



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER  
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



**Bar-Ilan  
University**

# **Palestinian Activists at Human Rights Watch**

Gerald M. Steinberg and Maayan Rockland



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 177

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ISSN 0793-1042

**July 2020**

Cover image: Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, image via World Economic Forum Flickr CC

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In theory, the officials, researchers, and analysts working in the area of human rights are committed to unbiased, politically neutral reporting. Their credibility as watchdogs is based on a non-discriminatory approach, as specified under criteria in United Nations documents and [published by the International Bar Association and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute](#).

In practice, these words often stand in sharp contrast to the activities and biased agendas of these institutions. Professor Michael Ignatieff notes that many NGOs “espouse the universalist language of human rights but actually use it to defend highly particularist causes: the rights of particular national groups or minorities or classes of persons.” As an example, Ignatieff notes that “[P]ersons who care about human rights violations committed against Palestinians may not care so much about human rights violations committed by Palestinians against Israelis, and vice versa.” (See also Gerald M. Steinberg, Anne Herzberg, Jordan Berman, [Best Practices for Human Rights and Humanitarian NGO Fact-Finding](#), Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2012.)

This bias is characteristic of many major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claiming human rights agendas. A prime example is Human Rights Watch, which exhibits a fundamental and consistent bias against Israel. Its bias is reflected in the disproportionate output and content of its reports, press releases, and other products. In addition, as this report demonstrates in detail, the organization has employed a number of Palestinian activists without so much as a pretense of human rights experience anchored in universality.

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Following the presentation of the evidence regarding the systematic employment of biased and unqualified officials and researchers, we will consider the policy implications of this situation. The evidence of HRW's bias has been largely ignored by many international actors whose agendas include human rights issues. In some cases, this bias is shared, such as by the UN Human Rights Council and the ICC. In addition, the Israeli government has been ambivalent in its policies regarding the organization and its employees, at times providing HRW with additional opportunities to promote its agenda.

# Palestinian Activists at Human Rights Watch

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Human Rights Watch (HRW) was founded under the name Helsinki Watch by the late Robert Bernstein in 1978, and has grown to become one of the most influential non-governmental organizations with a global reach active on this issue. As of 2019, HRW had an annual budget of \$90 million, and its influence was reflected in access to and involvement in policymaking in many countries that emphasize human rights, as well as international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court.

In 2009, [Bernstein accused HRW](#) and its head since 1993, Kenneth Roth, of losing their moral compass, particularly in the Middle East. In the wake of Judge Richard Goldstone's renunciation of his own UN report on the Gaza conflict, [Bernstein told Roth](#) to follow this example and “issue his own mea culpa.”

Roth did not respond, other than to increase his disproportionate focus on and personal hostility to Israel. As Jonathan Foreman observed (“The Twitter Hypocrisy of Kenneth Roth,” *Commentary*, September 1, 2014), “it often feels as if Roth has a religious sense of mission regarding Israel; it’s his crusade. He responds with particular, extraordinary ferocity to any and all skeptical questioning of himself and the organization concerning Israel. HRW is of course not alone in subjecting Israel to disproportionate attention and particularly hostile scrutiny.”

Roth hired Sarah Leah Whitson in 2004 as Director of the Middle East and North Africa division of HRW, where she remained until January 2020. Whitson’s anti-Israel political agenda was reflected in her participation in boycott campaigns, the “research reports” she co-authored and supervised, and her media interviews and opinion pieces. In May 2009, Whitson went to Saudi Arabia seeking donors, emphasizing HRW’s “work on Israel and Gaza, which depleted HRW’s budget for the region,” and the need to stand up to “pro-Israel pressure groups” which, she declared, “strongly resisted the [Goldstone] report and tried to discredit it.”

Whitson often echoed classic antisemitic tropes and Jewish conspiracy theories, particularly on Twitter. [In January 2015, she commented](#) on the US Holocaust

Museum’s display of “death and torture in Syria,” stating that the Holocaust Museum should “also show pics of death and destruction in #Gaza”. Recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Whitson posted a tweet](#) referring to Israeli quarantine measures, which some had used for political purposes by comparing it to the Gaza counter-terror blockade. In her tweet, Whitson invoked the classic blood libel: “Such a tiny taste. Missing a tablespoon of blood.” Following intense criticism, she attempted to explain and then deleted the post.

Under Whitson’s direction, HRW employed an “Israel and Palestine director”—a higher-level position with no parallel among the other countries covered by the MENA division, highlighting HRW’s disproportionate emphasis on this issue. The director, in turn, is in charge of additional staffers HRW employs to promote its uniquely intense focus on this conflict and on Israel in particular.

