

**The role of International NGOs in Promoting Human Rights (Case Study: Amnesty International)**Mahmood Golestani<sup>1</sup>, Elham Pahlevani<sup>2</sup>, Mohammad Taghi Pahlevani<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup>MA in International Law; Lecturer in Payam-e Nour University of Mahdshahr and Semnan University of Applied Sciences<sup>2</sup>MA in Political Sciences; Lecturer in Payam-e Nour University of Mahdshahr and Semnan University of Applied Sciences<sup>3</sup>MA in International Law; Lecturer in Payam-e Nour University of Ali Abad Katoul and Islamic Azad University of Bandar Torkaman[golestani.m22@gmail.com](mailto:golestani.m22@gmail.com), [pahlevani.e22@gmail.com](mailto:pahlevani.e22@gmail.com), [pahlevani\\_mohamad\\_t@yahoo.com](mailto:pahlevani_mohamad_t@yahoo.com)

**Abstract :** Along with the development of the human rights, the increasing and effective role of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gets more important than ever, so that today, these organizations have become powerful actors in national and international arenas. As a NGO, Amnesty International is now the largest and most important human rights organization with a rich and powerful information network and with more than a million members and supporters worldwide. This NGO has been founded to defend the human rights and prevent any human rights violation with its widespread activities around the world. Like any other organization, Amnesty International can be affected by several factors in confronting the situations of the human rights and consequently it can face with barriers and shortages in its field of activity. Indeed, the main objective of this research is to study the role of international NGOs in promoting and developing the human rights with a special focus on the Amnesty International. To study the subject, we have used descriptive-analytic methodology. Moreover, to collect the needed data of the research we have relied on archival method, internet resources, and related books and journals. The findings of the research show that Amnesty International has attempted to consider the principle of parallel in confronting different countries; but it seems that the Amnesty International is affected by different factors including the time and place of its confrontation with the situations of the human rights and hence, it has a selective approach in confronting and acting against some countries.

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**1. Introduction**

Although human rights has been a very important issue in the twentieth century but it is not exclusive to this century or a specific culture (Burn and Bustil, 1997). Human rights have been considered in the culture and literature of different societies for the centuries, and several documents and books are available in this regard (Hayden, 2001). Extensive efforts have been done in recent two centuries to promote the principles and criteria of the human rights. Although the principles of the human rights was proposed first by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen in 18th century simultaneous with the Great French Revolution and its subsequent documenting of the Constitution, but the term Human Rights in its current meaning was entered into the legal literature and ordinary conversation after the World War II and the foundations of the United Nations Organization (UN Publication, 1998).

The most important proceeding of the United Nations was to publish the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued on 1948. In this declaration, the

right to life, liberty and security of person, prohibition of slavery or servitude, prohibition of torture or cruelty, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the right of equal protection of the law, right of speech freedom, right of free movement and residence within the borders of each state, prohibition of arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, prohibition of arbitrary interference with the privacy, family, home or correspondence of the people, right of social security, right of standard living adequate for the health and well-being of person and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right of security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control, and live of the participation in the cultural life of the society. After the Declaration of Human Rights issued, several seminars and conferences were conducted in the subject all of which presented some plans for respecting the human rights and preventing any violation of these rights.

