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# Amnesty International: from Ukraine to Israel, investigation into an ideological drift

Impartiality, solidarity, independence. The human rights organization claims its triptych of values everywhere. But, in the Middle East and Ukraine, the reality is less glorious...

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Amnesty France recently refused to describe the acts of Hamas as "terrorists".  
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Amnesty International is a bit like this old lady who is listened to carefully at family dinners. She is wise, impartial, ideologies do not seem to have a hold on her. Except that, in reality, these family dinners are international crises, and those who listen are leaders, journalists and civilians waiting for answers.

Since its creation in 1961 by British lawyer Peter Benenson, the human rights organization has become essential. Among his contributions: the abolition of the death penalty in Burkina Faso and Washington State, the decriminalization of homosexuality in India, the repeal of an article of the Irish Constitution that prohibited abortion, not to mention the release of hundreds of people unjustly imprisoned.

All these victories were obtained in compliance with three cardinal values: solidarity, independence, impartiality. But this moral triptych, crowned with a Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, seems to have taken on steam. The tragic events taking place in the Middle East are revealing. Certainly,

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the NGO denounced the crimes committed by Hamas against the Israeli civilian population. But how to interpret the presence of Amnesty International's branch at Harvard among the signatories, alongside several associations of the prestigious university, of a statement presenting Israel, the day after the Hamas attack on October 7, as responsible for "all the violence that is taking place"? How can we also understand the inability of Amnesty International France's president, Jean-Claude Samouiller, to describe Hamas as a "terrorist group"? Why does the NGO's secretary general, Agnès Callamard, persist in telling the microphone of Franceinfo on November 10 that "terrorism does not exist in international law", even though the organization has already used this term in the past to qualify the Boko Haram group?

"Accusations made by editorialists or influencers on social networks, then taken from account to account, or even from editorial to editorial, and which are not based on factual elements." This is what we should think about it, according to Amnesty France, interviewed by L'Express. Each time, criticism would come from people who "did not read what [the organization] wrote". But it is still in a statement published on November 7 on Amnesty France's website that the NGO's message is clearest: "In the face of accusations of worrying magnitude, we must denounce them and warn about the harmful impact they may have on the perception of our essential work of denouncing human rights violations". Understand: circulate, there is nothing to see.

## **"Dominants" vs "dominated"**

The malaise comes from further, and is not limited to semantic debates. For twenty years, the lawyer and former French ambassador for human rights François Zimeray has noted a "defeat of the fight against anti-Semitism by many NGOs, including Amnesty. Abandonment is all the more painful since it is part of their missions and their work is often irreplaceable. It is as if this issue is no longer part of human rights violations."

The one whose commitment to the defense of human rights dates back to his 17th birthday had time to question the attitude of these NGOs. He thus describes "a moralizing approach that prevents us from thinking about the world in its complexity, a way of seeing things through the prism of good and evil, the strong against the weak, to the point of not being able to

defend the victims with the same momentum as soon as they belong to the camp of the 'dominants'. How can we hesitate to call Hamas a 'terrorist' when we do not deprive ourselves of talking about 'apartheid' for Israel? Where is Amnesty's campaign to denounce state anti-Semitism in the Arab-Muslim world?"

Like François Zimeray, many have not digested Amnesty's report entitled "Israeli apartheid towards the Palestinian people", published in February 2022. Many observers then denounced a text considering "apartheid" as intrinsically

linked to the very creation of the Hebrew State. In reality, this document shocked even in the ranks of Amnesty, and this long before its publication...

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### ***"Pick and choose"***

"A biased report that violates Amnesty International's impartiality." These are the terms used in a letter sent on December 27, 2021 to the leaders of Amnesty International and signed by several members of Amnesty Israel's board of directors, after they were able to consult a first version of the said report. In their letter, which L'Express was able to consult, they denounce "inadequate research based on a '*pick and choose*' methodology [which] was used to verify the conclusions". "At the same time, the scope of the research, which was limited to the examination of the possible crime of apartheid in the [Palestinian] territories under Israeli occupation, the TPO, has been extended to the State of Israel without an adequate legal basis or

expertise," they said.

The publication is maintained. But, as D-Day approaches, there is a rumor in the circle of Israeli NGOs that members of Amnesty Israel's board of directors are considering taking a public position against the release of the report. On January 17, 2022, Amnesty Israel's board of directors received a letter, of which L'Express became aware, signed by five representatives of the most important Israeli associations working on the issue of Israeli occupation. The latter say they fear that a public position against the report will have "negative repercussions". Moreover, it is written that "this could hinder the positive and significant evolution of recent years, namely Jewish and Palestinian co-resistance, based on common values". Copies of this letter are Amnesty International's Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, as well as two members of the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) program directorate. This program, attached to the international secretariat, is responsible for conducting research in this geographical area. As a result, he was involved in the review process of the report in question before its publication.

