**THE IDEOLOGICAL BIAS OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL:**

**OVERVIEW:**

Amnesty International is perhaps the most prestigious international non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to furthering human rights. Amnesty’s campaigns and publications are quoted by political leaders, journalists, diplomats, and academics. Amnesty has helped set agendas and influenced governments, as well as other international bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Founded in 1961 as a small, volunteer initiative by Peter Benenson, the London-based organization has evolved dramatically, today operating around the globe, with thousands of employees and a multi-million dollar budget.

Despite Amnesty’s influence, critical analysis of the organization and its activities has been limited. The “halo effect,” which shields groups claiming to promote universal moral agendas and human rights from scrutiny because of a perceived impartiality, has insulated Amnesty from systematic critical assessment and reform, to its own detriment.

In 2014, Amnesty finds itself in the midst of unprecedented crisis. In late 2012, working conditions led to strikes in its London office and UK section. Internal reports acknowledged that in some regions, particularly in the US, the organization has lost influence along with a significant number of members. As NGO Monitor’s research has shown, the crisis is rooted in a number of structural problems, including consistent post-colonial ideological bias, a pronounced lack of credibility in research reports, moral inconsistency, financial instability and corruption, failure to act with transparency in critical organizational aspects, and friction between the London office and key national sections (particularly the U.S.).

Additional sections deal with ideological and political biases and with the lack of professional methodology and credibility in Amnesty’s publications, which have further limited the effectiveness of the organization. In particular, these failures are illustrated in Amnesty’s relationship with Israel and its treatment of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The ideological bias of the Amnesty international can be found at:

* Financial mismanagement among Amnesty’s corporate officers, most notably in the redundancy packages of former Secretary General Irene Khan and her deputy Kate Gilmore.
* A professional staff who believe that Amnesty is undermining human rights through its own policies and practices. In the words of Gita Sahgal, former head of the Gender Unit, Amnesty’s relationship with a pro-Taliban group “fundamentally damages Amnesty International’s integrity and, more importantly, constitutes a threat to human rights.”1
* Repeated examples of “lawfare,” the tendentious misapplications of legal terms and statutes to create the false impression of guilt.
* Likewise, systematic flaws in the reporting of human rights abuses, including the repetition of false libels and comparison of Israel to terror groups such as Hamas.
* An inadequate understanding of armed conflict leading to erroneous claims and incorrect analysis.
* Violation of the universality of human rights, including a consistent institutionalized bias against Israel through double standards.
* The employment of individuals in key research and leadership positions whose backgrounds, skills, and activities demonstrate the absence of professional human rights experience, exacerbated by deep ideological and political bias. This trend is incompatible with the requirements for credible and universal human rights reporting and analysis.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Amnesty’s beginnings were narrowly focused on a single issue, “Prisoners of Conscience,” as reflected in its well-known founding myth. While traveling by train in May 1961, Peter Benenson read a report of two students in Portugal who, having raised “a toast to freedom,” were imprisoned. Outraged and inspired, Benenson published an article, “The Forgotten Prisoners,” in the British Observer newspaper. In response, Benenson outlined a one-year campaign, called the “Appeal for Amnesty, 1961,”

Benenson sought to draw public attention to the prisoners’ plight and apply public pressure on those who might influence their release. The response was so positive that, at a meeting in July that year, citizens of several European countries and the U.S. agreed to establish “a permanent international movement in defense of freedom of opinion and religion, and not a one-year campaign.” Amnesty collected information on prisoners of conscience, promoted mass campaigns on their behalf, and, upon occasion, organized high-profile missions to report on the policies and practices of offending countries.

In addition to acting as a pragmatic organization assisting prisoners of conscience, Amnesty was also a social movement. “Benenson’s fundamental vision was not only for a movement that would free prisoners, but one that would transform the lives of those who became drawn into the campaign.” The tension between these different goals continues to frame Amnesty’s agenda in the 21st century.

**Bureaucracy Versus Activism:**

Amnesty is a highly bureaucratic organization that operates much like a multinational corporation or a government. At the same time, Amnesty continues to present itself as a grassroots, member-driven organization. This contradiction is reflected in the often conflictual relationship between country sections and the international organization.