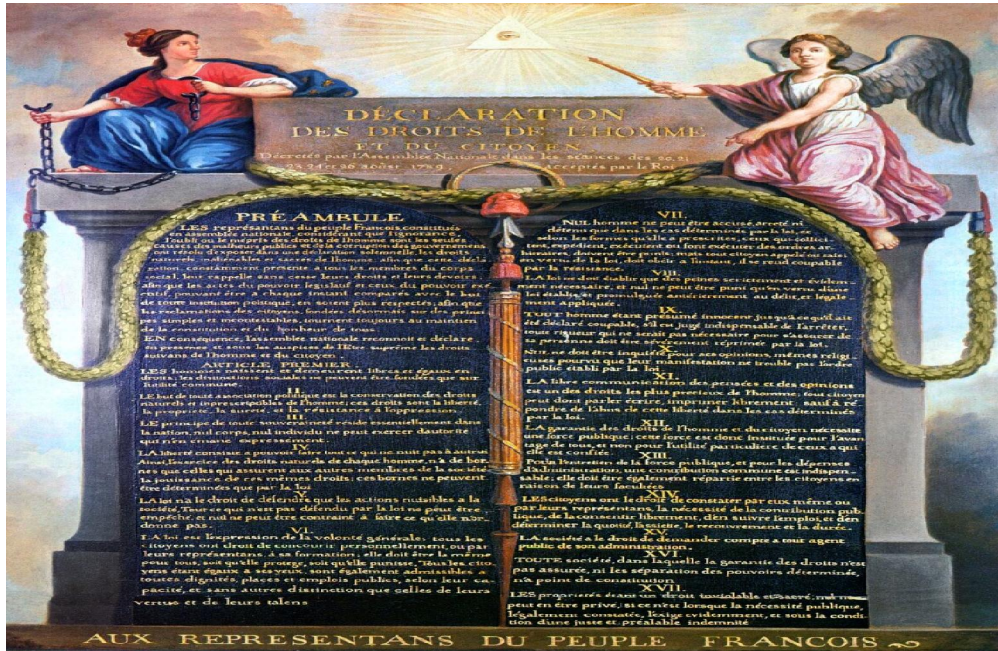


Figure. 1: Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen issued by the French National Constituent Assembly (Assemblée Nationale Constituante) on 26 August 1789

.. These plans and conferences led to foundation and establishment of many non-governmental organizations and institutes whose main goal was to promote the human rights Accordingly, now the non-governmental organizations are connected to the main and subsidiary institutes of the United Nations Organization and collaborating with them to research, regulate, and implement all related plans and programs. According to the latest statistics (September 2008), 3187 NGOs are officially work with the Economic and Social Council of the UN in consulting affairs. Among the most important roles and activities of such NGOs one can refer to the informing, education and sociability, pressuring the governments to fulfill the goals of the human rights, controlling the social crisis, directing the demands, helping the remove of the cases of human rights deviations, supporting activities, advocacy, etc.

## 2. Methodology of the research

To study the subject, we have used descriptive-analytic methodology. Moreover, to collect the needed data of the research we have relied on archival method, internet resources, and related books and journals. The subject matters of this research are studied in two parts. In the first part, we approach to the general issues of the human rights and in the second part we will focus on the performance of Amnesty International as an active branch of non-governmental organizations in relation to the development and promotion of the human rights.

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1. Human rights

Human rights are fundamental and non-transferable rights that are basic to the life of human. Yet, there is no inclusive and precise definition of the term and this issue has been a barrier for its international regulation on its own. The mentioned definition just can offer a general and yet vague image of the nature of such rights. However, in legal documents, human rights are increasingly divided into three separate categories as follow:

- First generation rights: civil and political rights
- Second generation rights: economic, social, and cultural rights
- Third generation rights: collective and communal rights

At present, the field of human rights is one of the most important subjects in the contemporary international law. There is a high sensitivity over the consideration of these rights, and several universal documents have tried to regulate these rights. In many countries of the world, several institutions and committees have been formed to follow the subject or even some ministries have been established under the title of human rights. All above, the diligently attempts of Kofi Annan, the former president of the UN, led to establishment of the Human Rights Council in the United Nations organization as one of the pillars of UN. This council enjoys wider executive

authorities than its predecessor (Human Rights Commission) and now it is a lever of executing the decisions of the UN. One of the perennial concerns of the United Nations has always been the complete consideration of the human rights because as Louse Arbour, the former president of the UN High Commissioner for the Human Rights says, "no

country of the world considers human rights in full". The idea of regulating and preserving human rights has a history as long as the human civilization. The roots of such attempts can be found in the Cyrus Cylinder that was inscribed on baked clay in Akkadian cuneiform script after he conquered Babylon on 538BC.



