's scathing criticisms of Kenneth Roth and HRW [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Even the founder of Human Rights Watch, Robert Bernstein,

having read the detailed reports on how HRW under Kenneth Roth has defamed Israel, publicly denounced the organization for wanting “to turn Israel into a pariah state.” He uttered his anguished and angry conclusions in 2009. But a decade has gone by, and Kenneth Roth is still at the helm of HRW, still pocketing his \$350,000 a year pay package, and having surrounded himself with others, such as Sarah Whitson, who see Israel just as he does. The venomous coverage of Israel by HRW remains the same; Roth is unchanged and unrepentant.

In October 2009, the man who founded Human Rights Watch, Robert Bernstein, published in the New York Times his own criticism of HRW for the anti-Israel bias that had become so palpable under Kenneth Roth:

I must do something that I never anticipated: I must publicly join the group's critics. Human Rights Watch had as its original mission to pry open closed societies, advocate basic freedoms and support dissenters. But recently it has been issuing reports on the Israeli-Arab conflict that are helping those who wish to turn Israel into a pariah state.

Israel, with a population of 7.4 million, is home to at least 80 human rights organizations, a vibrant free press, a democratically elected government, a judiciary that frequently rules against the government, a politically active academia, multiple political parties and, judging by the amount of news coverage, probably more journalists per capita than any other country in the world – many of whom are there expressly to cover the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Meanwhile, the Arab and Iranian regimes rule over some 350 million people, and most remain brutal, closed and autocratic, permitting little or no internal dissent. The plight of their citizens who would most benefit from the kind of attention a large and well-financed international human rights organization can provide is being ignored as Human Rights Watch's Middle East division prepares report after

report on Israel.

Bernstein concluded with a warning:

Only by returning to its founding mission and the spirit of humility that animated it can Human Rights Watch resurrect itself as a moral force in the Middle East and throughout the world. If it fails to do that, its credibility will be seriously undermined and its important role in the world significantly diminished.

Not only did nothing change at HRW after Bernstein's attack, but Roth's fixation on the "human rights abuses" of Israel became ever more pronounced. He was joined in this anti-Israel activity by Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of HRW's Middle East and North Africa Division, who set out to prove that boasting about HRW's hostility to Israel could pay handsomely: she traveled to Saudi Arabia to raise money, enticing potential donors by "highlighting her organization's investigations of Israel, and its war with Israel's 'supporters,'" who, according to HRW, "are liars and deceivers."

Wikipedia's biography of Roth contains this:

In August 2006, during the war between Hezbollah and Israel, Roth rejected criticism of HRW's allegations against Israel, writing in a letter to the editor of The New York Sun: "An eye for an eye – or, more accurately in this case, twenty eyes for an eye – may have been the morality of some more primitive moment. But it is not the morality of international humanitarian law which Mr. Bell pretends to apply." In response, the head of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) referred to Roth's rhetoric as a reflection of "classic anti-Semitic stereotype about Jews"., arguing that disproportionate retaliation was justified and necessary against Israel's Arab enemies, and that Israel's actions in the war were justified

as legitimate attacks on military targets against an enemy using human shields.

In reaction to Richard Goldstone's recantation of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict report, HRW Founder Robert Bernstein said to the Jerusalem Post in April 2011, referring to Roth, that it "is time for him to follow Judge Goldstone's example and issue his own mea culpa."

An analysis of his tweets by NGO Monitor, alleges that Kenneth Roth shows "significant levels of sarcasm, vitriol, and deep-seated hostility" towards Israel.

On April 26, 2015, Roth drew criticism for attacking Israel for sending humanitarian aid to Nepal during the April 2015 Nepal earthquake, due to its blockade of Gaza, which he saw as a humanitarian crisis of "Israel's own making."

And [here](#) is the latest outrage from Kenneth Roth, who was interviewed by Israel's Kan broadcaster in late July:

A top official at the prominent NGO Human Rights Watch proved unable to explicitly say Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish state in a recent interview with an Israeli media outlet.

In conversation with Israel's Kan broadcaster, Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth was asked, "Do you support Israel's self-determination as a Jewish state?"

"Nobody's ever questioned the right of Israel to exist," Roth replied. "I mean, every state has a right to exist, but every state also has a duty to apply international human rights principles."

