

January 12, 2023

Suzanne Nossel
Pen America
588 Broadway, Suite 303
New York, NY 10012

SNossel@pen.org

STrimel@PEN.org

Dear Ms. Nossel,

I am writing regarding your [statement](#) expressing “dismay ... over the Harvard Kennedy School of Government’s decision to deny a planned fellowship for Ken Roth, reportedly due to Roth’s criticisms of Israel’s human rights record.”

This statement raises a number of questions:

1) You repeat the accusation that Roth was denied a fellowship due to “criticisms of Israel’s human rights record,” echoing the *The Nation* and repeated in various forms. The only source for this claim is a meeting between Dean Elmendorf and “Carr Center leaders,” as reported by Roth’s supporters. Prof Katheryn Sikkink is also quoted as claiming that “Roth’s tweets on Israel were of particular concern.”

Perhaps these are paraphrases or interpretations. He might have referred to Roth’s highly disproportionate (obsessive might be more accurate) focus on Israel and vitriol in denouncing [“die hard see-no-evil defenders of Israeli repression”](#), in some cases, specifically in reference to me and my research.

Dean Elmendorf might have also noted the documentation showing that many of Roth’s allegations, including HRW publications for which he is accountable, regarding Israel are false (lies), highly distorted, or unverifiable. Or the numerous instances in which Roth has crossed the line into promoting or justifying antisemitism, and [blaming Israel for violent attacks against Jews](#). The

allegation that Jewish donors to Harvard led a conspiracy to block Roth, as emphasized in *The Nation*, and for which there is no evidence, is another example. In his [Guardian oped](#), Roth wrote “As best we can tell, donor reaction was his [Elmendorf’s] concern.

At what point does mere “criticism of Israel’s human rights record” become obsessively discriminatory, and at what point do these central aspects of Roth’s 30 years as the head of HRW disqualify him from a fellowship at an academic center? The same question would apply to someone who, in the course of a career outside academia, promoted discrimination against other groups – Blacks, women, Hispanics, Mormons, the LTGB community, etc.

2) It is also more than plausible that Professor Elmendorf and others were concerned about other aspects of Roth’s career, including fund raising practices. As you may recall from your years at HRW (2007-9), Roth and Sarah Leah Whitson, his MENA director, solicited funding in Saudi Arabia in order to promote demonization of Israel - specifically, the Goldstone report. (Roth [denied](#) that this was the pitch – he lied.) And the campaign to legitimize Ghaddafi as a “human rights reformer” might have also been part of a fund raising scheme, as well as courting other notorious human rights violators. Under Roth, HRW’s donor records were not transparent. After repeatedly and insistently denying having received Saudi funding, [information leaked in 2020](#) revealed a \$470,000 “gift” solicited by Roth from a corrupt businessman. Roth also accepted the condition that money not be used to promote LTGB rights in the Middle East. Whether there are other secret “gifts” remains to be seen.

On the basis of these and other details, your embrace of Roth “as a leading global human rights advocate” who has nobly “excoriated many dozens of governments” and is “credited with having advanced respect for rights and freedoms the world over.” On Israel, Roth goes far beyond “calling out governments harshly” or taking positions that are “unpopular in certain quarters.” Roth’s vituperative hostility towards Israelis and the singling out of the Jewish state may not be the result of “racial or religious animus”, as you wrote, but there are other possible sources.

When you were with HRW, [you departed from the NGO’s policy by criticizing the UN Human Rights Council](#) for its disproportionate focus on Israel. Throughout Roth’s career at HRW, and continuing now, he has been at the forefront of such hatred, which is the antithesis of human rights and its moral foundations.