

Statistics tell the real story of rights watchdogs and Israel

BY JAMES RON AND HOWARD RAMOS, CITIZEN SPECIAL NOVEMBER 2, 2009

Last week, Human Rights Watch's founding chair, Bob Bernstein, lambasted the global watchdog for dwelling too heavily on Israel's abuses. From the op-ed pages of the New York Times, Bernstein, a former Random House executive, claimed that Human Rights Watch had become overly focused on the misdeeds of democracies, rather than on the abuses of authoritarians.

The New York-based group quickly fired back, saying it devoted only 15 per cent of its Middle Eastern and North African reporting to Israel, and that the region consumed only 5.5 per cent of the group's global budget. Israel, in other words, consumed only a "tiny fraction" of Human Rights Watch's attention.

Who is right? Is Israel obsessively covered while authoritarians are neglected? Both Human Rights Watch and Bernstein have a point, but in subtle and highly nuanced ways. We know this because we asked ourselves similar questions six years ago, and then built a large dataset of human rights reporting by global watchdogs and the western media.

With funding from Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Council, a publicly funded agency, we assembled a mass of relevant information, including counts of every Human Rights Watch report listed in its public catalogue from 1980 to 2000. (While Bernstein was referring to the period since he left Human Rights Watch in 1998, based on the group's assessment, the focus on Israel hasn't actually changed a great deal.) For comparison's sake, we also listed all digitally archived Amnesty International press releases in those same years.

How many reports did these groups devote to Israel?

In the 1990s, when Bernstein was still deeply involved in the organization, the 10 countries Human Rights Watch wrote the most about were -- in declining order of importance -- the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, China, Russia, India, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Sudan, Israel and Myanmar.

Thus Israel was on the group's top 10 "hit list," but the country's overall weight within the organization's global portfolio was tiny. In the 1990s, Israel earned its ninth-ranked slot with only 2.4 per cent of the group's total published output.

Human Rights Watch distributed its reports reasonably evenly across many countries, investing only a fraction of its resources on Israel's misdeeds. The same was broadly true for Amnesty. Although the London-based group ranked Israel second in critical press releases during the 1990s, this represented less than four per cent of the watchdog's total output.

On this count, in other words, the weight of evidence comes down on Human Rights Watch's side. The global watchdogs did report more on Israel than other countries, but they still devoted only a small

portion of their resources to the Jewish state.

What else did these lists suggest?

First, size matters, since large countries such as China, the U.S., and India received more human rights scrutiny than others. Newsworthiness also counts, pushing Turkey, a key NATO ally and European Union applicant, to centre stage. Finally, the lists are also notable for the countries they did not mention.

Here, Bernstein and other watchdog critics may be on much firmer ground.

To explore the worst places on Earth, we generated lists of the poorest, most repressive, and most war-torn countries. Sadly, few of these unfortunate places were covered in much depth by either Amnesty or Human Rights Watch. Notable no-shows included Niger, the poorest country in the world, or Afghanistan, the world's second-most war-torn country.

Remarkably, moreover, none of the most repressive countries made it on to HRW's or Amnesty's top 10 list, including authoritarians such as North Korea or Turkmenistan.

Interestingly, this finding is for both the 1980s and 1990s, two decades when Bernstein was in a leadership position at Human Rights Watch. Bernstein may rightly be concerned about the group's lack of attention to brutal authoritarians, but he must surely shoulder at least some of the blame.

Yet the watchdogs often have rational reasons for neglecting authoritarians. Sometimes, access to victims in authoritarian countries is impossible, since its borders are sealed or its repression is too harsh.

In other instances, authoritarian countries are too small, poor, or un-newsworthy to inspire much Western media interest. As a result, Human Rights Watch, like Amnesty, faces few incentives to engage.

To explore these issues further, we subjected our Amnesty data to a barrage of statistical tests for the 1986-2000 period, holding some factors constant while exploring the unique impact of others. Since HRW's early archival procedures were unclear, we did not include their data in our models.

Our statistical findings showed that Amnesty's coverage was driven by multiple factors. Contrary to right-wing conspiracy theories, moreover, there was no single "master variable" at work.

Most importantly, actual levels of violations did matter, since Amnesty reported more heavily on countries with higher levels of abuse. Size also mattered, but in an unexpected way -- although sheer population numbers didn't count, a country's overall economic size did. Bigger economies attracted more Amnesty attention.

Finally, a country's policy relevance also seemed critical, since Amnesty wrote more about abuses in countries that were already heavily covered by the western media.

What does all this mean?

Happily, human rights groups are at least partly true to their mission, since they report more frequently on countries with more abuse. Both Bernstein and the watchdogs should be relieved.

Yet human rights groups also seek visibility, relevance and impact, and this pushes them to report more on the most pressing abuses of the day. Like most any advocacy group, watchdogs respond to media demand, and the more journalists ask about a country such as Israel, the more Human Rights Watch and Amnesty will respond.

As a result, it may often seem that both the media and watchdogs are piling on a smaller number of countries, creating the "whipping boy" sensation that so upset Bernstein. Yet this, for better or for worse, is the way the global news game is played.

The western media report on issues they think readers are most interested in -- how could it be otherwise? Advocacy organizations, for their part, feel obliged to respond in kind, creating the kind of virtuous (or vicious) cycles that drive public attention.

There is no anti-Israel or anti-democratic conspiracy at work. Like Pakistan or Afghanistan today, Israel is, and has been for many years, a tremendously newsworthy place. This is true for many reasons, but much of the interest must be driven by Israel's very large claim on America's overseas assistance envelope and foreign policy resources.

Global watchdogs, like western reporters and politicians, are keen to be heard, seen, and make an impact. As a result, they join the public debate wherever it takes place, prompting them to devote more resources and attention to Israel than to North Korea, Niger, or Burkina Faso.

Note also, however, that Israel's security forces regularly commit violations against Palestinians and southern Lebanese, and since the statistical models show that actual abuse is also a significant factor, Israeli behaviour -- along with other factors -- is also driving the coverage.

Careful analysis, in other words, is a calming remedy in times of emotion, allegation, and counter-allegation. Statistics, disdained as boring by so many university students, can, occasionally, offer useful insights not found elsewhere.

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