### **"No waves"**

"We were caught between our conscience and reality," says Julia\*, a former employee of the Israeli section. Small sections such as Amnesty Israel depend on the financing of the movement and are largely controlled by the international secretariat and its regional offices. If we made waves, we would take the risk (as we were made to understand) that our section would suffer the consequences. We felt that there was a limit not to be crossed: to express disagreements between us, yes. But not in the eyes of all." As an indication, in 2022, the Israeli section received a loan of £240,000 (€275,000) from Amnesty International Limited, according to the company's financial report for the period ending December 31, 2022.

Asked, Amnesty International replied to L'Express that, "aware of the complexity and sensitivity of the issues addressed in this report, the international secretariat involved its colleagues in Israel throughout the four years from the initial planning phase to the writing of the report, and requested and integrated their comments. Amnesty International Israel's views on the application of the apartheid framework have been discussed for more than a year and many of these discussions have taken place at the

highest levels of the organization." The organization adds that it is aware of "the diversity of views regarding this report".

## "Pro présumée discrimination"

It will finally take six months after the release of the document to see what it costs to "make waves". On June 21, 2022, the board of directors of Amnesty Israel received a letter classified as "strictly confidential", signed by the presidency of the international board of directors, and which L'Express was able to consult exclusively. Reason: "serious concerns about the culture and governance of Amnesty's Israeli section", including a "deterioration in relations between Amnesty Israel and the international movement/secretariat", or a "misalignment of Amnesty Israel's leadership with Amnesty's position". On this point, the letter refers to the interview given by the director of Amnesty Israel on February 21, 2022 to *Zman Yisrael* (the Hebrew version of the *Times of Israel*), in which she made several criticisms against the famous report.

More surprising: "reports of racism and discrimination against Palestinians" were reportedly made to the international board of directors. In detail, "testimonials of alleged discrimination by members of the section's board of directors, former staff members and staff members of the international secretariat" are described.

The International Board of Directors requests that immediate measures be taken, as well as initiatives, to "restore trust". On the program: "renew the management" of Amnesty Israel, with a bonus "recommendation". Namely, "the section is considering the possibility of adopting a co-direction model including a Jewish leader and a Palestinian leader, as well as a Palestinian presidency". In the event of a lack of cooperation from the Israeli branch, Amnesty International even threatens to "suspend" its membership.

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As for the accusations of racism and discrimination, Amnesty International, interviewed by L'Express, explains that "discussions on complex issues of internal governance and discrimination issues continue

to take place between Amnesty's international council and Amnesty Israel's board of directors. It would be inappropriate and counterproductive to comment on these ongoing discussions."

## Political influences

"We did not understand where these accusations of racism and discrimination could come from, they absolutely did not reflect reality," says Julia, who worked for the Israeli section for several years. For me, this was further proof of the identity shift that Amnesty was taking. I also remember this sentence, pronounced by a Palestinian colleague while I was expressing my disagreement on all this: 'You have enough rights, now it's our turn!' 'You' meant 'you, the Jews'. In the same vein, some Palestinian members of the Israeli section (even on the board of directors) refused to use the official term 'Amnesty Israel', preferring 'Amnesty Tel-Aviv'. After this episode, Julia resigned.

"Sometimes, it was close to anti-Semitism," insists Ide\*, another ex-employee. One of my friends was told that she was not trusted because she was Israeli, the implication being that she was Jewish. When I met Amnesty, it was a professional organization with really meticulous research methods. But, over the last ten years, supporters and activists close to political movements, such as the BDS movement [Editor's note: "Boycott, divestment, sanctions" is a campaign launched by Palestinian NGOs in 2005 aimed at the full boycott of Israel] have been appointed to key positions in Amnesty's international secretariat and have been able to import their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

At the time of the publication of the report on "Israeli apartheid towards the Palestinian people", Saleh Hijazi was Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Program of

Amnesty International's International International International Secretariat and head of its regional office in East Jerusalem. Consistent sources indicate that he actively participated in the publication of the report on "apartheid committed by Israel". In particular, he was in copy of the letter sent by Israeli associations worried about a possible road exit of the Israeli section of Amnesty. Saleh Hijazi has since left Amnesty

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International. His current position? Coordinator of the "policy of the fight against apartheid" within the BDS movement. Requested by L'Express, the latter did not respond. For its part, Amnesty International says it is not "used to appoint the people involved in the production of its research reports", even if it confirms that, at the time of the publication of this report, Saleh Hijazi was indeed in the management of Amnesty's office in Jerusalem and led "the research team on Israel and the TPOs".

