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NEWS REVIEW

I founded a charitable trust nearly 30 years ago, working on human rights issues such as torture, conditions of detention, freedom of expression, and sexual violence in conflict.

The Sigrid Rausing Trust funds other causes, too, but human rights is our oldest programme, and our area of expertise. We enter into long-term partnerships with our grantees, based on trust and shared values. Language – the only way to gauge those values – has always been important to us: we ask for clarity and brevity in funding applications and reports, and we mistrust inflated mission and vision statements. More importantly, following Charity Commission guidance, we have strong clauses in our grant contract requiring grantees to abstain from incendiary language that may promote violence.

At times of heightened tension, we check our grantees' websites and social media accounts. After the October 7 atrocities, a handful – only five out of some 400 – had posted disturbing material: a group working on social and economic rights in Tunisia expressed "pride" (our translation) in the Hamas action. Another called for "support for the guerrilla Palestinian people in their war against the Zionist entity", which they said "was shaken due to the action of the Palestinian resistance [...] invading the occupied lands and Zionist settlements". A media group in Lebanon described the Hamas action as "resistance" to "colonisation", referred to the murdered civilians as "settlers" and dismissed Israeli information about Hamas' atrocities as "lies".

The outlier, if only in terms of geography, was a group in Canada that almost immediately termed Israel's actions "genocidal", and described the country as a "settler colonialist white-supremacist state". The statement ended with an echo of a United Nations resolution; an affirmation of "the right of all oppressed peoples to self-determine their resistance". It is a phrase which, given the context of the piece, we felt condoned the Hamas atrocities.



I CUT OFF CASH TO COMBAT

Atrocities against civilians are obviously contrary to human rights and international humanitarian law, and we cancelled our contracts with the groups in question. It wasn't a hard decision to make, but it drew criticism from activists in the US who seemed to have wilfully misunderstood what we did and why. Here is Vu Le, a philanthropy critic, on LinkedIn: "Defunding organisations that are speaking up against genocide is the worst of all crappy funding practices. I hope The Sigrid Rausing Trust will find its moral compass and courage to stand with grantees who are speaking for Palestinians' human rights and liberation." One women's rights activist agreed with this post and said that SRT seemed to have become "a funding organisation that is actually unclear about what it means to stand up for human rights".


I have been wondering since then how these activists and our former grantees understand human rights, a field in which practitioners used to be known, and should be known, for their rigorous adherence to truth. How did the field become entangled with the sort of anti-Zionism we see playing out on certain university campus protests or in hard-left actions in politics?

In the early 1990s the field of human rights was informed primarily by law and by evolving methods of collecting and recording evidence and testimony. It was a movement that elevated impartiality to a principle – the degree to which human rights groups were attacked from both the left and the right was a point of pride. In the wake of 9/11, the US began its war on terror. Terror suspects were detained indefinitely and subjected to so-called enhanced interrogation techniques". And both the US and UK employed extreme rendition, the outsourcing of torture to other countries.

The war on terror brought human rights practitioners and terror suspects together. Human rights lawyers and organisations – some of them our grantees – helped terror suspects swept up in the

ANTISEMITISM. THEN THINGS GOT NASTY

The philanthropist
Sigrid Rausing reveals the
criticism she suffered when
she resisted human rights
groups who act as apologists
for terrorism rather than
standing up for truth



ABAT ISM...

been abandoned. Without human rights lawyers, many would have disappeared into voids beyond legal reach, and some were innocent victims, sold to CIA operatives in a grisly human trade: post 9/11 America needed terrorists to interrogate and punish, and it was willing to pay for them. But the support that human rights advocates gave to terror suspects may have helped to later legitimise a dubious discourse mixing the vocabulary of human rights and social justice with troubling apologies for terrorism and dark anti-Zionist slogans.

Politics has shifted, and ideas we once took for granted are slipping through our fingers. The right has rejected the human rights movement, associating it with judicial over-reach and global-elite media control, and parts of the left have appropriated it, without fully signing up to all its principles, not least that of political impartiality.

