

IDEAS

The Double Standard in the Human-Rights World

Organizations that explicitly valued impartiality and independence have become stridently critical of Israel.

By Michael Powell

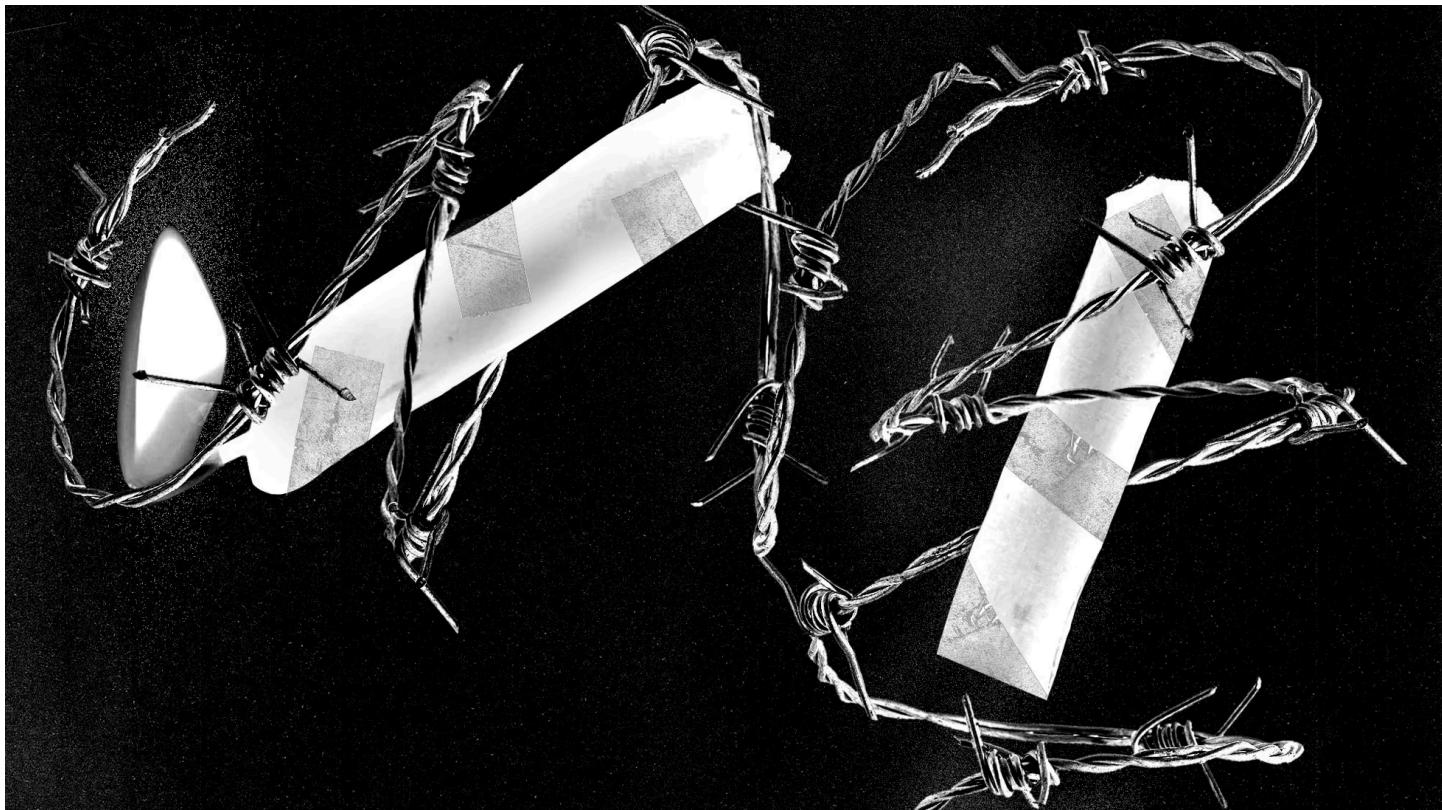


Illustration by Mark Harris

MARCH 27, 2025

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THE DEMONSTRATION IN LONDON was like so many others in the past year and a half. A swell of pro-Palestinian demonstrators, tens of thousands of them, banged drums and chanted against Israel. Although this march in early October observed the one-year anniversary of the day Hamas militants broke a cease-fire by invading Israeli territory, the marchers paid no heed to the civilians who were murdered or kidnapped.