Omar Shakir, an experienced anti-Israel advocate, was hired by HRW for this position in October 2016. Shakir received an Israeli work visa as a “human rights expert”, allowing him to expand his BDS and other propaganda activities from within Israel. [This campaign had three closely linked points of focus](#): pressuring (or threatening) high-visibility businesses like California-based Airbnb to sign up to the boycott; getting Israel banned from FIFA, the international football (soccer) association; and lobbying the UN Human Rights Council for publication of a “blacklist” of businesses allegedly “in support of the occupation”.

Citing these and other activities as evidence, Israeli courts, including the High Court of Justice, affirmed that Shakir had violated the terms of his work visa as a “human rights expert” and was not entitled to a renewal. In November 2019, Shakir departed for Jordan, accompanied by Roth and a number of HRW officials, including a media team, and [decrying](#) what they referred to as Israeli suppression of free speech and an attack on democracy.

### **HRW’s Palestinian “researchers and consultants”**

In addition to these highly visible staff members, HRW’s Israel-focused operation, led by Whitson and Shakir, also employs a number of dedicated Palestinian political advocates as “researchers and consultants” whose biases and participation in campaigns are also blatant violations of neutrality norms in human rights research. Khulood Badawi, Abier al-Masri, and Zena Al Tahhan are deeply committed to the Palestinian narrative and cause, acting primarily as focused activists and not as researchers or promoters of universal human rights.

#### ***Khulood Badawi***

Khulood Badawi is [listed by Human Rights Watch](#) as a Consultant for Israel and East Jerusalem. She was born in Nazareth, Israel, and identifies herself as Israeli, Muslim, and Palestinian. At Haifa University, she studied Arabic Literature and History of the Jewish People, and was highly involved in political activism including

as head of the Arab Student Union. According to [Haaretz](#), Badawi was banned from entering the university for two years for organizing illegal demonstrations.

Badawi's brief biographical note on the HRW website claims that she has "over 18 years of professional experience in human rights, humanitarian affairs, media and communications", and lists her work with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA-oPt). Not surprisingly, the note omits the fact that in 2013, Badawi reportedly lost her job [after tweeting a graphic photo](#) of a Palestinian father carrying his young bleeding daughter, claiming the girl had been killed by an IDF strike the night before. She tweeted: "#PHOTO: Palestine is bleeding. Another child killed by #Israel. Another father carrying his child to a grave in #Gaza." After the photo was widely circulated on social media, it was [shown to be a Reuters image from a 2006 car accident](#) and unrelated to Israel. Badawi posted a short tweet a week later claiming she had not realized that the photo was from 2006, but did not issue an apology.

This background did not prevent HRW from employing her to author and contribute to analyses that condemn Israel. One "[dispatch](#)" from 2017 focused on the trial of Issa Amro and Farid al-Atrash in a West Bank military court on charges of "entering a closed military zone," "incitement," and "obstructing an officer." The clashes took place in Hebron—one of the most sensitive and violence-prone sites inhabited by both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Badawi completely ignores the city's history and background while labeling Amro and Farid al-Atrash as "human rights defenders" without any grounds other than the fact that both are Palestinian. Her allegiance to the narrative is clearly stated: "Sitting in the courtroom, I couldn't escape feeling that Amro and al-Atrash were on trial for trying to bring a sense of normalcy back to their city and pushing back against entrenched Israeli discrimination..."

In an example from early 2020, Badawi wrote a [piece](#) headlined "COVID-19 Restrictions Offer Window into Palestinian Experience: Movement Restrictions, Family Separation Daily Reality for Millions of Palestinians," again reflecting the propaganda aspect of her contribution to HRW. As in her other work, this piece also contains no mention of the history of terror and conflict. The only hint she provides is in an entirely unsupported claim that "Israel's closure of Gaza...is vastly disproportionate to any concrete security threat..."

As a "researcher" at HRW, Badawi contributed to HRW's December 17, 2019 [publication](#), "Born Without Civil Rights: Israel's Use of Draconian Military Orders to Repress Palestinians in the West Bank," in which Omar Shakir was lead author. The main accusation is that Israel uses military law to ban "hostile organizations." Many of the examples are individuals who, [as detailed in independent analysis](#), had been convicted of incitement, terror financing, and membership in terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

In parallel, Badawi's social media posts on Twitter and Facebook consistently reflect an overt pro-Palestine and anti-Israel bias. For example, on December 13, 2018, Badawi [tweeted](#) about a clash in which a number of Israelis had been killed and injured, with a link to the *Haaretz* article that reported on the incident. Badawi omitted all references to the Palestinian terror attack that had triggered the clash. The full tweet reads: "2 Israeli soldiers were killed, and another soldier and an Israeli settler woman were seriously wounded today in a shooting near the settlement of Ofra, located in occupied #Ramallah district. #Palestine #Israel #oPt."