Meanwhile, the BBC version of impartiality, placing broadcasters in the artificial centre of every argument with reference only to vague ideas of "British values", has degraded the very idea of impartiality. The centre by itself, without its concomitant intellectual history, is nothing but an empty space.

I did research on a former collective farm in Estonia in 1993-4, a time of rapid social transformation, analysing language use and slogans. I am still interested in political language, and in how it tends to fragment under pressure into set expressions flagging allegiance. The tired phrases of our former grantees quoted above, "settler colonialist white-supremacist state" or "Zionist entity", are slogans, a form of propaganda that came to be broadly understood as meaningless and/or a source of ironic jokes in the last stages of the Soviet Union.

But the entanglement between antisemitism and anti-Zionism has deep Soviet roots. The 1948 Soviet campaign against so-called "rootless cosmopolitans" was openly antisemitic, as was the infamous 1952 Doctors' Plot. The leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee

were shot in the cellars of the Lubyanka that same year, accused, inter alia, of "disloyalty", "bourgeois nationalism", and "cosmopolitanism". Anti-Zionism and antisemitism were one in the Czechoslovakian anti-Jewish purge culminating in the Slansky trial (1952), which, incidentally, included a charge of collaboration with "Zionist-Imperialist" Americans. I don't believe that most of the protesters and campus occupiers who were active in the last few years are personally antisemitic, but it's hard to find the putative separation between anti-Zionism and antisemitism convincing when the two concepts are so clearly entangled in history.

People taking those slogans at face value tend to get caught up in thorny definitions, self-defeating webs of rigidly patrolled identity politics like the disturbing (if well-intentioned) claim that Jews or Israelis are not actually "white". Some are and some aren't, obviously, but we have stooped low indeed if a defence of Israel comes to rest on the degraded premise of racial classification. The words settler/colonial/white supremacist don't reflect reality, exactly – they are a slur, a cut-and-paste insult lifted from other contexts. "As soon as certain topics are raised," Orwell wrote in his seminal 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language", "... [the] prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house".

Nothing much happened after our bruising social media experience. There were whispers and conversations behind closed doors. Some members of the International Human Rights Funders Network were said to be "uncomfortable" about sharing a platform with us at a conference, so we withdrew. We should have held our ground, I now think – we might have persuaded some of them that sympathy with a cause (or a people) can never justify violence against civilians. That clearly applies to both sides of the Israel Palestine conflict. Binyamin Netanyahu's policies, including support for violent settlers on the West Bank and attempts to undermine the judiciary, have been profoundly unjust, and deeply damaging to Israel. Gaza lies in ruins, and the IDF may have committed war crimes. But terrorism is always wrong, and politically a dead end or worse.

The massacre of October 7 stems from that broad and murky political tradition, and whatever words Hamas used to legitimise their action as they planned it, they could have been in no doubt that thousands of their own people would likely perish in the Israeli retribution.

As for the Sigrid Rausing Trust, we now have a more limited regional focus (Eurasia, the Balkans and Turkey), fund more anti-corruption work and have started a number of focused initiatives.

One of our grantees in Serbia told me last year that she doesn't have hope, she has commitment. I feel much the same.

The Sigrid Rausing Trust has committed £591 million in grants in its history

campaign against terror. Some of the detainees were innocent while others were clearly not, but for human rights lawyers the point was more to do with defending the principles of due legal process and a ban on torture than it was defending the innocent. Indeed, one of the human rights arguments was that the detainees, guilty or not, could not be tried in the US, because confessions had been forced under torture, and as such were not admissible in American courts.

The hardening of the American right in the years after 9/11 led many to associate human rights with being soft on terror. In the UK, the term came to be associated with the hard left of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn and the Stop the War coalition, which included groups with ambiguous or even sympathetic stances on terrorism.

In 2014 President Obama blandly admitted that "we tortured some folks", and nothing much was said about CIA transgressions after that. The right moved on to immigration as a grievance narrative, then trans rights. I am not saying that the terror suspects should have

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'Colonialist' is a cut-and-paste slur lifted from another context