



Why Are the United States and Israel at the Top of Human Rights Hit Lists?

We ran the numbers and it's true: the watchdogs have their politics. But that might just be a good thing.

BY JAMES RON, HOWARD RAMOS | NOVEMBER 3, 2009



Human Rights Watch and its rights-watching peers have heard it all. They're quasi-terrorists with an anti-U.S. ax to grind or perhaps stealth fighters for global capitalists. They've been accused of being anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, and anti-African at one time or another. Since the human rights movement began in the early 1970s, the criticism has grown as fast as the stacks of reports, op-eds, and analysis that the organizations' analysts produce.

Six years ago, we decided it was time to systematically examine the accusations flying from all directions. After

subjecting human rights organizations' work to a barrage of statistical tests, we found that everyone was right. Yes, the watchdogs have biases. But they might make those groups more effective at pushing the human rights cause. Whichever side of the fence you fall on, there's no denying it: There's a politics to human rights.

It was bound to happen. Despite the drive for neutrality that watchdogs strive for, they were playing in a political minefield. Just take reporting on Israel, which has been the source of consistent controversy from both sides. The debate turned especially nasty two weeks ago when one of Human Rights Watch's own -- Bob Bernstein, chair of the group's board from 1978 to 1998 -- lambasted his protégé in a *New York Times* op-ed for dwelling excessively on Israeli abuses. "Human Rights Watch has lost critical perspective on a conflict," he claimed.

Israel is a frequent flyer in this arena since its wars are both consistent and well covered by the global media. But many other countries partake in the human rights blame game. Take Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, criticized by many for its excesses while being revered by others for its socialism. Last year, prominent Latin American scholars castigated Human Rights Watch for contributing to U.S. anti-Chávez propaganda. Three years earlier, it was the United States itself that was upset; the Bush administration accused Amnesty International's report on Guantanamo of being written by "reprehensible" people who "hated America."

In response, the watchdogs say they call 'em as they see 'em, reporting as best they can on the misdeeds of democracies and authoritarians alike. Apologists who cry foul are being defensive and insular, refusing to acknowledge the seamy underside of their favored regimes. Fair point indeed.

To moderate the spat, we began assembling a mass of relevant data, including from every Human Rights Watch report listed in its publications catalog from 1980 to 2000, coupled with all digitally archived Amnesty International press releases from those same years. We also created new data on human rights by reading through the *Economist* and *Newsweek*, and we trolled through existing sources for quantitative indicators of government repression, political freedom, economic development, population size, U.S. aid received, and the like.

Our first result was simple, but fascinating. We listed each organization's top 10 "hit list" of countries reported on for the 1990s. Human Rights Watch's most written on countries were, in descending order, the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, China, Russia, India, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Sudan, Israel, and Burma. Amnesty's hit list from 1991 to 2000 was similar, including the United States, Israel, Indonesia, Turkey, China, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Britain, India, Russia, Rwanda, and Burundi (there were 11 countries because of one tie). Size seemed to matter, since large countries such as China, the United States, and India received more scrutiny than others. Policy relevance and newsworthiness also counted for something, pushing Turkey, a key NATO ally, to center stage.

Yet these lists were also notable for the countries they did *not* include. When we used data on poverty, repression and conflict to identify some of the worst places on earth, we found that few of these countries were covered much by either Amnesty or Human Rights Watch.

At first, this seemed puzzling; why would the watchdogs neglect authoritarians? We asked both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty, and received similar replies. In some cases, staffers said, access to human rights victims in authoritarian countries was impossible, since the country's borders were sealed or the repression was too harsh (think North Korea or Uzbekistan). In other instances, neglected countries were simply too small, poor, or unnewsworthy to inspire much media interest. With few journalists urgently demanding information about Niger, it made little sense to invest substantial reporting and advocacy resources there.

The watchdogs can and do seek to stimulate demand for information on the forgotten crises, but this is an expensive and high risk endeavor, not to be done lightly or too frequently. It's easier to sell people what they already want than to try create new demand, and businesses that do too much of the latter will quickly run into trouble.

Intrigued by these preliminary findings, we subjected the 1986-2000 Amnesty data to a barrage of statistical tests. (Since Human Rights Watch's early archival procedures seemed spotty, we did not include their data in our models.)

Amnesty's coverage, we found, was driven by multiple factors, but contrary to the dark rumors swirling through the blogosphere, we discovered no master variable at work. Most importantly, we found that the level of actual violations mattered. Statistically speaking, Amnesty reported more heavily on countries with greater levels of abuse. Size also mattered, but not as expected. Although population didn't impact reporting much, bigger economies did receive more coverage, either because they carried more weight in global politics and economic affairs, or because their abundant social infrastructure produced more accounts of abuse. Finally, we found that countries already covered by the media also received more Amnesty attention. Although we did not perform the same statistical tests on the Human Rights Watch data, this pattern seems to hold there, too.

What does all this mean? First, human rights groups are partly true to their mission, since they report more on countries with more human rights problems. That's a relief. Wealth and its byproducts -- global influence and information -- are also crucial. Thus, abuses in countries with more telephones, computers, and educated people receive more watchdog attention. That makes sense since even human rights researchers are only human.

Amnesty and Human Rights Watch also seek visibility and impact, however, and this gives them clear incentives to report more on the most pressing issues of the day. Like any advocacy organization concerned with real-world effects, the watchdogs feel compelled to respond to media interest. Supply rises with demand; the more

journalists who ask about a country, the more information watchdogs will supply.

This feedback loop makes it seem as if the media and watchdogs are piling on a smaller number of countries, creating the whipping boy effect that can easily come across to the defenders of Israel, Venezuela, or the United States as simply unjust.

Yet this, for better or for worse, is the way the news game is played. The media report on issues or countries it thinks readers care about, and advocacy groups of all stripes respond in kind, creating the virtuous (or vicious) cycles that drive public attention.

Whether this is this a good or a bad thing depends on your ethic of moral engagement. If you believe in Quixotic struggles and think watchdogs should swim valiantly against the tide, you'll castigate Human Rights Watch and Amnesty for investing more resources, time, and energy on countries already in the news. "What about Niger?" you'll ask. And if you're young and rebellious, you might even mutter something nasty about corporate sellouts under your breath.

The Kantian imperative, in other words, obliges moral actors to do what is right, consequences and efficacy be damned.

But if you believe an advocacy group's highest purpose is to make a difference, you'll support the strategy of focusing on targets of opportunity. You'll also think that investing scarce activist resources in low-interest struggles should be done sparingly, lest the few watchdogs we have go bankrupt in pursuit of lost causes.

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