HRW: Human Rights Watch or Hypocritical Representatives of Washington? (Part 2)

As I noted in Part 1 of this article, Human Rights Watch (HRW) is an integral part of the West’s propaganda machine. I noted that “HRW serves as intermediary between the facts on the ground, and the western public who rely on the organization (and similar NGOs such as Amnesty International) to accurately tell the story of a given conflict.” But of course the function of HRW runs far deeper than simply presenting information in a biased way. Rather, HRW shapes the narratives of conflicts, narratives which become solidified through repetition, and which eventually become regarded as undeniable facts.

Moreover, the language HRW employs, far from being simply stylistic choices, is deliberately utilized to obscure the reality of war zones in the service of the Empire. This is undoubtedly the case with the Israel/Palestine conflict where Israeli actions are never outright war crimes, while Palestinian ones are. It is equally true of Ukraine. This is also the case in Libya, Syria, and Venezuela, countries where HRW has played a critical role in constructing narratives in the interests of its financier and corporate paymasters, not to mention of course the US foreign policy agenda.

HRW on Libya

In both Libya and Syria, HRW has played a critical role in propagandizing the western public against the governments of those countries, thereby justifying the imperialist assault on them. More than simply “collecting the facts,” HRW cobbled together a completely distorted, and in many cases utterly dishonest and factually wrong, narrative which has buttressed the case for “intervention” in Syria, as it did in Libya.

At the outset of the war against Libya, HRW was one of the most active agitators against the lawful government of Muammar Gaddafi, publishing a seemingly endless stream of reports alleging everything from “unlawful killings” to “systematic rapes” by Gaddafi’s military and security forces. These reports, each of which heavily relied on “eyewitnesses” and “sources” which have later been discredited, played a central role in building the case for supporting both anti-Gaddafi extremists and western military intervention in Libya. In this way, HRW’s distortions and outright lies led directly to the war and the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent Libyans.

In its report Libya: Governments Should Demand End to Unlawful Killings (February 20, 2011), HRW alleged that Gaddafi’s forces were wantonly killing peaceful protesters in the eastern city of Benghazi. Sarah Leah Whitson, HRW’s Middle East and North Africa director bombastically stated that “A potential human rights catastrophe is unfolding in Libya as protesters brave live gunfire and death for a third day running...Libya is trying to impose an information blackout, but it can't hide a massacre.” This is precisely the sort of outright lie that led directly to the war in Libya. Not only have subsequent investigations revealed that the claims of “massacre” were complete fabrications, but also the fact that Libyan security forces never killed protesters, but rather engaged solely with armed terrorists, making every attempt to avoid any civilian casualties. Of course, by the time these findings were released, Gaddafi had already been brutally assassinated, his government toppled and replaced by NATO proxies from the so called National Transitional Council (NTC).

In his 2013 report on Libya published by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Dr. Alan Kuperman wrote:
Contrary to Western media reports, Qaddafi did not initiate Libya’s violence by targeting peaceful protesters. The United Nations and Amnesty International have documented that in all four Libyan cities initially consumed by civil conflict in mid-February 2011—Benghazi, Al Bayda, Tripoli, and Misurata—violence was actually initiated by the protesters. The government responded to the rebels militarily but never intentionally targeted civilians or resorted to “indiscriminate” force, as Western media claimed. Early press accounts exaggerated the death toll by a factor of ten, citing “more than 2,000 deaths” in Benghazi during the initial days of the uprising, whereas Human Rights Watch (HRW) later documented only 233 deaths across all of Libya in that period.

Interestingly, HRW was the original source of the “more than 2,000 deaths” claim which only later did they reduce to the 233 figure. Reading the text of HRW's reports from early 2011, one gets the impression that Libya’s security forces were, in the words of HRW's leadership, “massacring” innocent Libyans. But, as Kuperman and others have noted, this is an outright lie as the violence was, in every documented case, initiated by the so called “protesters.” Indeed, this fact is critical because the case for war in Libya was made on the basis of “imminent massacre” in Benghazi and elsewhere, while the only source for this was HRW itself and its “sources.” In this way, HRW played a leading role in making the case for war, and directly contributed to the deaths of countless Libyans.

Additionally, HRW was one of the principal sources of the now debunked myth of Libyan soldiers “systematically raping” women in Benghazi. This mythology stems from the curious case of Eman al-'Obeidy, a Libyan woman from the eastern city of Tobruk who, quite conveniently, stumbled into a hotel filled with journalists to tell her story of rape and torture at the hands of Gaddafi’s soldiers. At the height of a destabilization and war, this woman arrives in front of a horde of western journalists, making herself into a cause célèbre for the West and its anti-Gaddafi agenda.