These and many similar examples reveal Badawi to be a committed Palestinian activist, in sharp contrast to the normative model of a politically neutral research-oriented promoter of human rights. Her consistent omission of Palestinian terrorism in her writings and posts disqualifies her from claiming to engage in credible fact-finding.

### *Abier al-Masri*

Abier al-Masri is [listed by Human Rights Watch](#) as a research assistant for the Gaza Strip in the MENA Division and as an "expert" on Israel/Palestine. Her first HRW publication is from July 2016, which coincides with Omar Shakir's employment by the organization. Al-Masri is a Palestinian from Gaza with a BA degree from al-Azhar University in 2009 in English Language and Literature. She has worked as an interpreter for journalists and as an English teacher at foreign and local nonprofits in Gaza. There is no evidence that she possesses any experience that would qualify her as a human rights researcher or expert.

At HRW, al-Masri has published a number of "commentaries" and op-eds, including one that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2017 under the heading "In Gaza, we get four hours of electricity a day—if we're lucky." The article presented the situation as, for the most part, Israel's responsibility, telling American readers, "Israel's bombings of power plants, its closing of the Gaza border in 2007 and fallout from the split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, which governs Gaza, have meant chronic power outages."

As with other HRW products on Israel, the terror attacks (and their victims) that triggered the Israeli response are erased. Ten years after the Israeli withdrawal, she repeats the fiction that "As the occupying power, Israel bears responsibility under international law to facilitate normal life for the people of Gaza."

In an op-ed published by *Reuters* under the headline "[At 31, My First Glimpse of Life Outside Gaza](#)" (March 2018), al-Masri presents a moving personal story of being trapped, again blaming Israel without acknowledging the facts. She wrote: "Israel imposed a land, air and sea blockade on Gaza in 2007, including a generalized ban on travel, and has kept Gaza mostly closed ever since." Similar posts on the HRW website include "[Israeli Forces Kill Gaza Fisherman at Sea](#)" (June 18, 2017) and "[Israel's Eurovision: 'Dare to Dream' Unless You're Caged in Gaza](#)" (May 16, 2019),

which was part of a failed attempt to organize a boycott of the international song festival held in Israel.

Al-Masri's social media posts strongly reflect an emphasis on Palestinian political activism and advocacy. For example, on September 30, 2017, she [tweeted](#), "On the 17<sup>th</sup> remembrance day of the second Al-Aqsa Intifada...may Palestine get closer to freedom every year". The Al-Aqsa Intifada (which has many other names, including "Arafat's war") was waged through large-scale Palestinian terror attacks targeting Israelis in buses, restaurants, and hotels. Over 1,000 Israelis were killed and many more wounded. Celebration of this horror is hardly consistent with human rights values.

In March 2017, al-Masri posted [a series of tweets](#) praising Basel al-A'raj, a [terrorist leader](#) killed by the IDF during a violent exchange. According to the IDF, Al-A'raj was active in [purchasing the weapons used in the terror attacks](#). Masri [tweeted](#) and [retweeted](#) pictures of Al-A'raj, as well as Al-A'raj's will, stating, "[Peace be upon your pure spirit.](#)" In his will, A'raj writes: "All the wills of the Shahids... do not quench our thirst in the search for the question of the Martyr... is there anything more eloquent than the Martyr's deeds?"

In 2017, al-Masri was also active in support of a high-profile media campaign seeking to focus attention on a hunger strike by Palestinian terrorists held in Israeli jails. She promoted Marwan Barghouti, found guilty [for killing five Israelis and on an additional count of attempted murder](#). Al-Masri's tweet reads: "Bargouthi's health seriously deteriorates #DignityStrike." Another [post](#) focused on Ahmad Saadat, commander of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) terrorist organization, as designated by the governments of the US, Canada, the EU, and Israel. Saadat was convicted in the [murder of Israeli minister Rehavam Ze'evi](#) in 2001.

As even this small sample demonstrates, Abier al-Masri is a Palestinian activist. Her employment by HRW as a research assistant is another example of the organization's deep bias as reflected in the "experts" it employs.

### *Zena Al Tahhan*

Zena Al Tahhan is a [research assistant for the West Bank and East Jerusalem](#) for HRW. Like Badawi, she contributed to HRW's December 17, 2019 tendentious publication, "[Without Civil Rights: Israel's Use of Draconian Military Orders to Repress Palestinians in the West Bank.](#)"

