

# What's wrong with human rights organisations?

Tuesday 16 November 2010, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2010).

**Since the beginning of the nineties in Algeria, local human rights activists and women's rights activists challenged the position taken by human rights organisations vis a vis Muslim fundamentalists and especially armed groups within them.**

During what is known to people there as 'the dark decade' and 'the war against civilians', Muslim fundamentalists armed groups started targeted assassinations of specific categories of people (namely : journalists, intellectuals, artists, foreigners and women, in this order, as was announced in communiqués published in advance by their headquarters, then claimed after the facts), then moved to mass killings when they virtually eradicated whole villages that they probably thought were not enough on their side.

First, women's rights and human rights activists started challenging the distorted vision that the reports published by human rights organisations' gave of what was happening in Algeria. Activists requested human rights organisations to produce more balanced reports, as these reports were describing in great details the violations committed by the Algerian state against armed fundamentalists, but largely overlooked and ignored the violations committed by armed fundamentalist groups (AIS, GIA, FIDA and others) against the ordinary citizens who did not bend to their orders.

For decades however, activists within human rights organisations were not heard by their organisations' headquarters, and the numerous analysis and facts finding missions they produced were just filed.

Those who rebelled from within were sacked and expelled [\[1\]](#)

Activists from outside these organisations were ignored too.

Recently Gita Sahgal, Amnesty International's Head of the Gender Unit, after sending internal memos to AI for two years, denouncing in vain their all out support for Moazzam Begg, a former Cage Prisoner and open supporter of al Qaeda, went public in the media: she tried to draw a line between supporting anybody's (including the worst criminals) fundamental rights to be free from torture, arbitrary detention, have fair trial, etc... and giving fundamentalists a political platform from where to propagate their views as well as clean them by presenting them exclusively as victims and/or human right defenders. Gita Sahgal was asked to leave AI, which she did [\[2\]](#).

It is now Karima Bennoune, member of the Board of the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York, who went public today in *The Guardian* [\[3\]](#), after knocked in vain for months at her colleagues doors to request them not to represent in court (*pro bono*) Anwar Al Awlaki, a Yemeni American living now in Yemen and most important mentor of Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula - a man who openly calls for the assassination of intellectuals and foreigners, as is reported in the media. CCR,

rightly so, denounces the planned assassination of Awlaki by – it seems – the CIA; but it fails to publicly say who this man is and to call for his fair trial (rather than his assassination). Nor does CCR express the slightest intention to support in the same way his victims in Yemen and elsewhere. Awlaki is exclusively presented as a potential victim of CIA.

What's wrong with human rights organisations? Can't they think with some complexity? Can't they strongly oppose Awlaki's policies and calls for murder, and defend his right not to be assassinated at the same time? And what about the right of his victims not to be assassinated? Is it less important in their eyes because it is not CIA that threatens them? Why do they chose to defend him and ignore his victims?...

Algerian rights organisations and individuals, victims of fundamentalist armed groups, sent yesterday a letter to CCR in which they spell out who Awlaki is in relation with al Qaeda and what crimes he incited or supported. This letter denounces the fact CCR puts forward its political role within the internal politics of the USA, rather than defend rights for all, as human rights organisations should. It writes: 'CCR is clearly putting its own positioning in internal US politics before human rights for all.' It further accuses CCR to 'make (fundamentalists' victims) even more invisible' [4]

This seems an important political comment.

We certainly see very clearly here the consequences of the fact that most international human rights organisations are European or North American based, that their Headquarters are located in the West, that progressive people there (Left, anti globalisation and human rights alike) tend to defend Muslim fundamentalists as victims of western colonialism and imperialism and legitimate representatives of oppressed people/communities. They abandon the numerous populations that suffer and die [5] under Muslim fundamentalists' rule, all the progressive people, the human rights activists, the women's rights activists from Muslim countries, as if those need not be defended. This is politics, it is not human rights. Certainly not human rights for all.

Human rights organisations fail to their stated mission when they pick and chose among victims which are to be defended and which are not.

They fail to their mission when they create a hierarchy of rights, with minority rights, community rights, religious rights or cultural rights superseding women's rights, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of consciousness which used to be the fundamental rights on which the Universal Declaration of Rights was based.

**Marieme Helie Lucas**

---

## Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [Conscientious objection: Amnesty International persists in suppressing dissent](#)

[2] See on ESSF: [Amnesty International is 'damaged' by Taliban link](#)

[3] See on ESSF: [Legal challenge to US assassination policy divides rights groups](#)

[4] See on ESSF: [Algeria/USA:human rights organisations should not support Muslim fundamentalists](#)

[5] See on ESSF: [Statement by Algerians, survivors, family or friends of victims of fundamentalist violence on the affair Gita Sahgal vs Amnesty International / Moazzam Begg](#)