Nobody's ever questioned the right of Israel to exist"? Kenneth Roth hasn't been paying attention. Hundreds of millions of Arabs and Muslims question that right. The Iranian

ayatollahs do so all the time. So does Hasan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah. Hamas, in its charter, denies Israel's right to exist. So does the Palestinian Authority, to judge by its new school textbooks dripping with hate. Turkey's Erdogan questions Israel's "right to exist" and offers plans for a pan-Islamic military force to destroy Israel. The most influential Sunni cleric in the world, Youssef al-Qaradawi, whose sermons are broadcast live to tens of millions of Muslims worldwide, has declared that Israel has no right to exist. Saudi clerics, Egyptian professors, Iranian mullahs – you can find them all at www.MEMRI.org – declare that Israel has no right to exist. But for Kenneth Roth to admit to that would be to lend support to those who insist that Israel is under permanent siege and must be forceful in its military responses if it is to exist in a dangerous neighborhood where its survival can never be taken for granted. And lending support to Israel is something Kenneth Roth would never want to do.

“As a Jewish state?” the interviewer prodded.

“As a democracy,” Roth said. “In other words ...”

Roth carefully avoids using the phrase “Jewish state.” He doesn't forthrightly denounce the notion, but his way of sliding away from even repeating the phrase shows his evident distaste for the very idea.

“Not as a Jewish state?” the interviewer pressed again.

“Well, I mean, Israel can define itself any way it wants,” Roth said. “I mean, lots of governments define themselves in nationalist terms, but that's not an excuse ...”

If Israel calls itself a “Jewish state,” why does that so offend Kenneth Roth? Should the Jews be uniquely denied the right to a state they can call their own? Haven't the Arab

people twenty-two states of their own? Wasn't the Mandate for Palestine, and before it the Balfour Declaration, and before that, the Zionist movement founded by Theodore Herzl, all about creating the "Jewish state"? Wasn't that the whole point of allowing, and even encouraging – see Article 6 of the Mandate – Jews worldwide to settle in their ancient homeland for the express purpose of reconstituting that "Jewish state," a place where Jews could live freely and securely, by right and not on sufferance from others, no longer forced to live in a condition of permanent insecurity, and possibly endure persecution or – as recent history reminds us – much worse.

"Why do you have difficulty to define Israel as a Jewish state?" the interviewer asked.

"Well, because there are many Palestinians who live in Israel too who are citizens and deserve full rights," Roth said, seeming to imply that the presence of Arab citizens negates a Jewish right to self-determination.

When Roth says "the Palestinians who live in Israel...deserve full rights," he clearly means that in his view they do not have full rights now. What is he talking about? The Arab citizens of Israel do not only "deserve full rights," but they already possess those rights. They have the right to vote. They have their own political parties. They serve in the Knesset and on Israel's Supreme Court. They serve in the diplomatic corps, some as ambassadors. They attend Israeli schools and universities. They have access to the same health care that Jewish Israelis have. They have complete freedom to practice their religion. They may even, if they wish – though they are not required to – serve in the armed forces.

"So for me, the emphasis is, is Israel a state that respects the human rights values?" Roth added.

As the head of Human Rights Watch since 1993, Kenneth Roth has

been answering that question, repeatedly, with a resounding and grotesque “No.” He has consistently painted Israel as a country that does not respect “human rights values.” He accuses it of every kind of war crime. He ignores or minimizes the behavior of Hamas and Hezbollah, which to him appear not to merit the kind of blistering attack he regularly lets loose on Israel for the crime of trying to protect its people, from Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. He attacks Israel for targeting places that are normally civilian in character, such as mosques and school building, but where Hamas and Hezbollah store their weapons or from where they launch attacks. Roth hasn’t been nearly as indignant over the kidnapping and murder of Israeli soldiers, the killing of Israeli civilians, including small children, the support given to terrorists, who are lionized as “martyrs” and have squares named after them, while their families are provided with lifetime subsidies in the Pay-For-Slay program, the deliberate placing of Palestinian fighters and weapons, including missiles, in the middle of civilian areas, both in Gaza and in southern Lebanon, in order to limit Israel’s freedom to hit back. He’s not worried about the Palestinian textbooks, that instill a murderous hate for Jews. or the Palestinian television shows for children where sweet-faced kids declare they desire to kill Jews. None of these assaults on “human rights values” seem to matter very much to Kenneth Roth.