In its news release Libya: Allow Eman al-'Obeidy to Leave Tripoli, HRW simply repeated the story that al-'Obeidy had told to CNN and a number of other news outlets. The release stated that:

On April 4, 2011, in two phone interviews with CNN’s Anderson Cooper, al-'Obeidy confirmed that Libyan authorities had freed her after she was examined by a doctor. She told Cooper that the medical evidence supported her allegations that she had been raped and tortured. Al-'Obeidy also told Cooper that men poured alcohol into her eyes and used rifles to sodomize her when she was detained at a checkpoint in Tripoli on March 26. She said that she had escaped when a woman who was detained with her untied her hands and feet while the soldiers were asleep.

A close reading of the above passage should immediately raise questions about the credibility of these claims by HRW. First and foremost, there is absolutely zero independent corroboration of al-'Obeidy’s story. Instead, HRW simply repeats her claims and expects readers, and the western public generally, to simply take her word for it and, by extension, HRW’s word for it, since they are implicitly validating the claim. The medical evidence itself was not presented, but rather simply al-'Obeidy’s claim that the evidence supported her allegations. Such an obvious bias flies in the face of all accepted norms and practices of journalism where the alleged victim's assertions can never be cited as evidence.

Of course, this journalistic malpractice was part of the broader campaign of demonization of Gaddafi which ultimately led to his assassination and the destruction of Libya. Political observers should remember the claims of Viagra being issued to Gaddafi’s soldiers, along with other outlandish allegations nauseatingly repeated by the western media and leaders such as former US Secretary of State Hillary “We Came, We Saw, He Died” Clinton. HRW in many ways served as the scaffolding for the construction of a false narrative on Libya, one whose impact is still being felt today as the people of Libya have been predictably plunged into a brutal civil war.

HRW on Syria

As with Libya, HRW has played a prominent role in the ongoing propaganda campaign against Syria – a propaganda campaign that in many ways has as its ultimate goal, regime change. So, just as with Israel/Palestine, Ukraine, and Libya, HRW serves as a nominally “independent” appendage of US foreign policy and the Empire’s media machine. A simple examination of just a few of the many reports and news releases on Syria concocted and disseminated by HRW demonstrates quite clearly its role as cheerleader for the Empire.

Within a few months of the outbreak of violence in Syria, HRW positioned itself as a leading international voice condemning the “crimes” of the Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad, and calling for international action to stop it. In its ostensibly “comprehensive” report ‘We’ve Never Seen Such Horror’: Crimes Against Humanity in Daraa, and the accompanying press release, HRW combined unsubstantiated allegations with
In the very first paragraph of HRW’s press release accompanying the report, the organization states that, “Systematic killings and torture by Syrian security forces in the city of Daraa since protests began there on March 18, 2011, strongly suggest that these qualify as crimes against humanity.” A number of important questions must be asked before we simply accept this obviously biased interpretation of events on the ground.

First, one should be quite skeptical of the phrase “systematic killings and torture by Syrian security forces,” as such language would imply a codified, ongoing, and organized pattern of killing and torture. One would expect there to be manuals, interrogation/torture training, and/or a bureaucratic chain of command ordering such actions. None of this is present in Syria, and HRW makes no such claim and provides no such evidence. On the contrary, one primary piece of evidence upon which this assertion relies is the imprisonment of a small group of young Syrians arrested for painting anti-government graffiti in the city of Deraa. Now, one would think that these young men must have undergone some sort of barbarous treatment at the hands of the Syrian security forces who tortured them with impunity. However, what HRW conveniently fails to mention is that, as Time magazine reported, the governor who ordered their arrest was sacked by Assad, and the teens were immediately released.

This incident, presented in the western narrative as the event which precipitated the early anti-government protests in Daraa, is one of the only independently verified aspects of the HRW story. Most of the report relies on interviews with victims of abuse in Daraa governorate under the direct supervision of the same governor who was summarily stripped of his post by Assad. However, the report frames the testimony as being evidence of a nationwide policy of “systematic torture” for which there is absolutely zero evidence. Considering the timing of this report (June 1, 2011), it is clear that HRW was once again the leading edge of the regime change agitation.

Second, what exactly does the phrase “strongly suggest that these qualify as crimes against humanity” mean? HRW is not an international court, they have not evaluated evidence refuting the claims of the “eyewitnesses,” nor have they investigated the supposedly “systematic” nature of the “torture and killings” in Syria. And so, it’s quite obvious that the phrase is yet another vacuous rhetorical flourish that is more editorial commentary than it is factual reporting. Considering that this was within a few months of the unrest beginning in Syria, such statements should cast serious doubt on HRW’s vaunted position as an objective human rights NGO. Quite the contrary, it seems that HRW made itself into the avant-garde of the Assad/Syria demonization campaign expertly picked up by the dutiful western corporate media.

