



Opinion

Opinion • Amnesty's Descent Into McCarthyism: The Case of Israel, Gaza and Genocide

Dissenting in today's increasingly dogmatic human rights movement is rapidly becoming an act of kamikaze bravery. Amnesty Israel's members are finding that out the hard way, after they rejected the conclusions of the organization's new report determining Israel had committed genocide in Gaza



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When Amnesty International recently released a report concluding that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza, not all members agreed.



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their jobs, professional sidelining, and personal attacks.

I know, since I am one of the few who have spoken out in recent times about troubling practices that I saw over 13 years as senior editor at Human Rights Watch (I am a "disgruntled ex-employee" in the attack phase). Other people I spoke to have taken a quieter stance, especially since October 7. They "chose" to leave their human rights or humanitarian NGOs because of what they describe as an alarming rate of tolerance for compromised principles and rising antisemitism.

Members of Amnesty Israel are currently discovering the price of disagreeing, one frightening step into human rights NGO McCarthyism at a time.

It began when members of the organization's Israel chapter raised a legal argument to counter the report's conclusion: genocide.

Amnesty Israel members agreed that Israeli actions in Gaza had resulted in horrific atrocities and may well have crossed the threshold of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

But they rejected the legal interpretation the



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group, in whole or in part; and 2. that genocide is "the only possible inference" based on available facts.

Human rights are, of course, filled with exegesis and debate, and have been ever since the drafters of their Rosetta Stone, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, parsed and parried in the 1940s over its formulation. The decades since have been filled with figuring out just how and when to apply its principles.



But the alternative hypothesis of Amnesty Israel did not sit well with its mother ship. In an internal message, which was also sent to the media, no time was lost in providing a masterclass on how to transform a trusted colleague into a spurned traitor.



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Next, assert supreme authority: "Determining whether a situation constitutes genocide is a matter of international law, not opinion."

Then, undermine and counterattack. "On the other hand," it said, recent resignations in Amnesty Israel "due to the silencing of Palestinian voices and those who support them reflects deep internal division within the section." This refers to internal tensions about Palestinian representation within the local office.

And finally, promise justice: "The silencing of Palestinian voices by AI Israel is unacceptable and will be addressed through Amnesty's international, democratic processes."

Never mind that Amnesty played a little fast and loose regarding details – for example while the Geneva Conventions define genocide, determining whether and when it applies is a matter of interpretation, and has been since they were written in 1949.



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The real punch came when it flipped the script.

Strictly speaking, the phrase "on the other hand" introduces "the second of two contrasting points, facts, or way of looking at things." Not in today's ideological human rights movement, where the "other hand" does not weigh other views, it crushes them.

In Amnesty's case, the message was clear: these people dispute the genocide of Palestinians; and "on the other hand" they do not listen to Palestinian voices anyway, so what do you expect?

And in the blink of a meta-narrative, Amnesty Israel members who last week might have thought the biggest fight on their hands was crafting a good argument about the Geneva Conventions in response to the report, now face the prospect of defending their reputations, and possibly their jobs against thinly veiled charges that they are racists.



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The odds are not in their favor, since the overseer and dispenser of justice is Amnesty itself.

It's not clear what the organization's "international democratic processes" entail, but of course, human rights NGOs are mostly self-regulating and answer to virtually no one but themselves. That means whatever justice awaits will be NGO-style: self-designed and enacted by their own judges and jury.

Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnes Callamard has already made clear where her sympathies lie, publicly thanking for his "courage and principles" the former recent head of the Amnesty chapter who resigned his post because of what he said was the unequal treatment of Palestinians there.



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But once an organization turns against its own members, it is a dangerous day for human rights. Members who have dedicated their professional lives – and much of their private ones – to fighting their own government, occupation, and for Palestinian rights, often incurring the disdain of their own society for doing so.

It is a dark day when it portrays colleagues who have themselves initiated policies to include more Palestinian voices as hostile to them.

It is a frightening day when an international organization dedicated to free speech cuts off colleagues who posit an alternative legal interpretation, with allusions to racism and insinuations abound that they can't make a clear-eyed argument related to Israel because they are Jewish. Some people might even call this racist.

If *these* are the enemies of human rights, it's worrying to think about who human rights NGOs count as their friends.

In the 1950s, Joseph McCarthy ferreted out "enemies from within" by accusing them of Communism.

Today's human rights NGOs raise different specters:



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Eventually, the Senate censured McCarthy, and brought his reign of terror to an end. But the years of the Red Scare cast a long shadow until today –a somber reminder of what can happen when institutions are corrupted, power is left unchecked, and ideology takes the reins.

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