Figure. 2: Human rights cylinder of the Cyrus the Great

Cyrus Cylinder is a clay cylinder that was created on 539BC by the Cyrus the Great, the king of Persian Achaemenid Dynasty. Known as the "first charter of human rights", Cyrus Cylinder had been placed as a foundation deposit in the foundations of the Esagila, the main temple of Babylon. The Cylinder is now located at the British Museum.

### 3.2. Amnesty International

Amnesty International is one of the largest and most important non-governmental organizations who benefits from the supporting system of the UN in the field of human rights. The organization was founded in 1961 by the British lawyer, Peter Benenson. According to his own account, he was travelling in the London Underground on 19 November 1960, when he read of two Portuguese students from Colombia who had been sentenced to seven years of imprisonment in Portugal for allegedly "having drunk a toast to liberty". Later in his famous article "The Forgotten Prisoners" in The Observer on The Observer on 28 May 1961 he described his reaction to the mentioned news as follow: "Open your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government" (William Korey, 2001). The article described these violations occurring, on a global scale, in the context of restrictions to press freedom, to political

oppositions, to timely public trial before impartial courts, and to asylum. In the same year Benenson had a book published, Persecution 1961, which detailed the cases of nine prisoners of conscience investigated and compiled by Benenson and Baker. Due to the attempts by Benenson and Baker, the first international session held in July 1961 with the participation of representatives from Belgium, Great Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, Swiss, and the US. The leadership had decided that the appeal would form the basis of a permanent organization. On 30 September 1962, it was officially named 'Amnesty International'. By the mid-1960s Amnesty International's global presence was growing and an International Secretariat and International Executive Committee was established to manage Amnesty International's national organizations, called 'Sections', which had appeared in several countries. The international movement was starting to agree on its core principles and techniques. Amnesty International published its first reports in 1965 about the situations of the prisoners in Portugal, South Africa, and Romania. Besides, it supported the UN statement on the suspension and finally prohibition of death penalty for the political crimes at peace time. Its activity and influence was also increasing within intergovernmental organizations; it would be awarded consultative status by the United Nations, the Council of Europe and UNESCO before the decade ended.



Leading Amnesty International in the 1970s were key figureheads Seán MacBride and Martin Ennals. While continuing to work for prisoners of conscience, Amnesty International's purview widened to include "fair trial" and opposition to long detention without trial (UDHR Article 9), and especially to the torture of prisoners (UDHR Article 5). Amnesty International believed that the reasons underlying torture of prisoners, by governments, were either to obtain information or to quell opposition by the use of terror, or both. Also of concern was the export of more sophisticated torture methods, equipment and teaching by the superpowers to "client states". Amnesty International drew together reports from countries where torture allegations seemed most persistent and organized an international conference on torture. It sought to influence public opinion in order to put pressure on national governments by organizing a campaign for the 'Abolition of Torture' which ran for several years.

Amnesty International's membership increased from 15,000 in 1969 to 200,000 by 1979. This growth in resources enabled an expansion of its program, 'outside of the prison walls', to include work on "disappearances", the death penalty and the rights of refugees. A new technique, the 'Urgent Action', aimed at mobilizing the membership into action rapidly was pioneered. The first was issued on 19 March 1973, on behalf of LuizBasilio Rossi, a Brazilian academic, arrested for political reasons. Luiz personally believed that the request by the Amnesty International was very important. "I knew that my case is now public. I knew that they no longer will be able to kill me. So the pressures were decreased and the situation improved". Amnesty International did its best attempts to apply the "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners" and "available humanitarian conventions" that finally led to the Statement 3059 of the UN in forbidding the torture. In 1974, Seán MacBride, the president of the International Executive Committee of the Amnesty International won the Noble Peace Prize for his continuous attempts on behalf of the human rights.

