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## **Visit to Saudi Arabia and False Allegations of Human Rights Watch 'Bias'**

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**UPDATE:** In light of continuing false allegations against Human Rights Watch, we have expanded this statement, originally issued on July 17, 2009.

(New York, August 6, 2009) - Several recent media reports have suggested that Human Rights Watch has compromised its political neutrality and showed an anti-Israel bias by meeting with potential donors at receptions in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East. These reports are based on misleading assumptions and incorrect information which we address here.

Human Rights Watch visited Saudi Arabia in May 2009 and attended two private receptions held to discuss our work in the Middle East and beyond. Among the false allegations about the trip made on blogs and in the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, the *National Post* and the *Jerusalem Post* were that Human Rights Watch tried to raise money "to counter the Israeli lobby," that Human Rights Watch failed to criticize Saudi Arabia's rights record, that Human Rights Watch does not recognize Israel's right to self-defense, and that Human Rights Watch is somehow linked to terrorism.

### **The Saudi Receptions**

Human Rights Watch visited Saudi Arabia in May with the aim of starting to build a human rights-supporting constituency within Saudi Arabia, as part of our larger effort to create a diverse global funding base beyond our traditional donors in Europe and North America. During this trip (en route to which our researcher on Saudi Arabia was detained at the airport for six hours), we attended two private receptions in Saudi Arabia, in Riyadh and Jeddah, as well as receptions in Beirut and Amman. We held a similar reception in Tel Aviv in April.

These receptions were in private homes, hosted by people interested in Human Rights Watch who invited other guests to learn more about us. We discussed the work of the organization globally and in the region. Among the investigations and reports discussed were ones on human rights abuses by Israel and Hamas, including during the Gaza conflict, which had recently been a focus of Human Rights Watch, as well as

Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

The roughly 50 guests at the reception in Riyadh included three with governmental affiliations: the spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior; the deputy head of the Human Rights Commission, a governmental organization; and a member of the Shura Council, a government-appointed consultative body. None was solicited for funds, nor would Human Rights Watch ever accept funds from such officials, in any country. However, as in all countries, government officials are important interlocutors for our advocacy on Saudi human rights policy. We have had extensive conversations with Saudi officials, including at the most senior levels, about their country's human rights record, and welcome those conversations whenever we can have them. Our host extended an invitation to the Interior Ministry spokesperson both to signal that Human Rights Watch is a reputable organization operating openly in Saudi Arabia and to offer our staff the opportunity to present concerns about Saudi policy. The previous night, the spokesperson had helped secure the release of our researcher from the airport. Human Rights Watch has previously met with senior Interior Ministry officials to discuss Saudi rights abuses.

This trip has been misused by critics to suggest impropriety by Human Rights Watch, as well as a broader "anti-Israel" bias. False allegations include the following:

- **"Fundraising to counter the Israel lobby"**

Human Rights Watch did not try to raise money "to counter the Israeli lobby." In discussing our work on Gaza, we noted criticism that Human Rights Watch is biased against Israel and juxtaposed that with claims often heard in the Middle East that we are "soft" on Israel because of our US donor base. We never tried to raise funds to counter such attacks. We did ask for funds to support Human Rights Watch's work both in the region and worldwide.

- **"Failure to Criticize Saudi Abuses"**

A blog posting republished in the online *Wall Street Journal* claimed that Human Rights Watch had "no time to criticize Saudi Arabia's abysmal human rights record" during the trip. That is false. Our audience had come to the events in Riyadh and Jeddah precisely to hear about what lay ahead in improving their country's human rights record, among broader regional concerns. We discussed our work on Saudi Arabia, which exhaustively documents the country's appalling human rights record, and includes coverage of women's rights, severe problems with the criminal justice system, the juvenile death penalty, domestic workers, and discrimination against religious minorities. No other human rights group has produced a more comprehensive, detailed, and thorough body of work on Saudi human rights issues in recent years than has Human Rights Watch.

- **"Accepting Saudi Government Funding"**

The head of the Israeli group NGO Monitor wrote in the *National Post* that "HRW has become a subsidiary of Saudi Arabia." In fact, Human Rights Watch takes no government money of any kind and has published numerous reports highly critical of Saudi Arabia, with two more due to be released over the coming weeks.

- **"Failure to Recognize Israel's Right to Self-Defense"**

In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed accusing Human Rights Watch of anti-Israel bias, the author says Human Rights Watch refuses "to distinguish between aggression and self-defense" and does not recognize "that Hamas's refusal to stop its attacks makes it culpable for both Israeli and Palestinian casualties."

Human Rights Watch has never criticized Israel (or any country) for defending its civilians, or disputed its right - and responsibility - to do so. Once a government or armed group engages in armed conflict, the sole question we ask is whether its military operations are conducted in accordance with its obligations under international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch maintains a position of strict neutrality on the legitimacy of resorting to military action because we find it the best way to promote our primary goal of encouraging all sides in the course of the conflict to respect international humanitarian law.

