



## POLITICS

# J.K. Rowling vs. Amnesty

Is this the reckoning that human-rights NGOs have long avoided?



**Danielle Haas**

11 AUG 2026 · 10 MIN READ



Mar 29, 2022 - London, England, UK - JK Rowling attending *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* World Film Premiere, Royal Festival Hall. Alamy.



On 31 July, Amnesty International publicly apologised for publishing an “a  
rights” briefing at the heart of a weeks-long public clash with author J.K.

Rowling. The document, “A Growing Threat: The Anti-Rights Movement in the UK,” purported to map a nationwide “anti-rights ecosystem” that included Beira’s Place, the Edinburgh sexual-violence support service established by Rowling in 2022. Transgender-rights activists have long criticised the charity for excluding transgender women from its services.

Rowling was having none of it, and she launched a scathing public attack on an NGO that she said has “become a tyrant that persecutes those who don’t espouse what it decrees acceptable beliefs.” She invited any of the groups named on what she called Amnesty’s “blacklist” to apply to the J.K. Rowling Women’s Fund for legal support. Amnesty quickly realised that it had picked the wrong fight. Its earlier, carefully calibrated expression of “regret” collapsed into a full mea culpa; it withdrew the briefing. The document had been uploaded by mistake, the organisation said, bypassing its established and normally rigorous internal-review processes. An internal investigation was announced, to be followed by an independent external review.



At a glance, Amnesty's climbdown seems to close a brief but turbulent chapter in the history of one of the world's most influential human-rights organisations. But if it hopes that its procedural explanation will satisfy critics and end scrutiny of its operations, it is mistaken; it only raises more questions. How, for instance, does a document of this significance—which named more than a hundred British organisations and might have seriously damaged their reputations and funding—reach publication without passing through the oversight that Amnesty claims it applies to all its work? And if that process failed here, why should anyone assume that it has not failed elsewhere?

As senior editor at Human Rights Watch (HRW), I saw the machinery behind major human-rights publications up close. It beggars belief that a complex document like this one about a highly sensitive issue simply slipped out of the door unnoticed. A less fantastical explanation is that it was not a rogue briefing, but the most legally exposed expression of a settled institutional view. In May, Amnesty published a related report titled “Like a Snowball: The Growth and Impact of the Gender-Critical Movement in the UK,” which included comparable characterisations of many of the same organisations and was finally withdrawn on 31 July. Also withdrawn was a parliamentary briefing produced for Pride Month this year that likewise described 51 gender-critical organisations as “anti-trans.”

Amnesty's approach in the Rowling affair followed the familiar NGO playbook that has allowed human-rights organisations to survive crises for decades to preserve their moral authority and avoid meaningful accountability. First, downplay the incident by framing it as a regrettable breakdown in an otherwise scrupulous system; second, promise an investigation; third, wait for the news cycle to move on. But maybe that won't work this time. Is it too much to hope that Rowling's stand-off with Amnesty will finally produce a reckoning for an increasingly unaccountable sector?

A realist might well conclude that there is almost no chance of that.

Organisations like Amnesty International—which command budgets that run

into hundreds of millions, and even billions, of US dollars—have spent decades surviving controversies and evading scrutiny, even though they exert enormous political and cultural influence. An optimist, on the other hand, might point out that history has a habit of stripping moral halos from individuals and institutions (like the Catholic Church and the Boy Scouts of America) that were once thought beyond reproach. The wheels of accountability may turn slowly, but turn they do.

Last month, the UK Charity Commission opened a compliance case into Amnesty's handling of the "anti-rights" affair, saying it was "engaging with the charity's trustees to gather more information." Public figures have also begun to challenge what they see as the organisation's ideological direction. "As a former major fund-raiser for Amnesty—I produced the first five "Secret Policeman's Balls"—I renounce the mob who have taken over Amnesty," wrote comedian John Cleese on X. "Amnesty used to be about trying to do something about TORTURE." Iseult White, the granddaughter of Amnesty co-founder Seán MacBride, told the Times that she "would not donate a single penny to Amnesty." And now, some of those who have spent their working lives in the human-rights sector are also speaking out about the betrayal of foundational principles they witnessed during their careers.

---

I am one of those people. Shortly after 7 October 2023, I left HRW and co-founded EiGHT, a Swiss-based nonprofit established and staffed by former and current professionals from major global-rights and humanitarian groups. Our mission is to press for greater accountability and external oversight of organisations like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, HRW, and Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF) which have been allowed to wander unchecked through the legal system, the media, academia, and the halls of power.

## Danielle Haas' Email to HRW Staffers – October 16, 2023 – ngomonitor

On October 16, outgoing senior editor at Human Rights Watch (HRW) Danielle Haas sent an email to her co-workers claimin...

