

Remembering Rhonda Copelon

Tributes from her global community of activists, scholars, friends & loved ones

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Remarks at Rhonda's Life Celebration

I believe that Rhonda Copelon will be remembered as one of the most important feminist international lawyers of our time. For me, as a professor of international law myself, she was a mentor and a role model who wedded theoretical brilliance with real empathy and relentless advocacy. Her relentlessness in pursuit of human rights – especially for women – though sometimes exhausting, was profoundly inspiring.

Today, I am speaking as the proud daughter of an Algerian secular father of Muslim heritage, and in that capacity I want to memorialize Rhonda's profound contribution to the progressive fight against Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria and beyond. I know that I speak today for many Algerians, including those who gathered in Paris yesterday to hold their own memorial. They sent me a summary of their event this morning which included the following wonderful sentence: "The testimonies were interspersed with the reading of poems in Arabic and those texts chosen by Rhonda against a background of Yiddish music." How fitting.

In these terrible times of anti-Muslim hysteria in the U.S. and in the wake of the law-violating "war on terror," it is sometimes hard for U.S. progressives to remember that the often dangerous struggle of the left and women's movements in Muslim contexts against the forces of their own extremist right is one of the most important human rights struggles in the world today – and deserves support. But Rhonda, with her vigorous commitment to universality and secularism, understood this so well. She knew that the most progressive stance toward what is called the Muslim world is concrete solidarity with its progressives, not apology for fundamentalism. She had long worked to challenge religious orthodoxies – whether the religiously justified dispossession of Palestinians by the Israeli state or the attempts by the Catholic Church and Protestant evangelicals in this country to crush women's reproductive freedom.

So it made perfect sense that in 1996, Rhonda brought the groundbreaking lawsuit *Jane Doe v. Islamic Salvation Front and Anwar Haddam* on behalf of nine Algerians and the *Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocrates* (RAFD), a leftwing women's group, against the notorious Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its leader. The case which she brought under the auspices of the Center for Constitutional Rights charged the FIS and Haddam with war crimes and crimes against humanity, including assassination, rape and torture. The situation in Algeria was far too dangerous for any of the individual plaintiffs to be named. However, their lawyer was named and her clients feared for her safety. Rhonda even traveled to Algiers to take their testimonies at a time when it was considered far too dangerous to do so.

Though Haddam prevailed on summary judgment, a decision that was wrongly decided, the case represented pioneering progressive legal advocacy in that it recognized and sought a remedy for the grave harms to progressive activists posed by religious fundamentalists, a cause which Rhonda championed throughout her life. It was another "brave milestone case that broke her heart," as Ros Petchesky described McCrae. The victims – who had watched family members butchered or survived

death threats and attacks themselves - never forgot that Rhonda stood with them. In 2008, a group that included some of them wrote, "We thank you, dear friend and comrade who supported us personally, publicly and legally, at a time when you were nearly alone in doing so. We thank you for defying the conventional wisdom - including among the major human rights organizations - by defending the victims of fundamentalist armed groups." Rhonda herself talked about how devastated she was about the outcome of this case, and about the failure of progressives in the US to support her plaintiffs. This was a lonely struggle as the progressive struggle against Muslim fundamentalism so often continues to be.

In recent months, I have thought a great deal about the loneliness of this work as Rhonda described it while I have tried to internally challenge the decision by the Center for Constitutional Rights - an organization that Rhonda loved - to represent the interests of a notorious Al Qaeda ideologue Anwar Awlaki. Awlaki remains at large and openly threatens "unbelievers" and non-fundamentalist Muslims with assassination, and he advocates the most violent form of jihad - the kind of jihad that targeted the Haddam plaintiffs in Algeria. While I believe that Rhonda would have agreed with opposing United States government targeted assassinations which is the point of the CCR suit, I also believe that she would have found a different way of doing so. Because she would have recognized that Awlaki too has victims and she would have been concerned about them as well. Unlike Rhonda, many Western human rights groups have been clamoring to associate themselves with Muslim fundamentalists as a way of challenging Western governments. I hope that human rights advocates treading on this complicated territory will learn from Rhonda's important legacy in this area.

I will always remember that at the end of her life Rhonda was still relentless. In late March, she still had the energy to be outraged that Amnesty International had suspended the head of its gender unit, the Indian feminist Gita Sahgal, for publicly criticizing the organization's close public relationship with a British former Guantanamo detainee Moazzam Begg who was also a supporter of jihadist movements and who claimed to be "conservative on family values." Rhonda knew exactly what that meant. She spent much of the evening at the party for Charlotte Bunch in March politicking around this issue. A few of us Algerians finally managed to drag her away from the politics upstairs and onto the dance floor. And I have to say that even 1 ½ months before her death, she was still a fabulous dancer.

It will be one of the honors of my life that I got to be friends with Rhonda Copelon. I miss her very much. But, I know that when we are both principled and relentless in our pursuit of justice, as she was, she lives on in us. To paraphrase the words said by many Muslims at the time of someone's passing, with a secular humanist twist: "We come from the universe and to the universe we return."

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P.S.

* MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2010:

<http://rhondacopelon.blogspot.com/2010/09/from-karima-bennoune.html>