

## Human rights folly on Anwar al-Awlaki

By glossing over the problem of defending extremists like Awlaki, groups like the ACLU, Amnesty and CCR jeopardise their cause

Wednesday 17 November 2010, by [SAHGAL Gita](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2010).

Karima Bennoune's public criticism of the Center for Constitutional Rights and the ACLU's case in defence of Anwar al-Awlaki [\[1\]](#) is a welcome stand for a universal vision of human rights that has largely gone missing from western human rights organisations.

Many Asian, African and Middle Eastern groups and organisations who are struggling against both state and non-state violence feel utterly betrayed [\[2\]](#) by the deliberately ignorant and partial stands taken by organisations in the US and Britain which are supposed to represent human rights [\[3\]](#). Their outrage was ignored or attacked by the left in Britain [\[4\]](#). The three founders of Amnesty International in Algeria were allegedly expelled from the organisation for raising an internal complaint about Amnesty's failure, in their view, to criticise atrocities committed by Islamist rebels, as opposed to government repression, as Algerian feminist Marieme Helie Lucas made public for the first time earlier this year [\[5\]](#).

In my case, I asked my bosses at Amnesty International for information [\[6\]](#) about what investigation of Moazzam Begg, the former Guantánamo detainee, they had conducted – including his beliefs both before his detention without charge in Guantánamo Bay and, subsequently, when his admiration for Anwar al-Awlaki and Ali al-Timimi should have rung alarm bells. They failed to answer my questions and I left Amnesty International due to “irreconcilable differences” [\[7\]](#), having been suspended after going public. Later, an internal review (pdf [\[8\]](#)) found that Amnesty International had not done “adequate due diligence”. In plain terms, Amnesty executives had entirely failed in their duty to conduct an investigation of Moazzam Begg. Although they expressed regret for their failure, they also affirmed their relationship with Begg.

To this day, no investigation of Moazzam Begg or Cageprisoners' [\[9\]](#) suitability as a partner for a human rights organisation has been made available to Amnesty International staff or members. Nor have any of the issues been debated internally.

It is becoming clear that this silence and ignorance are not accidental. CCR has clearly failed to answer satisfactorily the questions that Karima Bennoune was posing to the board; it has also not bothered to respond to queries raised by feminists like the US writer Meredith Tax [\[10\]](#). Instead, in language very similar to Begg's, the CCR has stated that in the absence of any due judicial process against al-Awlaki, there is no evidence against him.

It is likely that the similarity of view between Begg and CCR is not accidental either. CCR has long been proud to claim Cageprisoners as partners and human rights colleagues [\[11\]](#), and like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have conducted joint research (pdf [\[12\]](#)) with them.

But CCR has a history that should have allowed it to develop a different path. The pioneering feminist lawyer Rhonda Copelon [\[13\]](#) had fought a case on behalf of victims of terrorism against the head of the Algerian Islamist group, FIS [\[14\]](#), when most human rights organisations were simply

looking at Islamists as victims of state violence rather than as perpetrators of violence themselves. That is why Algerians feel particularly betrayed by the stand taken now by CCR, and have written to the organisation to challenge its stand.

But do these complaints mean that those of us critical of human rights organisations from an anti-fundamentalist perspective are arguing that the US government would be right to assassinate their opponents? And does that mean that, conversely, it is the duty of anti-imperialists everywhere to support al-Awlaki uncritically?

Not at all. And it is not surprising that a dedicated human rights advocate such as Karima Bennoune, who was also an adviser to Amnesty International on policy on terrorism, should have gone public with her views. Her background, like mine, was firmly anti-imperialist. Her family had fought French colonialism in Algeria, as mine had fought the British in India. For feminists from the left, anti-imperialism has not abandoned its emancipatory roots and simply decided to support “the enemy of my enemy”.

CCR claims that litigation “is what it does”. But CCR is an organisation that should conduct litigation to advance a general human rights cause. By deliberately sanitising al-Awlaki’s reputation, the CCR is acting as criminal defence lawyers rather than human rights lawyers.

Lawyers for the Russian spies [15] argued that there was no evidence against their clients – shortly before a deal was struck and their clients went off to Moscow. No one blames them for that. But CCR has taken the path of undermining a potentially important legal argument about oversight of government actions by pretending that al-Awlaki’s activities raise no human rights concerns.

If US policy is a western problem, which western human rights organisations are bound to address, fundamentalism and terrorism exported by US- and British-based groups is also a western problem. Western human rights organisations have comprehensively failed not only to monitor al-Awlaki’s activities in western countries, but have decided to represent his interests. They are failing many more victims of the “war on terror” than they are supporting through their work on illegal detention and extraordinary rendition.

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**P.S.**

\* From the Guardian, Monday 15 November 2010 21.21 GMT:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/15/international-criminal-justice-yemen>

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## Footnotes

[1] See [Legal challenge to US assassination policy divides rights groups](#)

[2] See [World Wide Outcry To Make Amnesty International See Reason and Make Amends](#)

[3] See [Women’s Rights as Human Rights – 1 – ‘Soft law’ and hard choices: a conversation with](#)

[Gita Sahgal](#)

- [4] See [Dangerous game: a reply to Gita Sahgal and her supporters](#)
- [5] See [Conscientious objection: Amnesty International persists in suppressing dissent](#)
- [6] See [Gita Sahgal's dispute with Amnesty International puts human rights group in the dock](#)
- [7] See [Amnesty International parts from Gita Sahgal, the whistle blower](#)
- [8] [http://www.amnesty.org/sites/impact.amnesty.org/files/Working\\_with\\_others.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/sites/impact.amnesty.org/files/Working_with_others.pdf)
- [9] <http://www.cageprisoners.com/>
- [10] See [The CCR and the Elephant in the Room - To defend Anwar al-Awlaki and how?](#)
- [11] <http://ccrjustice.org/newsroom/press-releases/center-constitutional-rights-issues-statement-suppport-new-ngo-formed-men-who>
- [12] <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2007/jun/us-disappeared-prel.pdf>
- [13] See [Rhonda Copelon obituary](#)
- [14] See [Remembering Rhonda Copelon](#)
- [15] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/russian-spy-ring>