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Fundraising Corruption at Human Rights Watch

By Jeffrey Goldberg

JULY 15, 2009

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An on-line Wall Street Journal op-ed posted two days ago alleged that Human Rights Watch officials went trolling for dollars in Saudi Arabia, and that the organization's senior Middle East official, Sarah Leah Whitson, attempted to extract money from potential Saudi donors by bragging about the group's "battles" with the "pro-Israel pressure groups."

This is a serious allegation, and one I found difficult to believe, because Human Rights Watch has always been moderately careful about the optics of its fundraising efforts. The group's credibility, of course, rests on its neutrality; playing traditional enemies off each other as a way to collect money from one (or both) sides in a conflict seems beyond the pale. (Let's put aside for now the queasy-making image of a human rights organization venturing into one of the world's most anti-democratic societies to criticize one of the Middle East's most democratic states.)

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Another problem here, of course, is that Sarah Leah Whitson, if the allegation against her is to be believed, trafficked in a toxic stereotype about Jews in a country that bans most Jews from even crossing its borders, and whose religious leadership often propagates the crudest expressions of anti-Semitism. The term pro-Israel lobby, of course, means something very different on the Arabian peninsula than it does here. Here, even to critics of AIPAC, it means a well-funded, well-oiled political machine designed to protect Israel's interests in Congress. In much of the Arab world, "pro-Israel pressure group" suggests a global effort by Jews to dominate the world politically, culturally and economically.



I'm not one of the people who believes that Human Rights Watch is reflexively anti-Israel, and I think the group has done admirable work exposing Israel's human rights violations (and admirable work, of course, exposing human rights violations across the Middle East). But this allegation, if proven true, would cast serious doubt on whether Human Rights Watch's Middle East division could ever fairly judge Israel again.

I asked Ken Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, if Bernstein's allegation was true. He forwarded me the following letter, from Sarah Leah Whitson, that was sent to the Wall Street Journal:

It's a pity that David Bernstein didn't bother to do the most basic fact-checking before posting his opinion piece today ("Human Rights Watch Goes to Saudi Arabia," July 14, 2009), where he alleges that Human Rights Watch "said not a word about the status of human rights" in Saudi Arabia during our recent trip there, where one of our supporters hosted a dinner for us. Had he asked me, and not just "someone who claims to have worked for HRW," the only source he ever cites, he would know that we did indeed spend much of the time in serious discussion about Saudi violations, including its troubled justice system and the lack of women's rights, as well as our work in the region, including Israel. Mr. Bernstein implies that our work on Saudi has gone soft, focusing only on foreign domestic workers; had he checked our website, he'd know that Human Rights Watch in recent years has published more reports and press releases on a variety of rights problems in Saudi Arabia than any other human rights organization in the world. What's really at the heart of Mr. Bernstein's gripe is his misconception that efforts to raise support among Saudis are unseemly because, well, if they live in a totalitarian country, they must be bad people too. Human Rights Watch accepts funding from private individuals and foundations the world over, which we never allow to affect the independence of our work; we are proud to have a Saudi on the Middle East Advisory Committee and look forward to building an even stronger support base throughout the region. Support from citizens of Arab countries for the work of Human Rights Watch - including our vocal, public criticism of rights violations by their governments - is something to be applauded, not denigrated. Believe it or not, some Arabs believe in human rights too.

I don't think Mr. Bernstein thinks that no Arabs believe in human rights -- he certainly doesn't state that -- but let me note the salient fact here, which is that the Whitson statement doesn't address P [redacted] in charge, that she used her organization's battles with the "pro-[redacted] groups" to raise money among Saudis. I sent Ken Roth the following e-mail in response to the Whitson statement:

A couple of questions: Were you there?

And, this letter doesn't address Bernstein's contention that Ms. Whitson "highlighted HRW's battles with 'pro-Israel pressure groups in the US, the European Union and the United Nations.'" Did she in fact attempt to raise money from Saudis by highlighting such "battles"? And do you in fact have "battles" with "pro-Israel pressure groups." And, were any of the people at this fundraising event associated directly or indirectly with the Saudi government?

Here is Roth's response:

I wasn't there. I've been told that we talked about the range of our work in the region, including Israel, Saudi and elsewhere. The stereotype that Saudis (or other Arabs) are interested only in Israel, not their own government, is completely false. They are eager for us to work on their government, know of the extensive work we have done, and support it. As you may know, we don't seek or accept government money from any government, directly or indirectly. We never have. So we certainly weren't soliciting Saudi government funds and would never take them. As for whether any government people were there, the closest was a guy from the national human rights commission and someone from the Shura Council; not sure whether you'd consider them government or not. No one senior, if that's what you mean. I have met with quite senior Saudi officials -- ministerial level -- but to press our human rights issues in Saudi.

As for whether we have battles with pro-Israel pressure groups: all the time. There's a cottage industry out there devoted to criticizing anyone who criticizes Israel. You must have seen that. Every time we publish something on Israel they target us. The fact that we publish far more extensively on other Middle Eastern governments (as well as the PA, Hamas, etc) is irrelevant, apparently.

Still no answer, just the revelation that a member of the Shura Council was at the meeting. The Shura Council is the state-appointed religious leadership of Saudi Arabia. I wrote Roth again:

On your last point, understood. What I'm getting at is whether or not your person talked specifically about the need to raise funds to fight back against pro-Israel pressure groups. Did she or didn't she frame it the way Bernstein has ...

Or to put it another way, has HRW ever raised funds in Israel by advertising its work exposing human rights abuses in Arab countries? Either way it seems wrong.

This is what Roth wrote in response:

In SA we were mainly stressing the need for support to add to the credibility to our SA work (as well as their contacts with the government, etc). The Saudis obviously are aware of the systematic attacks on us by various reflexive defenders of Israel. Everyone is. That comes up quite often in discussions about our work, including I presume in SA. But we don't get any Saudi funds for work on Israel, if that's what you're driving at. We do have some funds from Jews for work on other Middle Eastern countries (and some for work on Israel), but the vast majority of our funding is for our work as a whole. It's been a great strength of the organization that most people attracted to us believe in the importance of applying our principles even-handedly to all countries, and give accordingly.

Again, an evasive answer. I wrote back: "That's not what I'm getting at. I'm simply asking the question, did your staff person attempt to raise funds in Saudi Arabia by advertising your organization's opposition to the pro-Israel lobby?"

Roth responded:

That's certainly part of the story. We report on Israel. Its supporters fight back with lies and deception. It wasn't a pitch against the Israel lobby per se. Our standard spiel is to describe our work in the region. Telling the Israel story--part of that pitch--is in part telling about the lies and obfuscation that are inevitably thrown our way.

In other words, yes, the director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East division is attempting to raise funds from Saudis, including a member of the Shura Council (which oversees, on behalf of the Saudi monarchy, the imposition in the Kingdom of the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law) in part by highlighting her organization's investigations of Israel, and its war with Israel's "supporters," who are liars and deceivers. It appears as if Human Rights Watch, in the pursuit of dollars, has compromised its integrity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeffrey Goldberg



Jeffrey Goldberg is the editor in chief of *The Atlantic* and the moderator of *Washington Week With The Atlantic*.

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