This law applies to all parties to a conflict, and is primarily designed to spare noncombatants the hazards of warfare and abuse. Neither the justice of the cause nor the trigger for the conflict affects the analysis of the legality of the military actions taken under international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch criticizes Israeli forces (see "[Precisely Wrong](#)" and "[Rain of Fire](#)"), Hamas (see "[Rockets from Gaza](#)" and "[Indiscriminate Fire](#)") and other armed groups (see "[Civilians under Assault](#)"), when we find evidence that their actions violated international humanitarian law, regardless of their reasons for engaging in armed conflict.

On the second point, violations of international humanitarian law by one party to the conflict do not justify violations by the other party. Each side has a legal obligation to abide by the laws of war.

- **"Human Rights Watch linked to terrorism"**

The head of NGO Monitor told the *Jerusalem Post* that: "To deny that there is a campaign, closely linked to the terrorist campaign, to demonize and delegitimize Israel, is to ignore fact, and HRW is central to this." Human Rights Watch has extensively documented and condemned terrorism in the region, including in [Israel](#) and [Iraq](#), and for four years has pursued an initiative to promote condemnation by key regional actors of attacks against civilians by armed groups as well as states. We firmly believe that civilians anywhere warrant protection. We have written reports about the targeting of civilians by armed groups in

Afghanistan, Colombia, Israel, and the Philippines, among others.

## **Building Networks for Human Rights**

Our visit to Saudi Arabia was organized to help build a human rights-supporting constituency there, and as part of a larger campaign to diversify our funding base beyond our traditional donors. In 2009, we opened a development office in Tokyo to go beyond our fundraising presence in North America and Western Europe. On July 10, Human Rights Watch made public plans to set up a development office in Beirut to seek support for our global work from potential donors in the Middle East.

Over the past few years, Human Rights Watch has held several similar receptions in Israel. These were private events, hosted by supporters of Human Rights Watch who invited friends and colleagues to hear presentations about our work. We hold many such events across the United States and Western Europe, and we hope to hold many more in countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, India, Kenya, and South Africa.

There is a significant community of Saudis and others in the Middle East who believe in human rights and would like to help enhance respect for rights in their own countries and their region. The building of such a constituency is in the interest of all people of the Middle East.

Some critics claim that Human Rights Watch's Saudi visit has somehow compromised the organization's political neutrality by making it dependent on funds from people who live in a repressive society. Of our US\$44 million annual budget, which is raised entirely from private individuals and foundations, almost 75 percent comes from North America and about 25 percent from Western Europe, with less than 1 percent from all other regions of the world combined. As an organization with a global mandate, we have appropriately begun to explore funding from Australia, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. To suggest that by doing so we undermine our independence is baseless. We never allow our funding base to affect the independence of our work.

## **Our Donors**

The NGO Monitor head further suggested that: "HRW's embrace of the Saudis makes sense, because it can compensate for the group's loss of support from liberal Jews." There is no basis for the claim that Human Rights Watch has lost donors as a result of our work on Israel. Human Rights Watch does not profile our supporters based on religion or ethnic background, but many tell us they have deep ties to Israel, and they support our work because they believe that respect for human rights should be universal. Many also recognize that when Israel disregards human rights it undermines rather than enhances the country's security.

## **Human Rights Watch Methodology**

When Human Rights Watch reports on abuses, including in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, we conduct extensive field investigations and document facts before reaching conclusions about violations of international human rights or humanitarian law. We seek to apply our rigorous methodology in an even-handed way to serious human rights abuses wherever they occur. A key source of our credibility in raising concerns with governments is that we are not singling them out for criticism, but rather looking at similar issues in more than 80 countries. Nevertheless, governments and their supporters frequently criticize Human Rights Watch and the messages we deliver. We have been accused of bias against numerous governments and armed groups, including China, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Israel, Hezbollah, Morocco, Palestinian groups, Russia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers, Vietnam, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.

We try to avoid making errors through painstaking, on-the-ground research, and careful vetting. When we make a mistake, we issue a correction.

NGO Monitor, by contrast, conducts no field investigations and condemns anyone who criticizes Israel. It appears never to have found any criticism of Israel to be valid, nor conceded that Israel has committed a human rights violation.

### **Supporting the Human Rights Ideal**

Human Rights Watch rejects the idea that nationality, ethnicity, or religion determine people's political or ideological beliefs, and that the backgrounds of our supporters influence our coverage.

By the same token, no assumption should ever be made that a private citizen's support for human rights reflects his or her government's policy. Human Rights Watch is eager and delighted to find supporters of the human rights ideal - financial or otherwise - in any and all countries of the world. To draw such communities into an active, international network is an important part of our mission and does not impair our political neutrality. It threatens no one but the human rights violators we seek to expose.

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