## "She seemed convinced"

Should we see an isolated case in this episode? Are we dealing here with an interference of ideology in the usually neutral defense of human rights? Or to a search for impartiality turning so much to obsession that it becomes biased?

This time we are in May 2022, in a hotel located in Kramatorsk, the capital of Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. While the Russian bombings shake the walls, journalist Tom Mutch, who covers [the war in Ukraine](#) for the British daily *Evening Standard*, meets the Amnesty International team in the hotel kitchen. The latter, including seasoned researcher Donatella Rovera, was dispatched to document the situation. "We exchanged on how Ukraine was defending itself militarily. Donatella Rovera's attitude shocked me a lot: she seemed convinced to me that Ukraine had committed war crimes and seemed to have already decided before even what her conclusions would be. When I asked her what the Ukrainian army should do to defend itself, she replied that this was not the subject, and that the military presence in a populated area was a "violation of international humanitarian law".

When Tom Mutch becomes aware of the [press release published on August 4](#), entitled "Ukrainian combat tactics endanger the civilian population", one point in particular is obvious to him. In the document, Amnesty International

writes: "the military has an obligation to avoid using schools located near houses or residential buildings filled with civilians, because this would endanger their lives, except in cases of absolute military necessity. If necessary, the military must then warn civilians and, if necessary, help them evacuate the premises. This clearly did not happen like that in the

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cases examined by Amnesty International."

However, this seems to have been the case for other journalists present in Ukraine, including Tom Mutch, who was able to "personally observe that the Ukrainian authorities and the army [had] often insisted that civilians leave active combat areas and [had] even offered evacuation assistance to those who wished to". Asked about Donatella Rovera's case, the NGO answers us: "All Amnesty International's research reports are subject to a rigorous approval process, involve multiple contributors and reviewers, and do not reflect the opinions of staff members. As for Donatella Rovera, she is a valued member of Amnesty International's staff and we are convinced that her human rights research meets the strictest professional standards in the research projects in which she participates." For her part, Donatella Rovera did not respond to L'Express.

### "Pro Propaganda gift"

Many observers had strongly criticized this press release when it was released. Starting with Edward Hunter Christie, a former NATO civil servant and researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. "This document demonstrated a rigid and above-ground application of international humanitarian law (also called the law of war), without taking into account the broader imperative of the defense of Ukrainian territory. If the Ukrainian troops had followed the recommendations of this Amnesty document (i.e. to move away from populated areas), they would certainly have suffered Russian missile attacks and, in the end, would have been less able to protect their civilian population. This does not mean that the military use of civilian objects can be done without certain precautions."

For the specialist, Amnesty's error was, in part, the result of an "incompetence" but above all of a habit: "Amnesty has often dealt with conflicts whose initial guilt is more difficult to attribute. The war in Ukraine is a very binary case of pure

aggression from Russia. I think that Amnesty has not managed to adapt its principle of 'impartiality' to this reality. In fact, the organization made a propaganda gift to Russia. This raises a question: if Amnesty no longer knows the difference between 'aggressor' and 'aggressor', what is the use of

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it?"

## "Impartiality"

A few days after the publication of the press release, on August 6, 2022, the head of Amnesty Ukraine, Oksana Pokalchuk, resigned, indicating that she had tried in vain to convince Amnesty International's management that the fact that the document did not take into account the point of view of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense was a problem. For its part, the organization said it contacted the Ministry of Defence on July 29, but did not get the answers in time to integrate them into its statement, published five days later. To L'Express, Amnesty International explains: "[We] subsequently acknowledged that this time was insufficient and that the Ukrainian government should have had more than five working days to respond to the information contained in the expanded press release of August 4. We are reviewing our procedures accordingly."

Should we go so far as to hypothesize Russian interference in the production of this press release? On the contrary, according to an informant, a member of the Ukrainian section when the document was in preparation, the reason for this fiasco would rather be, again, to this concern for "impartiality". "When we expressed the need to give the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (which still manages and manages a full-time war) a certain time to respond, the team responsible for producing the document opposed us to the need to be 'impartial' in documenting the documentation of the conflict. We did not understand the urgency. From my point of view, the general management wanted to avoid appearing conciliatory with the Ukrainian camp."

In April 2023, the New York Times published an article about the existence of an independent report commissioned by Amnesty following this episode which, while it acknowledged that it was "appropriate" for a rights organization to criticize violations committed by a victim of aggression, nevertheless unanimously concluded, according to the newspaper, that "Amnesty International had botched its statement in several ways and that its main conclusions that Ukraine was violating international law 'were not sufficiently substantiated' by the available evidence". When "impartiality" sounds hollow.

*\* The first names have been changed.*

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