Third, HRW provides absolutely no refutation, or even mention, of the competing claims as to the events leading to the beginning of the unrest. It provides nothing to contradict the reports and photographic evidence of the UK’s Daily Mail, and other news outlets, which showed AK-47s, hand grenades, explosives, and other weapons recovered from a mosque in Daraa which supposedly was attacked by the Syrian security forces because it housed protesters. In other words, HRW selectively included facts that bolstered the western narrative of a brutal dictator killing his own people, while it omitted facts that supported Syria’s claims that the violence was initiated by armed terrorists whom the security forces engaged. In this way, HRW fabricated yet another false narrative in order to propagate the myth of Syrian crimes and support a regime change operation.

HRW’s report on the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, a suburb east of Damascus, is yet another example of a blatantly biased report that has been utterly discredited since it was published in the summer of 2013. It should be noted here that the timing of the report coincided directly with the US attempt to initiate a bombing campaign and “humanitarian intervention” in Syria. Almost as if by magic, HRW helps to make the case for yet another imperial aggression against a sovereign state. Many who called attention to the similarity with the lies propagated about Libya and the subsequent war that destroyed that country were shunned and met with silence and/or derision.

The report Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria makes the claim that the Syrian government carried out the chemical attack on Ghouta. The report states:

Based on the available evidence, Human Rights Watch finds that Syrian government forces were almost certainly responsible for the August 21 attacks...The scale and coordinated nature of the two attacks; against opposition-held areas; the presence of government-controlled potential launching sites within range of the targets; the pattern of other recent alleged chemical weapon attacks against opposition-held areas using the same 330mm rocket delivery system; and the documented possession of the 140mm and 330mm rocket systems able to deliver chemical weapons in the government arsenal – all point towards Syrian government responsibility for the attacks...Human Rights Watch has investigated alternative claims that opposition forces themselves were responsible...and has found such claims
lacking in credibility and inconsistent with the evidence found at the scene.

Well, there you have it. HRW, in its rigorous investigation, clearly determined that Damascus was responsible for the attacks. Of course, they fail to mention that not a single HRW researcher was ever present on the ground in Ghouta, and that their “evidence” relies on Skype interviews with “10 witnesses and survivors” of the attack. So, in their supposedly damning report, they cannot independently verify a single claim that they included in their dubious report. And yet, despite not being present on the ground, they were able to determine that only the Syrian government could have carried out the attack?

And this assertion came at the most opportune moment for the US and its western allies as they geared up to bomb Syria. The transparent collusion between HRW and its paymasters in Washington is astounding. However, the story of course does not end there. The claims made by HRW in its report have all been refuted in the months since, with a number of investigations discrediting the “findings” as little more than imperial propaganda.

In a comprehensive report released in January 2014 (more than four months after the incident and HRW’s bogus report), former UN weapons inspector Richard Lloyd and Prof. Theodore Postol of MIT effectively debunked the claims of HRW and the US government, showing conclusively that US intelligence and HRW’s conclusions regarding the incident were grossly inaccurate. The report, entitled Possible Implications of Faulty US Technical Intelligence in the Damascus Nerve Agent Attack of August 21, 2013, notes that:

The Syrian improvised chemical munitions that were used in the August 21 nerve agent attack in Damascus have a range of about 2 kilometers...[The evidence] indicates that these munitions could not possibly have been fired at East Ghouta from the “heart”, or from the eastern edge, of the Syrian Government controlled area shown in the intelligence map published by the White House on August 30, 2013...The UN independent assessment of the range of the chemical munitions is in exact agreement with our findings...this mistaken intelligence could have led to an unjustified US military action based on false intelligence.

Essentially, the report completely discredits the findings of both the US Government and HRW, the latter of course mirroring the former, as it so often does. The “intelligence” and “data” that HRW cited was either faulty or, as many have argued, deliberately falsified and/or exaggerated to make a case for military intervention. In this way, HRW served, once again, as the avant-garde of the Empire’s strategy of regime change.

Of course, it should also be remembered that Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Seymour Hersh published his absolutely critical piece The Red Line and the Rat Line in which he wrote:

“The American and British intelligence communities had been aware since the spring of 2013 that some rebel units in Syria were developing chemical weapons...Defense Intelligence Agency issued a highly classified five-page ‘talking points’ briefing... which stated that al-Nusra maintained a sarin production cell: its program, the paper said, was ‘the most advanced sarin plot since al-Qaida’s pre-9/11 effort...Previous IC [intelligence community] focus had been almost entirely on Syrian CW [chemical weapons] stockpiles; now we see ANF attempting to make its own CW ... Al-Nusra Front’s relative freedom of operation within Syria leads us to assess the group’s CW aspirations will be difficult to disrupt in the future.’ The paper drew on classified intelligence from numerous agencies: ‘Turkey and Saudi-based chemical facilitators,’ it said, ‘were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria.’”