#### 4. Data analysis

The study of the history of Amnesty International is the best way of investigating its performance. Thus we have studied the history of this organization and we have reviewed the most important events of the Amnesty International in different decades. By 1980 Amnesty International was drawing more criticism from governments. The USSR alleged that Amnesty International conducted espionage, the Moroccan government denounced it as a defender of lawbreakers, and the Argentine government banned Amnesty International's 1983 annual report. Throughout the 1980s, Amnesty International

continued to campaign against torture, and on behalf of prisoners of conscience. New issues emerged, including extrajudicial killings, military, security and police transfers, political killings; and disappearances. Towards the end of the decade, the growing numbers worldwide of refugees was a very visible area of Amnesty International's concern. While many of the world's refugees of the time had been displaced by war and famine, in adherence to its mandate, Amnesty International concentrated on those forced to flee because of the human rights violations it was seeking to prevent. It argued that rather than focusing on new restrictions on entry for asylum-seekers, governments were to address the human rights violations which were forcing people into exile.

Throughout the 1990s, Amnesty International continued to grow, to a membership of over 3 million in over 150 countries and territories, led by Senegalese Secretary General Pierre Sané. Amnesty continued to work on a wide range of issues and world events. For example, South African groups joined in 1992 and hosted a visit by Pierre Sané to meet with the apartheid government to press for an investigation into allegations of police abuse, an end to arms sales to the African Great Lakes region and the abolition of the death penalty. In particular, Amnesty International brought attention to violations committed on specific groups, including refugees, racial/ethnic/religious minorities, women and those executed or on Death Row. The death penalty report when the state kills (ISBN 978-0-691-10261-0) and the 'Human Rights are Women's Rights' campaign were key actions for the latter two issues. During the 1990s, Amnesty International was forced to react to human rights violations occurring in the context of a proliferation of armed conflict in Angola, East Timor, the Persian Gulf, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia. Amnesty International took no position on whether to support or oppose external military interventions in these armed conflicts. It did not (and does not) reject the use of force, even lethal force, or ask those engaged to lay down their arms. Instead, it questioned the motives behind external intervention and selectivity of international action in relation to the strategic interests of those sending troops. It argued that action should be taken to prevent human rights problems becoming human rights catastrophes.

At the intergovernmental level, Amnesty International argued in favor of creating an United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (established 1993) and an International Criminal Court (established 2002). After 2000, Amnesty International's agenda turned to the challenges arising from globalization and the reaction to the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States. The issue of globalization provoked a major shift in Amnesty

International policy, as the scope of its work was widened to include economic, social and cultural rights, an area that it had declined to work on in the past. Amnesty International felt this shift was important, not just to give credence to its principle of the indivisibility of rights, but because of what it saw as the growing power of companies and the undermining of many nation states as a result of globalization. In the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, the new Amnesty International Secretary General, Irene Khan, reported that a senior government official had said to Amnesty International delegates: "Your role collapsed with the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York". In the years following the attacks, some believe that the gains made by human rights organizations over previous decades had possibly been eroded. Amnesty International argued that human rights were the basis for the security of all, not a barrier to it. Criticism came directly from the Bush administration and The Washington Post, when Khan, in 2005, likened the US government's detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to a Soviet Gulag.

During the first half of the new decade, Amnesty International turned its attention to violence against women, controls on the world arms trade, concerns surrounding the effectiveness of the UN, and ending torture. With its membership close to two million by 2005, Amnesty continued to work for prisoners of conscience. Amnesty International reported, concerning the Iraq War, on 17 March 2008, that despite claims the security situation in Iraq has improved in recent months, the human rights situation is disastrous, after the start of the war five years ago in 2003.

#### 4.2. Scopes of activity

There are five key areas which Amnesty deals with:

- Women's, children's, minorities' and indigenous rights
- Ending torture
- Abolition of the death penalty
- Rights of refugees
- Rights of prisoners of conscience

Some of the specific goals of Amnesty International are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Specific Goals of the Amnesty International

#	Specific Goals of the Amnesty International
1	Abolition of the death penalty
2	Ending the extra-judicial executions
3	Ensuring the prompt and fair trial for all political prisoners
4	ensure free education to all children worldwide
5	Fighting the impunity from systems of justice
6	Ending the recruitment and use of children soldiers
7	Freeing all prisoners of conscience
8	promoting economic, social and cultural right
9	Protecting human rights defenders
10	Promoting religious tolerance
11	Stopping torture and ill-treatment

12	stopping unlawful killings in armed conflicts
13	Upholding the rights of refugees and migrants