The U.K. chapter of the world's largest human-rights organization, Amnesty International, echoed the marchers' point of view. The official Amnesty UK account on X promoted a video of an unnamed young female protester clad in a red shirt and a keffiyeh. She peered into the camera and said: "Don't let anyone tell you this all started on the seventh of October, 2023."

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The video showed a demonstrator's placard: IT'S BEEN 76 YEARS & 364 DAYS—a reference to events that culminated in the founding of Israel in the late 1940s. The implication: Israel, a member state of the United Nations, has no right to exist. The clip, which Amnesty UK captioned "It didn't start one year ago," drew 9.7 million views. Amnesty employees around the world shared it.

The social-media promotion of this march marked an astonishing shift for one of the world's most prominent human-rights organizations. Amnesty's handbook declares that it is "independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion. It does not support or oppose any government or political system, nor does it necessarily support the views of the victims whose rights it seeks to protect."

Amnesty's goal was to serve as an advocate for victims and prisoners of conscience,



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now dominate many conversations about the Jewish state, which a constellation of groups casts as uniquely illegitimate—a regressive, racist ethnic “Western” state in an Arab sea.

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Rasha Khoury, the president of the board of Doctors Without Borders USA and a surgeon who has worked courageously in war zones, might be seen as the embodiment of this new tendency in the human-rights establishment. She was born in the occupied Palestinian territories. A month after the Hamas attack and the beginning of the Israeli counterattack, she posted an essay on the organization’s digital bulletin board, known as the Souk, the Arabic word for “market.” “We must decolonize our minds,” she wrote. “The mainstream discourse around the unhinged bombardment and massacre of Palestinians in Gaza by Israeli forces for the last 33 days continues to affirm the colonizer’s world view, one rooted in white supremacist logic.”

Not long after October 7, Khoury was among the co-authors of “Violence in Palestine Demands Immediate Resolution of Its Settler Colonial Root Causes”—an article in the journal *BMJ Global Health* that, subsequent commentators argued, ignored Hamas’s role in triggering the Israeli invasion and incorrectly blamed the Jewish state for a deadly missile strike. In a follow-up article, Khoury and her co-authors responded to the criticism with scorn. “Demands for ‘corrections,’” they declared, “are almost always demands to acquiesce to Israeli state propaganda.”



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Human-rights groups fairly argue that disagreeing with Israel's actions and policies is not anti-Semitic, but they have become more and more averse even to considering Israel's side. "There's clearly a leftist perspective that would like to do away with Israel," the longtime Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth told me. Roth led the group for decades before stepping down in 2022 and maintained that his former employer did not share this perspective. Some other former employees of the group disagreed. "The trend is to substitute ideology and personal belief for the principles of the human-rights movement," Danielle Haas, who left her job as a senior editor at Human Rights Watch, told me.

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Earlier this year, Amnesty International took the extraordinary step of suspending its Israel chapter, after that chapter criticized a report accusing Israel of committing genocide in Gaza. In an internal email to colleagues in Europe, Amnesty Israel deputy director Yariv Mohar suggested that the broader organization was playing into "a zero-sum victimhood game, as if any attention or acknowledgment to the victimhood of one side comes at the expense of the other."

Major human-rights groups' shift toward overt opposition to Israel has had the unusual effect of sidelining many of Israel's own activists, who historically are among the sharpest critics of the Israeli government's behavior in Gaza and the West Bank. These activists—along with many Jewish counterparts around the world—object to the reflexive condemnation of Israel and wrestle with questions they find vexing: How can the country protect itself from Hamas? What would a proportionate, defensible response to October 7 look like?

[Riv Vellin is a longtime left-wing human rights activist in Israel who has worked](#)



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WITHIN HUMAN-RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, anger toward Israel has been simmering for decades, particularly as the country's politics have shifted rightward and its settlements have expanded in the West Bank. On October 7, the divide within the human-rights movement over Israel began to seem unbridgeable, in particular to many Jewish employees. That morning, Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters viciously attacked Israel, slaughtering civilians before retreating back into Gaza, where they gathered their armaments and hid in tunnels, using the dense civilian population aboveground as human shields. Hospitals, schools, and universities—all became hiding spots for Hamas militants.

