



Confronting the Anti-Israel Narrative-Industrial Complex

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"Israel has become so demonized" in human rights organizations, says Danielle Haas, former senior editor at Human Rights Watch (HRW), that there's "no space to see Israelis as victims, or to absorb nuance or voices that challenge their orthodoxies. In a conceptual universe where Israel is an occupier-colonizer-apartheid state, it is a priori the aggressor, regardless of the brutal human-rights abuses it suffers."

Haas (no relation to me) edited HRW's annual review of human rights around the world from 2010 to 2023. In a blistering piece for the journal *SAPIR*, she writes that in human rights organizations, "Israel has become their watchword of outrage, the focus of disproportionate attention, and the note to sound for signaling fealty to a human-rights movement that is increasingly hijacked by politics and dominated by groupthink."

That's why, she writes, these organizations have been so anodyne in their response to Hamas' brutality of October 7, so disinterested in the tunnels it has built "beneath children's beds," so skeptical of the proven ties between Hamas and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, so eager to parrot false claims of Israeli brutality in response to October 7, and so reluctant to correct the record later.

From their perch as self-appointed human rights arbiters, these groups play a huge role in shaping public views of the Jewish state. Their reports, tweets, and other utterances are echoed at the United Nations and other global bodies, in leading capitals, through media, on campuses, and in Hollywood—all of it contributing to what one might call a "narrative-industrial complex" that sets and reinforces a narrative about Israel that's driven by ideology, biased in its conclusions, and disproportionate in its focus.

The silver lining in all this? Because the narrative is rooted less in facts than ideology, facts can chip away at that narrative, forcing its adherents to think anew. Polling proves it, and I've witnessed it up close.

Before we get to prescriptions, however, let's dig deeper into the narrative-industrial complex and its impact on Israel.

In his "Allegory of the Cave," Plato wrote about people chained to a wall who see nothing but shadows from nearby objects and, knowing nothing else, assume those shadows are reality. Only the person who leaves the cave and sees sunlight comes to recognize reality for what it truly is.

When it comes to Israel, much of the world is similarly chained to a wall, seeing only shadows—the shadows of a narrative about Israel as an "apartheid state," a uniquely prominent human rights abuser now committing genocide in Gaza.

The problem does not begin and end with human rights organizations, nor do these organizations drive skewed views of Israel more than any other part of the narrative-industrial complex. The UN and its Human Rights Council focus inordinate attention on Israel while largely ignoring truly horrific human rights abuse elsewhere; Western newspapers often cover the Arab-Israeli conflict with a pronounced bias against Israel; Western leaders read that coverage and seek limits on Israel's response to terror; and leftist professors nourish anti-Israeli bias on the campuses of all-too-many universities. It's no wonder that support for Israel is dropping among college students and other young adults.

All is not lost, however. Ignorance about Israel—still the region's only democracy, by the way—provides opportunity. In a recent survey of 250 college students from around the country, more than 85 percent of them supported the Palestinian chant "from the river to the sea." Many, however, couldn't identify that river or that sea, and many didn't know basic facts about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"After learning a handful of basic facts about the Middle East," the University of California at Berkeley professor who commissioned the survey wrote in December, "67.8% of students went from supporting 'from the river to sea' to rejecting the mantra."

I've experienced something similar. Discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I've evoked blank stares when noting that Palestinian leaders have rejected multiple offers of statehood, that Palestinians overwhelmingly oppose a two-state solution and support Hamas's brutality of October 7, that the Palestinian Authority continues to pay pensions to the families of terrorists who kill Jews, and that Israel arguably does more than any other nation to limit civilian casualties in wartime.

Nor do most people know that Palestinian leaders incite Jew-hating and Israel rejectionism at mosques, through schools, and on social media—lots of it documented by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and other watchdog groups.

So, here's an idea for those who want to level the playing field of discussion about the Jewish state: relay facts, offer history, and suggest reliable sources from outside the narrative-industrial complex.

And change the world—one blank stare at a time.