So, Hersh’s reporting finally firmly established the fact that the rebels were indeed capable of carrying out the attack on East Ghouta, and that they had help from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and possibly other regional actors. And so, not only did they have the motive (to blame Assad for using chemical weapons while international investigators were in Syria, thereby justifying a military intervention and regime change), but also the means and opportunity. Of course, no apology or retraction was ever offered by HRW or the US Government. And it is unlikely that one is forthcoming.

HRW on Venezuela

HRW has also played an important role as propagandist for US foreign policy in Latin America, a region that perhaps more than any other, has sought to assert its independence from the US-dominated Empire in recent years. In particular, Venezuela has been a top target of HRW ever since the late Hugo Chavez entered the political scene in 1999. Indeed, Chavez and Venezuela, a country that underwent a democratic revolution peacefully and reaffirmed its
political orientation with no less than 15 separate elections, were made into pariahs by the supposedly objective HRW.

Seemingly every year HRW publishes its World Report in which it almost never fails to attack the government of Venezuela and, until his death, specifically Hugo Chavez. Aside from these, HRW has published numerous reports detailing the “crimes” of the Venezuelan government. Perhaps the most infamous of these was the 2008 report entitled A Decade Under Chavez: Political Intolerance and Lost Opportunities for Advancing Human Rights in Venezuela, an utterly cynical and dishonest attempt to demonize Chavez and his government using distortions and outright lies.

The report, which was denounced by many individuals, organizations, and countries internationally, was egregiously biased and admittedly was a tool of subversion. The lead author of the report, Jose Miguel Vivanco admitted publicly that “we did the report because we wanted to demonstrate to the world that Venezuela is not a model for anyone.” Of course such an admission was hardly surprising considering HRW had been openly hostile to Chavez’s government from its very inception.

Focusing only on isolated, and in some cases unverified, allegations of violations of the rights of citizens, the report attempted to portray Venezuela as a country with no regard for human rights. That this is a most obscene lie is undeniable considering the fact that Venezuela under Chavez provided universal health care to all citizens, free education, eradicated illiteracy, greatly reduced poverty and nearly eliminated extreme poverty, embarked on massive public housing programs, and much more. Of course, these are not the sorts of human rights that HRW is interested in. Rather, HRW focuses solely on the alleged “violations” that bolster their political agenda which, by extension, is the agenda of Washington.

Indeed, the 2008 report was denounced by some of the most prominent intellectuals, scholars, and journalists in the world, including Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, and Vijay Prashad among many others. In just a small excerpt of a strongly worded open letter addressed to HRW’s Board of Directors, the individuals mentioned above along with more than one hundred others, wrote:

The report’s overwhelming reliance for factual material on opposition sources of dubious reliability also undermines its credibility and makes it difficult for most readers to know which parts of the report are true and which aren’t. The most cited source with regard to political discrimination is the newspaper El Universal. This is not only a stridently opposition newspaper, it has also, for the years during which it is cited, repeatedly fabricated news stories.

The authors correctly noted that the report relied on dubious sources to provide the “facts” that would fit the pre-conceived narrative that Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution are bad, and that members of the opposition, comprised of wealthy bourgeois former ruling class elites aligned with Washington, are the victims of state repression.

HRW continued with this sort of demonization in 2013 when, upon the sad passing of Hugo Chavez, the group issued its report Venezuela: Chavez’s Authoritarian Legacy, yet another outright distortion of the legacy of one of the great leaders in the history of Latin America. The press release accompanying the report begins by stating, “Hugo Chávez’s presidency (1999-2013) was characterized by a dramatic concentration of power and open disregard for basic human rights guarantees.” Such a blatant disregard for the facts – the expansion of basic human rights, rather than the alleged disregard for them, being merely one example – illustrates quite clearly the fact that HRW, rather than an objective party, had a clear anti-Chavez, pro-US position, and it invested significant resources in propagating that position. Such shameful pandering is, sadly, unsurprising for such a discredited organization as HRW.

Human Rights Watch is undeniably an appendage of US foreign policy. It is in many ways part of the “soft power” arm of US power projection, a means of delegitimizing, demonizing, and otherwise destabilizing countries that do not play ball with the US. From Ukraine to Libya, Syria to Palestine and Venezuela, HRW has shown itself to be treacherous, and a willing servant of Empire. It is for this reason that well-meaning people around the world, not to mention government and political organizations, must recognize HRW as the enemy, rather than an ally.

Eric Draitser is an independent geopolitical analyst based in New York City, he is the founder of StopImperialism.org and OP-ed columnist for RT, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.

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