“Should Egypt not call itself an Arab state?” the interviewer queried.

“If that means that therefore people who are not Arabs are second-class citizens and don’t get respect for ...” Roth replied.

Roth doesn’t answer the question. But he knows perfectly well that Egypt’s official title is the “Arab Republic of Egypt.” He also knows that Copts are treated as second-class citizens, not just by the government, but by the Muslim Arabs

among whom the Copts live. Copts are not allowed to build new, or repair old, churches. If they then meet in private homes to worship, they are often set upon by local Muslims. Coptic churches have been bombed; hundreds of Coptic-owned shops have been destroyed. Copts have been murdered singly or in groups, for the crime of being Unbelievers. Even the number of Copts is a source of dispute. According to the government, there are only five million Copts in Egypt. The Copts themselves believe there are 15-18 million of them in Egypt, and that they are being deliberately undercounted so as to minimize their presence and their representation in political life.

“And that’s your impression, that Arabs who live in Israel are second-class citizens?” the interviewer interrupted.

“Well, the issue with Egypt, for example, has been, you know, are Coptic Christians given the same rights as Arab Muslims,” Roth said. “Or if you look in Iraq, are Sunnis or various minorities given the same rights as the Shi’a majority. In Iran, are Baha’is given the same as the majority there?”

Notice how Roth ignores the question he has been directly asked, about whether he thinks that the Arabs who live in Israel are second-class citizens. Of course he does: he begins his 2018 report on “Israel and Palestine” with this: “The Israeli government continued to enforce severe and discriminatory restrictions on Palestinians’ human rights.”

Instead he brings up Egypt, but only to leave hanging, as a question, “are Coptic Christians given the same rights as Arab Muslims?” He knows perfectly well that they are not. Why did he not say “the issue with Egypt has been the mistreatment of the Copts by both the government and Muslim individuals”? He then quickly mentions two other examples, in order to distance the discussion still further from the original question about how Arabs are treated in Israel: “Or if you look in Iraq, are Sunnis or various minorities given the same rights as the

Shi'a majority"? Those "various minorities," both ethnic and religious, that he carefully doesn't name – Christians, Yazidis, Kurds – include two more examples of Muslim persecution of non-Muslims (Christians, Yazidis), and Arab persecution of non-Arabs (Kurds).

Roth, still not answering the interviewer's question about Israel, continues: **"In Iran are Baha'is given [sic] the same as the majority there"**? He knows how the Baha'i are treated. They have been imprisoned for closing their shops on Baha'i religious holidays, and for proselytizing – often doing no more than explaining their faith – which has been described by Iranian officials as conducting "propaganda" against the state.

He brought up the treatment of minorities in Egypt, and in Iraq, and Iran, in order to avoid answering the question about what he thinks of Israel's treatment of its Arab citizens. Reflexively anti-Israel, he can't possibly tell the truth – that is, that Arab citizens have the same civil, religious, and political rights as Jewish citizens of the state. But Roth also recognizes that, given this interview format, making his usual charges against Israel for supposedly mistreating its Arab citizens would be rebutted convincingly and immediately, over the air, by a well-prepared interviewer. Charges he makes in those impressive-looking glossy reports Roth puts out for Human Rights Watch can seldom be rebutted with such immediacy; even the tireless Gerald Steinberg, founder and director of NGO Monitor, who has a great many dragons to slay, cannot always respond at once Roth in print.

"You can go around the world, there are always minorities, and for me, the essence of a democracy, the essence of a rights-respecting state, is to ensure that everybody in that state has respect for their rights," Roth went on to say.

If I understand Kenneth Roth correctly, he has just told us

that “a rights-respecting state” is a “state that respects rights.” We are supposed to believe, apparently, that now we are getting somewhere. For insights like that, Kenneth Roth receives an annual pay package of more than \$350,000.

The interviewer might have tried one final time to pin down, or hold up for inspection, the slippery Kenneth Roth: “Mr. Roth, would you agree that Israel is an advanced Western democracy, where all citizens – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – have equal rights, where Arabs serve in the Knesset, on the Supreme Court, in the diplomatic corps and even, though they are not required to but may volunteer, in the military?” What answer could he possibly give?

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