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Update on HRW's Middle East Priorities 2005 (January-June)

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Following the report covering 2004, NGO Monitor has found some evidence of positive change in the focus of activities, resources and analysis of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its coverage of the Middle East.

In April 2004, NGO Monitor published a quantitative comparative analysis of the level of attention that HRW was giving to various countries and conflicts in the region. The report clearly showed HRW's disproportionate emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (see [full report](#) for details). Considering the appalling human rights record and lack of public information in many states in the Middle East, such unbalanced focus on the only democratic country in the region, as well as the liberal use of highly politicized and charged language such as 'violations of international law' with respect to Israel, indicated a clear political agenda in the work of the NGO. It is also a disservice on the part of HRW to victims of human rights violations in many other states during this period.

In examination of the period from January to June 2005, we note that HRW has to some extent reduced its disproportionate focus on Israel at the expense of other Middle Eastern Countries. Using the same quantitative analysis, the emphasis on Egypt and Iran was somewhat greater than in the case of Israel (71, 77, and 52 points, respectively); although together with Tunisia (35 points) and Iraq (93 points) these 5 countries formed an exceptional group in the level of attention they received

in this period. (See below for the breakdown of results for January-June 2005; and for country points in previous study). Although HRW's focus on Saudi Arabia's abysmal human rights record yielded only four brief press releases and one letter, these are steps in the right direction. Overall, this concrete evidence speaks for itself in terms of the reduced dominance and overemphasis on Israel that has characterized HRW's Middle East agenda in recent years.

The update study also reveals however, the problems that remain in HRW's agenda and allocation of resources to reporting on the Middle East. These can be categorized into three areas.

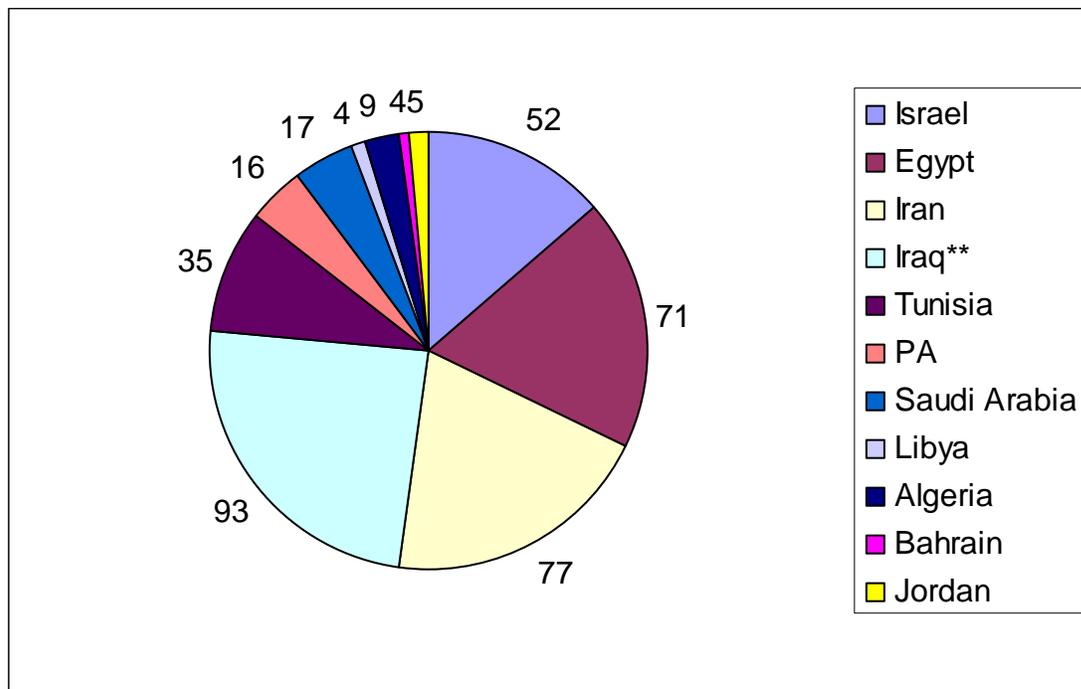
Firstly, that Israel still attracts disproportionate attention considering its size and open political system, when compared with many surrounding Arab countries. Syria, for example, is acknowledged by HRW as having “a long established record of torture” (['Torture Worldwide'](#) , April 27, 2005). One report says that “torture is a systemic human rights problem” in Syria (['Still at risk'](#), April 2005) and includes the Case of Maher Arar (2002) in which the USA handed over Arar to Syrian authorities, whereupon he was tortured. However there are no further examples, reports or investigations into human rights violations in Syria by HRW since March 2004. [Saudi Arabia](#) also receives no more detailed investigation than 4 press releases and a letter (17 points) despite concerns about the use of ‘flogging’ and ‘repression of political reformers’. The results in the table below therefore show that Israel’s 52 points still demonstrate a high level of priority in HRW resource allocation, recently demonstrated by a 128-page [report](#) released June 22, 2005, on the ‘impunity of the IDF’. HRW have clearly devoted disproportionate attention to this lengthy and detailed, yet clearly unbalanced analysis, to arrive at the conclusion that the ‘Israeli military’s investigative practices and procedures are not impartial, thorough or timely’ (page 3). Indeed this seems to be the only concrete conclusion that this extensive study could claim to prove; although the report also implies—without compelling evidence—that Israel has committed ‘war crimes, ‘crimes against humanity’, ‘willful killing of civilians’ and other ‘breaches of the Geneva convention’ (page 22). As such, the report becomes a 128-page diatribe against Israel’s practices in the territories.