**Amnesty’s Corporate Structure**

Amnesty describes itself as “a global movement of more than 3 million supporters, members and activists.” While members pay dues; there is no official definition for supporters or activists. Amnesty’s US section (AIUSA), for example, defines supporters as anyone who “has signed up to receive updates from the organization (e.g., email, Facebook, Twitter)” and activists as people who have “taken action for the organization within a recent timeframe; actions can be online (e.g., electronic petition) or offline (e.g., part of local group, participant in events).”

Amnesty’s self-identification as a “global movement” belies the complexities of the organization. Amnesty operates through a highly complex bureaucratic corporate structure with numerous international and country-specific organizations. The organization filters information to the membership, activists, and supporters in non-transparent means via a labyrinth of staff, volunteers, and bureaucratic structures.

Amnesty’s scope is reflected in the size of its workforce and volunteer base. In 2012, it had 2,155 staff members (76% full-time) and 6,811 volunteers who donated time for research, campaigns, translation, office, and events. Although Amnesty has staff and volunteers spread throughout the world, 70% of its staff as of 2012 was located in Europe.

**“Do Something” – Amnesty’s Changing Mandate:**

In the more than 50 years since Peter Benenson founded Amnesty, the focus of the organization’s activities has changed considerably. In its early decades, Amnesty’s main interest and source of influence were its campaigns for the release of prisoners of conscience, particularly in closed and non-democratic societies. The original core principle of Amnesty’s mandate was that prisoners who advocated for or engaged in violence could not be designated as a “prisoner of conscience,” and the NGO would not campaign on his or her behalf.

Amnesty International opposes the imprisonment not only of those imprisoned for their conscientiously held beliefs who neither use nor advocate violence.

This standard was so strict that Nelson Mandela was originally excluded from advocacy by the organization. However, the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet empire, other military dictatorships around the world, and South African apartheid, interest in (and the number of) political prisoners declined, as did Amnesty’s role and influence.

At the same time, Benenson’s original vision also imagined “getting people of different opinions, class etc. to work together in the same direction, and to learn to co-operate. Thus, it does not matter so very much what they do, so long as they do something.” Indeed, since 1961, Amnesty has greatly expanded its remit to encompass an ever widening range of human rights claims, so that its members and the organization can “do something.” In line with this reasoning, Secretary General Shetty argues that the core message of Amnesty is to “make sure that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights becomes real and meaningful to every human being in the world. And by definition the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is wide.”

**HISTORY OF AMNESTY MANDATE EXPANSION:**

**Year of expansion Expansion of mandate**

1973 (Vienna, Austria) Death penalty

1974 (Askov, Denmark) Fair trial/ reasonable time for prisoners imprisoned for political reasons

1979 (Leuven, Belgium) Extrajudicial killings for political reasons

1983 (Jouy-en-Josas, France) Ability to condemn torture and/or killing of prisoners by non-state actors

1985 (Helsinki, Finalnd) Refugees

1987 (Aquas de Lindoia, Brazil) All extrajudicial killings

1991 (Yokohama, Japan) Sexual orientation, administrative detention, forced deportation, house destruction

1993 (Boston, USA) Non-governmental prisoners of conscience

1995 (Ljubljana, Slovenia) Unfair trials of political prisoners by non-state actors

1997 (Cape Town, South Africa) Opposition to weapons of war & land minds in particular

1999 (Troia, Portugal) No changes - A mandate review was in process during this meeting

2001 (Dakar, Senegal) Move to full-spectrum approach

2005 (Morelos, Mexico) Mandate replaced with "mission"

**SOME NOTABLE EVENTS:**

**THE IRENE KHAN AFFAIR:**

In 2008, Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan was asked by Amnesty’s Executive Committee (IEC – now called the International Board) not to return for a third term. Khan’s Executive Deputy Secretary General Kate Gilmore was also dismissed. Khan then negotiated severance and compensation terms for both herself and Gilmore.