NGOMONITOR - MAKING NGOS ACCOUNTABLE • NGO ...



In July—just before J.K. Rowling’s clash with Amnesty—EiGHT published “Insiders Speak,” a 63-page report drawing on internal documentation and the experiences of more than seventy current and former staff from nine leading international NGOs. Submitted to Australia’s Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion and filed with five UN Special Rapporteurs, it identified many of the same failures that would soon erupt into public view: ideological capture, compromised work, broken processes, and a culture of deflection and avoidance. It also found broader failures of governance, accountability, and responses to antisemitism.

We found that the conclusions of NGO investigations were sometimes determined before completion, including Amnesty’s 2024 “genocide” report, which was already moving through internal systems under its pre-agreed heading while research was supposedly still underway. We also found that research was bent to the demands of ideology, buried, or delayed for political reasons. While Amnesty issued a report accusing Israel of “genocide” a year after Hamas’s 2023 massacres, it took more than two years to release a report on the 7 October atrocities. Internal documents show that staff were concerned an earlier publication date might generate sympathy for Israel. That report finally emerged in the media dead zone of early December, attached to a press release titled “Sustainable Peace Requires International Justice for All Victims of All Crimes in Israel and the OPT [Occupied Territories],” the first half of which was devoted to allegations of wrongdoing by Israel.

We also found that internal forums at NGOs are increasingly filled with rhetoric that violates these organisations’ own policies. At Médecins Sans Frontières, a

staff member was told to “stop playing the Jewish card” in the organisation’s Souk portal. Colleagues openly celebrated the 7 October attacks in internal chats and on personal accounts, raising fundamental questions about the impact of deeply held private views on professional judgment. A video shared within Greenpeace depicted militants entering Israel from Gaza with the caption: “Enter... you will be victorious.” In a since-deleted tweet, Amnesty staffer Veronica Koman posted “My respect to Yahya Sinwar... Legend!” on X. Incoming Amnesty USA board member Rasha Abdel Latif reposted content praising an attack on civilians in Tel Aviv, alongside a cartoon of a hand shaped like Israel flicking away a Star of David with the words: “It’s either us—or us.” When staff raised concerns, a manager told them no action would be taken, saying the post reflected Abdel Latif’s “pain.”

## The Humanitarian Mask

How activists at Médecins Sans Frontières shape Gaza disinformation.

QUILLETTE • GERALD M. STEINBERG



The problem of ideological capture and extremism extends beyond inaction by NGO leadership to active amplification. In 2025, Dr. Javid Abdelmoneim, the incoming head of MSF, reposted content describing Israel as a country of “child killers.” NGO employees past and present describe increasingly antisemitic workplaces—including Holocaust trivialisation—where objections are either silenced or dismissed as “sensitivity” to criticism of Israel. They also describe a broader culture of self-censorship, where open dialogue has become increasingly difficult and those who raise concerns about distorted work or problematic cultures are gaslit, sidelined, and worse. Multiple staff members have told me that they have considered pursuing legal action against their organisations over discrimination and retaliation. Two people featured in the report—from Greenpeace and Plan International, respectively—are litigating without the benefit of Rowling’s enormous resources.

Crises have also been selectively used for fundraising purposes. Between October 2023 and July 2026, seven of the ten campaigns launched by Amnesty Australia focused on Israel-Palestine, according to a staff, who reported that colleagues said the issue “played well” with donors. Employees also described a pattern of dehumanisation of Jews, Israelis, and victims of 7 October. At HRW, no mention was made of Hamas’s victims or hostages during an hour-long “Israel-Palestine” meeting attended by 300 employees on 23 October 2023, according to staff present. At Mercy Corps, an internal communication shared “thoughts and support” for people, including staff in Gaza and Syria. A staff member who added “Israel”—noting the organisation’s Israeli partners—was told, after their post was removed, that they had violated Mercy Corps’ Code of Conduct. At MSF, staff from the Lebanon office circulated an internal petition within days of Hamas’s attacks demanding that directors “instantly stop” the “Israeli media narrative adopted by the west framing Israelis as victims.”

---

## Bias and Betrayal

The extensive rot at the heart of Human Rights Watch.

