

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH TOOK MONEY FROM SAUDI BUSINESSMAN AFTER DOCUMENTING HIS COERCIVE LABOR PRACTICES

The controversial gift came with a caveat that it could not be used to support LGBT advocacy in the Middle East and North Africa.

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Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth arrives for a press conference to launch their 2020 World Report at the New York U.N. headquarters on Jan. 14, 2020. Photo: Johannes Eisele/AFP via Getty Images

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH accepted a sizable donation from a Saudi billionaire shortly after its researchers documented labor abuses at one of the man's companies, a potential violation of the rights group's own fundraising guidance.

Human Rights Watch recently returned the gift from Saudi real estate magnate Mohamed Bin Issa Al Jaber, which came with the caveat that it could not be used to support the group's LGBT advocacy in the Middle East and North Africa. The controversial donation is at the center of a contentious internal debate about the judgment and leadership of Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth.

After The Intercept began investigating the donation, the rights group published a [statement](#) on its website saying that accepting the funding was a “deeply regrettable decision” that “stood in stark contrast to our core values and our longstanding commitment to LGBT rights as an integral part of human rights.”

The 2012 grant from Al Jaber's U.K.-based charitable foundation amounted to \$470,000, Roth told The Intercept, adding that a “final pledge installment was never realized.” The statement did not refer to Al Jaber by name, but two Human Rights Watch employees confirmed his identity to The Intercept.

“We also regret that the grant was made by the owner of a company that Human Rights Watch had previously identified as complicit in labor rights abuse,” the group's statement said. In 2012 and previous years, Human Rights Watch reported extensively on labor violations at Jadawel International, a Saudi construction company founded and owned by Al Jaber.

Managers at Jadawel took passports from unskilled migrant workers and failed to renew their Saudi residency permits, effectively trapping laborers and forcing them to keep working in silence for fear of arrest, according to [a 2010 Human Rights Watch report](#). That

arrangement allowed managers to underpay staff; workers told Human Rights Watch that some had gone months without pay.

Roth was himself involved in soliciting the donation, according to an internal Human Rights Watch email sent last month and obtained by The Intercept. The email was written on behalf of the group's international board of directors and signed by the board's co-chairs, Amy Rao and Neil Rimer.

In 2012, Roth signed a memorandum of understanding with Al Jaber containing language that said the gift could not be used for LGBT rights work in the region. He was later [pictured](#) next to Al Jaber at a 2013 ceremony to memorialize the funding.

“By accepting a pledge excluding its use for work on a group whose rights we strive to protect, the people involved at Human Rights Watch, Inc. made a serious error in judgment,” Rao and Rimer wrote to staff. “Ken Roth, the most senior person at HRW involved with soliciting this pledge, accepts full responsibility for this mistake.”

In an email to The Intercept, Roth said that he and others discussed the labor abuses at Jadawel “with the employer, who pledged to address them and later provided documentation to that effect. HRW and the employer then discussed a possible gift to HRW’s work, pending confirmation that the abuses had been resolved.” Roth also said the fallout from returning the donation has not impacted his management role at Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch staff originally met with Al Jaber in 2010 as part of its advocacy process after researching his workers’ complaints, according to a Human Rights Watch employee. Their reporting continued the following year.

Mohamed Bin Issa Al Jaber in France in June 2008. Photo: Gilles Rolle/REA/Redux

Jadawel's labor practices are mentioned in Human Rights Watch's [2011](#) and [2012](#) World Reports as examples of the failures of Saudi Arabia's sponsorship system to adequately protect migrant workers.

The 2012 report said some managers at Jadawel were "six months in arrears with salary payments," and that "managers threatened workers not to pursue complaints in labor court."



A [fundraising policy](#) approved by Human Rights Watch's board later in 2012 said that the organization will not accept funding from a company that is "itself a focus of Human Rights Watch work," or when "the solicitation or acceptance of such funds might undermine Human Rights Watch's credibility, independence, or reputation."

The donation was only recently made known to Human Rights Watch's board, according to the internal email. But Al Jaber's foundation [announced the grant on its website in September 2013](#). "[His Excellency] Sheikh Mohamed Bin Issa Al Jaber, Founder and Chairman of the MBI Al Jaber Foundation, signed an agreement with Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, in order to support their work in the area of civil society in the Arab world, with particular reference to the cause of human rights in Arab countries in transition," the announcement proclaimed.

Despite the restrictions on Al Jaber's donation, Human Rights Watch continued to document LGBT rights violations in the region. In 2013, they joined a [letter](#) to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on LGBT

rights and [documented](#) abuses against of transgender people in Kuwait. The following year, they published reports on LGBT rights in [Morocco](#), [Egypt](#), and [Syria](#).

“Nevertheless, accepting a grant with such a condition was clearly wrong and is deeply disappointing to us,” Rao and Rimer wrote to staff last month.

Human Rights Watch will launch “a comprehensive independent investigation to understand why our stringent protocols and policies on vetting grants and donors failed,” according to its online statement.

“The investigation will start soon and will provide the basis for any further Board and management action,” the statement said. “To prevent this from happening again, we have created an additional policy explicitly prohibiting restrictions on gifts that would exclude particular social groups or fundamental rights issues.”

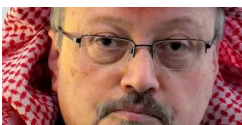
Update: March 2, 2020, 9:02 a.m. ET

This article has been updated to include a response and additional details from Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth that were received after publication.

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