These agreement terms were later reported in a letter to Amnesty members by Peter Pack, then-Chair of the IEC. Pack reported that the amounts paid to Khan and Gilmore in 2009 accounted for no less than 4% of Amnesty’s annual budget. The letter stated that Khan’s total severance payment amounted to £533,103 ($858,000) – an approximate equivalent of one year’s salary at £191,697 ($309,000), plus back pay and relocation and housing expenses for that year. Total payments made to Gilmore in 2009 amounted to £325,244 ($523,600), which included a termination payment of £59,655 ($96,000) in addition to a 2010 salary and pension of £113,987 ($183,496).

The letter also revealed that the salary for the new Secretary General totaled £200,600 ($323,000): £192,800 plus £7,800 for housing. Pack defended the salary, insisting it was “lower than the heads of other major comparable global human rights organizations.” He also argued that “the nature of the settlement reached with Irene Khan, including the level of compensation, was in line with other organizations in similar circumstances in the UK” and that “the substantial majority reflected contractual entitlements.”

These assurances were not sufficient to assuage grassroots members from individual country sections. The payments shocked and embarrassed Amnesty members and donors, who in good faith expected contributions to promote human rights at reasonable operating costs.

**Amnesty International: Defending those linked to terror:**

Amnesty International’s anti-Israel campaign has now extended to support for a confessed spy for Hezbollah.

On January 30, 2011, Ameer Makhoul, the head of Israeli-Arab NGO Ittijah, was sentenced to nine years imprisonment for spying for Hezbollah, including during the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Makhoul was originally charged with “assisting an enemy in war,” a crime that carries a life sentence, but an October 2010 plea bargain agreement resulted in lesser charges. The judge noted that “The defendant accepted responsibility for his actions, regretted his entanglements which started off with a ‘naïve’ relationship, at the beginning of which he fell ‘into a trap.’”

In contrast to Makhoul’s admission, Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa deputy director, used his NGO platform to state, “Ameer Makhoul’s jailing is a very disturbing development…He is well known for his human rights activism on behalf of Palestinians in Israel and those living under Israeli occupation. We fear that this may be the underlying reason for his imprisonment

This is not the only instance of Amnesty defending those with ties to terror organizations. Amnesty condemned the Turkel Commission for “clearing the Israeli armed forces of wrongdoing” in the deaths of IHH terror group activists on the “Free Gaza Flotilla.” Another example was the Gita Sahgal incident, in which Amnesty’s leading women’s rights activist was forced to resign after questioning the NGO’s cooperation with an alleged Taliban supporter, Moazzam Begg. Then interim Secretary General Claudio Cordone, publically condoned “jihad in self-defense,” demonstrating the absence of accountability in the organization’s response to legitimate criticism.

**DISPROPORTIONATE FOCUS ON ISRAEL:**

Amnesty’s neglect of the most egregious human rights violations was evident in December 2008 – January 2009, when more than 600 villagers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were killed by the Lord’s Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony. Amnesty made only one apparent reference to these massacres. In contrast, Amnesty issued daily statements and numerous publications condemning the Israeli response to Palestinian rocket attacks from Gaza during this same period.

Similarly, closed dictatorships in much of the Middle East, where human rights violations are daily occurrences and part of the regime’s control mechanism, receive only minor attention from Amnesty. In one example, it soft-pedaled abuses in Qatar against migrant and domestic workers: the International Trade Union Confederation estimates that at least 4,000 workers will die as a result of the 2022 World Cup, scheduled to be hosted in Qatar. Since 2010, more than 1,200 citizens of Nepal and India have died. Yet, in the face of such horrible abuses, Shetty praised Qatar because it has “been quite open to Amnesty’s criticism and recommendations.”

Within Amnesty’s Middle East and North Africa (MENA) section, Israel receives a disproportionality large share of condemnations. This reflects a combination of media interest, ideology, and political alliances, particularly in the context of UN human rights mechanisms dominated by the Islamic bloc.