As in the case of both Badawi and al-Masri, Al Tahhan's Twitter posts reflect deep involvement and experience in propaganda, political activism, and acceptance if not endorsement of terror and violence. In January 2015, for example, she compared the terror attack on the offices of the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris, which killed 17, to the "Battle of Shuja'iyya" during the 2014 Gaza war (Operation Protective Edge). The translation of her tweet is: "17 died and they called it a massacre...120 were slaughtered [while fighting] courageously and they called it a battle." She called the

use of the term “massacre” to refer to the Charlie Hebdo attack a “[hypocrisy](#).” In October 2016, she posted two tweets appearing to justify attacks that [killed Israeli civilian Levana Malikhi and police officer Yossi Kirmah](#). In one [tweet](#), Al Tahhan wrote, “Misbah Abu Sbeih’s family tell me he was terrorized by the Israeli occupation,” and in the [second](#), “Family of Palestinian who shot and killed two Israelis say he was pressured by occupation, barred from praying at Al Aqsa.” And like al-Masri, Al Tahhan [posted a tweet](#) sympathizing with Basel al-A’raj: “#Basil al-Araj is a reminder to the world that after 69 yrs of injustice & dispossession #Palestinians will not remain silent.” The hashtag reads: “Basil the revolutionary.”

On January 28, 2018, Al Tahhan posted a [tweet](#) quoting Israa Ja’abis, who [was injured while detonating a gas canister](#) at a checkpoint in 2015. Ja’abis had planned a major bombing inside Jerusalem but was stopped by a policeman for suspicious driving. When the officer approached, she yelled “Allahu Akbar” and detonated the explosive, injuring the policeman and herself. Al Tahhan’s tweet, starting with the quote from Ja’abis, read: “‘I feel scared when I look at my face in the mirror, so imagine what others must feel when they look at me.’ Heartbreaking story of Israa Ja’abi.”

In another example of her Palestinian activism, on March 31, 2018, Al Tahhan [tweeted](#) a reference to Israeli PM Netanyahu’s statement on clashes along the Gaza border prior to the Passover holiday. Netanyahu said, “Well done to our soldiers who are guarding the state’s borders and allowing the citizens of Israel to celebrate the holiday in peace,” which Al Tahhan turned into: “#Netanyahu thanks his army for massacring #Palestinians so that Israelis can ‘celebrate the holiday [Passover] peacefully.’ #Gaza @GreatReturnMarch.”

## **Recommendations**

Given HRW’s unambiguous bias against Israel, as reflected by the words of its officials and researchers and their influence in the media, at the UN, and elsewhere, it would make sense for the Israeli government to have a clear and consistent policy regarding the organization and its employees.

However, to date, Israeli behavior toward HRW has been ad hoc and erratic. For many years, the Israeli government—particularly the Foreign Ministry, the IDF, and the Ministry of Justice—have paid little or no attention to either HRW specifically or NGOs in general. Their policy was “We deal with governments, not NGOs,” reflecting a lack of understanding of the ways organizations like HRW shape perceptions of Israel both directly and indirectly. That influence is spread through the media and among foreign officials and institutions, and has a significant influence on policies.

This began to change with the 2009 Goldstone report on the Gaza conflict, which opened the door to ICC investigations, but the Israeli response was too late and too narrow to have an impact. HRW’s role in the process triggered some interest in the

organization, but that interest was short-lived. Throughout the period, as different officials came and went in the relevant government offices, the biases and antisemitism that drove the agendas of Roth, Whitson, and others in the organization continued to demonize Israel, without a significant response. In some cases, officials were careful to avoid being seen as opposing “civil society organizations,” reflecting the automatic esteem such groups are often automatically granted by Western elites, including Western European diplomats.

By 2016, when Omar Shakir applied for an Israeli work visa, the government’s initial rejection and explanation, citing in part evidence from the relatively new Ministry of Strategic Affairs, reflected an understanding that HRW was a major leader in different forms of political warfare against Israel. But without explanation, the decision was reversed and Shakir’s application was approved, and a Foreign Ministry diplomat was sent to meet him at the airport. A few months later, responding to evidence presented by NGO Monitor and a court action brought by a civil society organization (Shurat HaDin) arguing that Shakir had violated the terms of his visa, the Interior Ministry announced that it would not be extended. But once he was in the country, Shakir and HRW used the Israeli court process, which dragged out over two years, to highlight the “attempt to silence legitimate criticism,” using the term they used in the campaign and echoed by European diplomats. Roth came to Israel twice (without interference) to add to the visibility of the campaign to demonize Israel over this issue. The entire episode reinforced the delegitimization of Israel and highlighted the absence of a coherent policy.

Regarding the Gaza-based “researchers” Badawi, al-Masri, and Al Tahhan, although the Israeli government cannot prevent HRW from employing active supporters of conflict, Israeli officials tasked with combating demonization should make the relevant audiences aware of this fundamental contradiction between the norms and HRW’s actual behavior.

In parallel, it is important to counter the soft-power influence HRW enjoys among liberal government officials, particularly in Western Europe, and in international institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court. To be effective, this strategy should include transmission of detailed information on the deep bias and lack of credibility under the facade of researching and promoting a universal and neutral “human rights” agenda.

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