Israel responded with a relentless, at times brutal, invasion of Gaza, in which many thousands of Palestinian civilians, including children, were killed. This has given rise to a heated debate about whether such actions can be justified. Many critics have argued that Israel, as a democracy that professes to follow modern rules of war, has an obligation to minimize civilian casualties, and they point to abundant evidence that Israel chose to drop bombs on Hamas militants and headquarters even when aware that these sites were crowded with civilians. Even some Israelis have objected to the duration of the war and felt that it was too driven by feelings of rage and revenge. The international human-rights movement has gone further. Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and Doctors Without Borders have all accused Israel of crimes against humanity and acts of genocide. Some human-rights leaders have openly questioned Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

Over the past six months, I've reviewed internal emails and hundreds of social-media posts by leaders of prominent human-rights organizations. I've also spoken with more than two dozen Jewish employees of these groups, nearly all of whom described a



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supremacist state. More than half of Israeli Jews are descendants of those who lived in Arab countries, Iran, and Ethiopia; a great many others have ancestors who were driven from Europe by the Nazis.

A former top executive with a well-known human-rights organization noted the frustration inherent in trying to draw evenhanded distinctions that were once elementary in the human-rights world. “Hamas has an obligation under international law not to use human shields and to distinguish between military and civilian targets,” this person, who asked not to be identified to avoid further alienating former colleagues, said. “But if you bring this up internally, it’s framed as a distraction, an Israeli talking point.”

The leaders of the world’s most prominent human-rights groups have displayed little appetite for acknowledging the uncertainty and moral murk of the Gaza war. On October 17, 2023, the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry reported that Israel had bombed the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital and killed close to 500 Palestinians. Amnesty and Doctors Without Borders immediately picked up on that claim: The leaders of the latter group posted about the Israeli “massacre” on their social-media feeds. And Human Rights Watch’s director of Israel and Palestine issues, Omar Shakir, amplified a post blaming Israel for the attack. He added: “Abject horror. THIS MUST END.”

Shakir backed off a few hours later, saying that his organization was investigating. And to its credit, Human Rights Watch did so judiciously. A month later, it reported that the explosion likely was caused by a misfired Palestinian missile, which hit a paved area next to a parking lot and not the hospital itself. It also faulted the Gaza Health Ministry for reporting a death toll that is “significantly higher than other estimates, displays an unusually high killed-to-injured ratio, and appears out of proportion with the damage visible on site.” (Unlike Amnesty and Doctors Without Borders, Human Rights Watch has also released a report that researched and documented Hamas’s war crimes on October 7.)

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To this day, Doctors Without Borders has not removed its debunked claims of Israeli malfeasance from its social-media feed.

Doug Sandok worked with Doctors Without Borders in Rwanda, Chechnya, and Sri



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He became Amnesty's advocacy director for Europe and Central Asia, covering territory that stretched from Russia to Afghanistan to Ukraine. He admired the courage and creativity that his colleagues showed in documenting human-rights abuses. One used a fragment of an exploded shell that killed civilians to track down and publicly identify the armaments manufacturer; another donned a niqab and traveled through a war zone, documenting the crimes of a government and its secret police.

Slowly, however, Balson noticed a harshness creeping in whenever the subject of Israel arose. In particular, when he visited Amnesty's global headquarters in London, he sensed an antipathy toward Israel and anyone who identified as a Zionist.

On the morning of October 7, Balson checked and rechecked his messages to see if Israeli friends had been harmed. Then he scrolled the Amnesty International website, which issued a statement that day deplored that "civilians on both sides" were "paying the price of unprecedented escalation in hostilities between Israel and Gaza." That statement just once referred to Hamas, which controls the government of Gaza, preferring the term "Palestinian armed groups."

Balson turned to X and saw that his colleague Rasha Abdul-Rahim, then the director of technical services for Amnesty, had claimed that although she was distressed by reports of Palestinian fighters dancing on Israeli bodies, Palestinians had suffered worse for decades. She added: "To be truly anti racist and decolonial is to recognise that resistance against oppression is sometimes ugly."

That night Balson wrote his resignation letter. Amnesty International's time-honored approach, he wrote to his supervisors, was to decode the motivations, anxieties, and limitations of a nation and its leaders, even when those are disagreeable. None of that seemed to apply to Israel. Amnesty's approach, he wrote, "has shown such disdain for Israelis' existential fears that it seems deliberately calculated to repel rather than attract and persuade."