Rankings from Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization, while not flawless, provide a general sense of the human rights situation in a country. The following table shows the countries ranked worst in 2013 – 2014 on both “political rights” and “civil liberties” rubrics. Amnesty’s publications on the country in the same year follow. Israel, which ranked well on both scales, gained more attention in terms of overall publications than most of the “worst of the worst.”

**AMNESTY METHODOLOGICAL BIAS:**

On June 6, Amnesty released a publication headlined “Starved of Justice: Palestinians detained without trial by Israel.” The publication is part of the campaign to focus attention and exert political pressure on Israel, including the recent hunger strike of Palestinian prisoners, including those tried, convicted and serving sentences for involvement in mass terror attacks. The recommendations repeat many of the claims used in previous Amnesty publications which portray the Israeli legal system as inadequate, in order to justify international intervention.

**METHODOLOGICAL BIAS:**

* Amnesty’s report is based largely on unverifiable Palestinian “testimony”, with only minimal effort to check these allegations or obtain Israeli government responses (only four cases). This “methodology” violates professional and ethical standards for human rights fact finding.
* The report omits the author’s names, violating professional guidelines for fact finding such as the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute’s Guidelines on International Human Rights. Deborah Hyams and Saleh Hijazi, were listed in a prior media advisory as media contacts for the report and are described as Israel and OPT researchers, making it likely that they were the authors of the report. Both have backgrounds that reflect flagrant anti-Israel bias. Amnesty’s employment of biased staff also violates its claimed core value of “impartiality.”
* It has often been said that Amnesty International's agenda tends to fit nicely with the political needs of the United States and Great Britain. Around the

world, supporters of the Nicaraguan people's struggle for self-determination were outraged by the timing of a 1986 Amnesty report critical of the Sandinista government, which helped Reagan push another Contra Aid appropriation through a reluctant congress, at exactly the moment when the anti-Contra movement was beginning to get serious political traction. With regard to South Africa's apartheid regime, AI was critical of the human rights record of the South African government. However, as you will see below, AI never condemned apartheid per se. By the time Amnesty endorsed the Hill & Knowlton nursery tale concerning Kuwaiti infants pulled from incubators by Iraqi soldiers, many otherwise sympathetic observers of Amnesty's work became increasingly alarmed. [This was the manufactured (false) incident used to start the first Gulf War -- JW]

* More than a decade of grassroots organization within Amnesty's membership base finally succeeded just two years ago in moving the organization to take a position critical of the genocidal sanctions against the people of Iraq, sanctions which have killed approximately a million and a half Iraqis, one third of them children. According to Dr. Boyle, this delay was political, and it clearly served the interests of the U.S. and Britain, the two governments on the Security Council preventing the lifting of the sanctions. A recent search of the internet shows that AI Venezuela very quickly took up the U.S. line by charging President Chavez with crimes against humanity for the bloodshed during the recent failed coup attempt against his administration. Amnesty's performance on the April 2002 massacre at Jenin is another blot on its frequently laudable record. As our readers are aware, the United Nations attempted to investigate the Jenin massacre, but was prevented from doing so by Sharon and Bush. The announcement on May 3, 2002 by Human Rights Watch of "no massacre at Jenin" effectively killed the story, although there was a lot of argument about what constitutes a massacre. No such arguments were heard when a suicide bomber turned a Passover dinner into a tragedy. This magazine will cover the topic of Human Rights Watch in a future issue. For this issue, we were fortunate to be forwarded the transcript of a June 13th [2002] interview with Dr. Francis A. Boyle, professor of International Law and former board member of Amnesty International. What follows is a shortened version of the transcript.

Questions:

Why does such kind of Bias exist with in an international NGO that is an advocate of human rights?

How can this Bias of AL affect the reason of existence of this NGO?

Is AL actually failing to treat threats to security as a mitigating factor as voiced by Russia and China due to it’s ideological bias?

What methods can be adopted to eradicate the bias that exist in AL if does?

How can the Catholic Church criticism on AL’s stance on abortion be justified through evidence?

What corrective measures can be taken towards AL’s policies?

How does the misstatement of the law and omission of relevant facts about Israel affects credibility of AL?