QUILLETTE • GERALD M. STEINBERG



---

And then there is the NGO sector’s comfort with affiliations that ought to prompt greater scrutiny. Omar Shakir, a former BDS activist, directed HRW’s Israel-Palestine work for almost ten years, during which time he also held a visiting fellowship at a Qatari university. Amnesty is currently campaigning for the release of Hussam Abu Safiya, whom it has described as a “prominent voice of Gaza’s decimated healthcare sector,” despite Israel’s assertion that he is a Hamas colonel, a claim supported by a photograph apparently showing him in

military fatigues alongside Hamas leaders. Shawan Jabarin, convicted by an Israeli court of membership and recruitment for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—a group involved in suicide bombings, plane hijackings, and the 7 October massacre—served on HRW’s Middle East and North Africa Division Advisory Committee. When his past activities were raised, then-Executive Director Kenneth Roth first denied the allegations, then dismissed them as “ancient history” if true. Fadi Al-Wadiya, a physiotherapist working for Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF), was identified by Israel in 2024 as a “significant operative” of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. MSF rejected the allegation, saying it had “no indication” of any military activity. In 2024, PIJ claimed Al-Wadiya as a member after he was killed in an Israeli strike.



MSF PHYSIOTHERAPIST KILLED ON JUNE 25, 2024

## Fadi Al-Wadiya

Fadi Al-Wadiya was **killed on June 25** along with five other people, including children, near an MSF clinic in Gaza City. He was cycling to work at the time, on his way to provide medical care to others who had been injured. Al-Wadiya was a 33-year-old physiotherapist and father of three. He worked for MSF from 2018 to 2022 and rejoined the organization in 2024.

On February 24, 2026, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) publicly stated that Fadi Al-Wadiya had been a member of the group. MSF had no indication that Fadi Al Wadiya might have been involved in military activity of any kind prior to his killing by the Israeli Forces. If the Israeli authorities had any reliable information about Fadi’s involvement in military activity, they never shared it with MSF either prior to his killing or when we reached out immediately after he was killed to ask for clarifications around the circumstances of his death.

We would never knowingly employ people engaging in military activity. Any employee who engages in military activity would pose a danger to our staff and patients.

An editor’s note appended to the entry for Fadi Al-Wadiya in Médecins Sans Frontières’ article “Remembering our colleagues killed in Gaza” (21 March 2024).

It would be nice to think that 63 pages of documentation, findings, and the firsthand experiences of their own employees, backed by secondary evidence, might receive a thoughtful response from Amnesty International, MSF, Greenpeace, HRW, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mercy Corps,

Plan International, Save the Children, and UNICEF—the nine groups named in the report. Not one of these organisations has provided one.

Those of us who have worked in them are not the least bit surprised: we have seen and heard enough to know that apologies, transparency, and accountability are rarely offered to staff, journalists, policymakers, the public, or the communities that these organisations claim to serve. They are extracted under duress, including when furious billionaires threaten legal action and reputations. That is why our focus is not on persuading these organisations to take our concerns seriously or acknowledge their failures. It does not work.

Instead, we are borrowing the logic of a senior HRW manager, who once told me that the organisation simply bypasses the Israeli government because it does not trust them: the only effective strategy is to go above and around them. Pressure those with the power to affect what they care about most—reputation and finances. It will not be easy. But J.K. Rowling may have cracked open the bolted doors of the human-rights sector just enough for accountability to start getting in.

Whether or not this episode catalyses change at organisations like Amnesty is not up to them. It is up to the donors, journalists, courts, policymakers, and the wider public who have taken these organisations on trust and must finally demand answers to questions that have gone unasked for too long: Who are you, really? How do you work? And can you prove that what you say is true?

---

**Quillette invites thoughtful responses to its essays.**

Selected responses are published once per week as part of a curated *Letters to the Editor* feature. If selected, letters appear under the contributor's real name and may be edited for clarity and length.

To submit a letter for consideration, please email [letters@quillette.com](mailto:letters@quillette.com).

## FEATURED IN SECTIONS

POLITICS   NGOS   JK ROWLING



### Danielle Haas

Danielle Haas is the executive director of EiGHT, an insider-founded initiative focused on accountability and reform in the human rights and humanitarian sector. She was a senior editor at Human Rights Watch from 2009 to 2023.



## KEEP READING

### J.K. Rowling vs. Amnesty

Danielle Haas

11 AUG 2026 · 10 MIN READ



### Between Iraq and a Hard Place

Aurele Tobelem

10 AUG 2026 · 9 MIN READ



Claire's Weekly Letter: Cowardice at Cambridge

Claire Lehmann

8 AUG 2026 · 4 MIN READ

Billy Bunter and the Man from Animal Farm

David Cohen

8 AUG 2026 · 15 MIN READ



The Tip of the Iceberg

Andrew Hammel

7 AUG 2026 · 7 MIN READ



Three Ancient Ways of War

Robert L. O'Connell

7 AUG 2026 · 16 MIN READ



SEE ALL LATEST

MASTHEAD ABOUT CONTRIBUTE TERMS OF SERVICE PRIVACY CONTACT US FAQ  
ADVERTISE WITH US



© 2026 Quillette

}}}}}}}}}}