Secondly, HRW's continued political bias is highlighted by its relative lack of interest in human rights violations in the Palestinian Authority. HRW's categorization of the Palestinian people as victims of Israeli human rights abuses, seems to limit the ability to identify serious abuses within the Palestinian Authority. Only 2 press releases and 2 letters addressing human rights deficiencies in the PA were released in this period. On NGO Monitor's scale for measuring relative emphasis, the PA would have received only 10 points, were it not for their mention in HRW's campaign document for the 61st session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights (boosting the score by 6 points). And this document concentrates mainly on condemning Israel for a variety of offences including the 'impunity of Israeli security forces', 'the wall' and 'unlawful home demolitions'. The PA, by comparison is criticized only on the basis of 'Killings by Palestinian Armed Groups' (note that the word 'terrorist' is avoided). Indeed, HRW documents criticizing Palestinian violations of human rights are almost always offset by more intense condemnations of Israel. In a [press release](#) of June 9, 2005 that acknowledges the devastating effect on civilian Israeli life of Hamas' use of Qassam rockets and which calls for a cessation of these attacks, a large part of the document is dedicated to criticizing Israel's military response to such acts of violence. This is an artificial effort to provide political balance which dilutes the human rights impact of such statements.

Finally, HRW's continued use of politicized and biased language with respect to Israel (frequently using terminology claiming violations of international law), undermine Israel's very integrity as a state and exhibit HRW's political agenda. In this period, HRW continues the practice of condemning Israel for '[violating international humanitarian law](#)' and acting '[illegally](#)', without any systematic and universal application of these terms. HRW's latest [report](#) on Israel also accuses the Israel Defense Forces of 'arbitrary killing and human rights abuses against civilians' (page 9) and implies that HRW's identification of problems in the IDF make it liable to commit 'war crimes' (page 18).

Despite these significant limitations, some positive steps have been taken to reduce the disproportionate focus on the Israeli Palestinian conflict in HRW reporting. This has freed resources for highlighting the serious human rights abuses occurring in other countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. However, the anti-Israel bias continues, and the need for greater emphasis on the human rights violations in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Libya demonstrate that HRW has a long way to go in paying balanced attention to all countries with human rights deficiencies in the Middle East.

Figure 1. Individual Country Points (Jan-Jun 2005)



Note: Syria does not appear in this table as HRW did not publish a single piece devoted exclusively to Syria, in this period. The appalling human rights record in Syria is alluded to in various multi-country reports, and in the context of the controversy surrounding western nations sending suspects to countries known to have a record of using torture (see <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/canada/arar/> or <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/04/27/china10549.htm> or <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/04/15/eu10479.htm>). But in 2005, HRW has not yet allocated any resources to investigating human rights abuses specifically in Syria.

Table of levels of attention given to Middle East Countries, by HRW from January to June 2005.

Type of document (no. points)	Israel	Tunisia	Egypt	Iran	Iraq	Algeria	Bahrain	Jordan	PA	Libya	Saudi Arabia
Press Release (4)	5	4	8	12	7	2	1	1	2	1	4
Letter (1)	3	1	5	1	1			1	2		1
Report (8)	1	1	3		3						
Commentary (5)	1			1	1						
Background briefing (7)				1							
Special Focus (10)	1	1	1	1	2						
Campaign Document (6)	1			1	1				1		
Graphic (3)					3						
Testimony (2)						1					
Total Points (previous study)	52 (145)	35	71 (91)	77 (44)	93 (318)	9	4	5	16 (37)	4 (13)	17 (42)