Even Amnesty's sparing acknowledgment of Hamas's role on October 7 had proved too pro-Israeli for some staffers, who insisted that Amnesty's statement was too understanding of Israel. As debate grew within the organization, and some Jewish staffers argued for measured tones, other Amnesty employees complained that such arguments were "triggering" and accused Jewish colleagues of Islamophobia, multiple



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should be preserved as a state for the Jewish people,” he said at a luncheon of the Woman’s National Democratic Club in Washington, D.C. He subsequently expressed regret for his remarks and said that Amnesty “takes no position on the legitimacy or existence of any state, including Israel.” (Israel’s 2 million Arab citizens vote and are represented in the country’s Parliament and on its supreme court.)

But making stridently anti-Israel remarks, whether in person or online, is not a barrier to gaining a prominent role at Amnesty. In April 2022, a Palestinian gunman killed three Israeli civilians in Tel Aviv. Rasha Abdel Latif, a human-rights activist in D.C., reposted a social-media statement written in Arabic that stated: “This land is our land ... The occupation has no choice but to leave.”

Four days later, Amnesty USA appointed Latif to its board. Two people told me that angry Jewish employees demanded a meeting with O'Brien and management, during which O'Brien conceded that, yes, Latif's social-media post could be read as anti-Jewish. But he said that she had learned her lesson and that the board would not censure her so as to avoid giving comfort to the organization's critics. Latif's critics accused Amnesty of treating her as a victim. "The only reason she was not removed from the board is that the victims of her bias were Jewish," Balson told me.

Writing inflammatory social-media posts has become common among Amnesty officials. On the first day of 2024, Abdul-Rahim, the former technical-services director, posted on X, “Happy new year to everyone except the #israeli apartheid state.” Even Amnesty USA’s official website features dubious statements. In May, Amnesty put up a collage of footage from its “Solidarity With Gaza” conference, accompanied by music from the hip-hop artist Macklemore. “Who gets the right to defend and who gets the right of resistance has always been about dollars and the color of your pigment, but white supremacy is finally on blast,” Macklemore said in his rap about Israel.

I asked O'Brien about that post, which at a minimum seemed ignorant of Israel's actual demographics. O'Brien said he was unfamiliar with it (though it had been on Amnesty USA's site for half a year, even after employees had complained about it to senior managers). I sent him a link, and he replied the next day: "Thanks for flagging that post. We have removed it as it did not follow our internal guidelines."

THIS PAST FALL, on the anniversary of the October 7 attack, an extraordinary



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French physicians founded Doctors Without Borders in the aftermath of a civil war and famine in Nigeria. Its charter committed to providing medical care without regard to politics, race, or nationality. But five staffers, all of whom spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of endangering their jobs, described an environment in which their colleagues refused to entertain any nuance about the Jewish state. In November, for example, Javid Abdelmoneim, the former president of Doctors Without Borders UK, endorsed a full boycott of Israel, writing on X: “Invest no other time on Israel other than to cut it out of your life.”

Michael Goldfarb, a former longtime communications director for Doctors Without Borders, had worked in desolate and dangerous corners of the world. But his patience for his former employer eventually reached an end. He posted last year on the Souk, writing of his frustration with the “blatantly hate filled and, yes, anti-Semitic responses” within the organization to the anonymous Souk statement. “Fear of retaliation, silencing, and ostracism grips many MSF colleagues,” he wrote, using the French abbreviation for Doctors Without Borders, “who nonetheless courageously endorsed the publication of the post.” (Goldfarb declined my request for further comment.)

As if to underline his statement about organizational intolerance, Doctors Without Borders employees let loose on the Souk, going after Goldfarb and all those who signed the statement. “I leave you with your hatred, your racism and your victimization (We’re used to it!),” one rank-and-file staffer wrote. Another employee, Olivier Falhun, of the press office in Paris, responded to the dissenters, “At the risk of offending your principles-based catechism, I can’t resist sharing with you a self-evident solution … ‘We’ll have to give the land back. It’s as simple as that.’”

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These and similar statements have remained on the organization-wide site for many months. (I sought to talk with senior leaders at Doctors Without Borders USA about this atmosphere and other questions regarding Israel. A press officer, Brienne Prusak, wrote back that “we are respectfully going to decline.”)

The organization’s one-sided view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict goes beyond incendiary sentiments on message boards and social media. The fact is that the hospitals they worked in were often home to Hamas gunmen and armaments.



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of a desire to continue to work in the human-rights field, told me. “Doors were hidden. There were units you did not get into, that had armed guards at the door.”

Laws of war require soldiers to act with great care when fighting around hospitals, and none of this testimony would justify Israeli brutality. Likewise, however, humanitarian groups such as Doctors Without Borders claim to observe the principle of bearing witness to abuses—an obligation that includes challenging armed groups such as Hamas that risk civilian lives by using hospitals as bases and hiding spots.

Months after that Israeli operation at Al-Shifa, Hamas’s subterfuge was exposed—as was the willful ignorance of Doctors Without Borders. A New York Times investigation strongly suggested that Hamas used Al-Shifa for cover and to store weapons. U.S. spy agencies went further, saying that Hamas used Al-Shifa as a command center and that it held hostages there. That would be a war crime.

Last June, Doctors Without Borders accused Israel of killing one of its staff physiotherapists, Fadi Al-Wadiya, as he biked to work. Organization officials portrayed this as a war crime, an innocent family man slaughtered. An official statement said, “There is no justification for this; it is unacceptable.”

Doctors Without Borders posted a photo of Al-Wadiya’s fractured bicycle. Word circulated that he had been a fighter with Islamic Jihad, a radical group that allied with Hamas on October 7. The organization vigorously denied this. Then the Israeli army released photos of Al-Wadiya, who it said was a rocket specialist, wearing an Islamic Jihad uniform. Doctors Without Borders ultimately conceded that it was “deeply concerned by these allegations” and said it would “never knowingly employ” a fighter.

A staffer involved in hiring for Doctors Without Borders spoke of great organizational pressure to expand hiring in Gaza. “We were told not to check backgrounds,” this employee told me, adding that one office in Gaza had two known Hamas militants. “Our Arab staff was greatly concerned because to be in the same room with operatives put all at risk.”

This staffer paused. “Look, I’m truly not defending Israel; there is a lot in its actions to criticize,” this person said, adding that Doctors Without Borders had been “blindly pro-Palestinian to an extent that was destructive. And if you were Jewish and questioned it, you were just waved off”



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Amnesty has moved with far more dispatch to stamp out dissent within its ranks. Amnesty's Israeli chapter is known for feisty independence, taking on Netanyahu's government and at times its own international parent group. The Israeli branch has maintained that, although it was not downplaying "the many horrific atrocities made by Israel in Gaza, which, according to the information we have, seems, on the surface, to have crossed the threshold of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing," it viewed Amnesty's accusation of genocide as poorly reasoned. The genocide claim, the chapter argued, seemed designed to "support a popular narrative among Amnesty International's target audience." The Israeli branch, frustrated with the broader organization's silence on such questions, also began what it called a "pro-human campaign" to condemn both what it saw as anti-Semitism in some worldwide protests and the Islamophobia inside Israel, and to point out that extremists on both sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict promote ideologies of annihilation.

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The campaign announcement angered top Amnesty officials in the United States and Europe. Last May, Erika Guevara-Rosas, the senior director of global research, advocacy, policy, and campaigns, ordered the Israeli chapter to end its campaign. "Given the serious reputational and legitimacy risk, I am asking you to take this document down from all your platforms immediately," she wrote in an email that I obtained.

The right-wing Israeli government and its supporters frequently clash with the country's Amnesty chapter. For their part, Amnesty International leaders view the Israeli branch as rogue and disloyal, and in January, not long after the criticism of the genocide report, they suspended the chapter for two years. Amnesty emails suggest that this could turn into a full expulsion. Tiumalu Lauvale Peter Fa'afiu, the New Zealand-born chair of Amnesty's international board, wrote to his team that it must decide "whether Amnesty International Israel has a future within the Amnesty Movement."

These emails revealed that Amnesty leaders planned in advance to deflect the Israeli chapter's criticism of their genocide report by accusing it of "endemic anti-Palestinian racism." A Fa'afiu email underlined the real grievance: The Israeli branch had tried to "publicly discredit Amnesty's human rights research and positions."



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He exhaled. “Some days I feel like I’ve just been a useful idiot.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Michael Powell is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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