To further these aims, Amnesty International has developed several techniques to publicize information and mobilize public opinion. The organization considers as one of its strengths the publication of impartial and accurate reports. Reports are researched by: interviewing victims and officials, observing trials, working with local human rights activists, and monitoring the media. Amnesty International aims to issue timely press releases and publishes information in newsletters and on web sites. It also sends official missions to countries to make courteous but insistent inquiries. If the Amnesty International cannot officially access any country, then its inquiry team would rely on the information resources abroad including the reports of the media, experts, refugees, diplomatic representatives, and human rights defenders. In situations which require immediate attention, Amnesty International calls on existing urgent action networks or crisis response networks; for all other matters, it calls on its membership. It considers the large size of its human resources to be another of its key strengths.

#### 4.2. Members of the Amnesty International

Amnesty International is largely made up of voluntary members, but retains a small number of paid professionals. In countries in which Amnesty International has a strong presence, members are organized as 'sections'. Sections coordinate basic Amnesty International activities normally with a significant number of members, some of whom will form into 'groups', and a professional staff. Each has a board of directors. In 2005 there were 52 sections worldwide. 'Structures' are aspiring sections. They also coordinate basic activities but have a smaller membership and a limited staff. In countries where no section or structure exists, people can become 'international members'. Two other organizational models exist: 'international networks', which promote specific themes or have a specific identity, and 'affiliated groups', which do the same work as section groups, but in isolation. The organizations outlined above are represented by the International Council (IC) which is led by the IC Chairperson. Members of sections and structures have the right to appoint one or more representatives to the Council according to the size of their membership. The IC may invite representatives from International Networks and other individuals to meetings, but only representatives from sections and structures have voting rights.

The International Executive Committee (IEC), led by the IEC Chairperson, consists of eight members and the IEC Treasurer. It is elected by, and represents, the IC and meets biannually. The role of

the IEC is to take decisions on behalf of Amnesty International, implement the strategy laid out by the IC, and ensure compliance with the organization's statutes. The International Secretariat (IS) is responsible for the conduct and daily affairs of Amnesty International under direction from the IEC and IC. It is run by approximately 500 professional staff members and is headed by a Secretary General. The IS offices have been located in London since its establishment in the mid-1960s. Amnesty International is financed largely by fees and donations from its worldwide membership. It says that it does not accept donations from governments or governmental organizations. According to the AI website, "these personal and unaffiliated donations allow AI to maintain full independence from any and all governments, political ideologies, economic interests or religions".

### 5. Conclusion

Active non-governmental organizations of the human rights field are now important and effective actors in the area of international law and international relations. They play vital roles in scientific and normal advancement and promotion of the human rights so that the United Nations now emphasizes on its wide and systematic relations with non-governmental organizations. Amnesty International is one of the most active, important, and influential organizations in the process of the development of human rights institutes and principles with its strong information networks to inform the world and receive and collect the information and reports from all around the world to provide information for the human rights activists of the globe. Amnesty International is very influential in issuing the international treaties and establishing the human rights bodies. Moreover, it provides the cases of the human rights violations to the public opinion to make the public opinion, governments, and lawyers informed of such violations in order to help them abolish the violations of the human rights. The most important effect of the Amnesty International's reports and criticisms is the effect for the families of the prisoners and the human rights defenders because such activities leads to the awareness of the families of the prisoners about the facts of the prisons. In order to enjoy the fairness and to establish the justice, the families who are in trouble and face problems in their own countries can contact the Amnesty International through its website, mail, or email and benefit from the organization's supports.

The general performance of the Amnesty International has been a positive and developing process during the past 4 decades. Although one can find some cases of the organization affected by influential countries, but the general path of the organization implies that the Amnesty International

has attempted to make a parallel in its confrontation with the countries as far as possible. However, it seems that the Amnesty International has had a selective reaction to the cases of the human rights violations per the time (its own situation) and the place (the violating country) of such violations. Some of the proposed criticisms against the Amnesty International are as follow:

- a. Amnesty International's focus on the economic, social, and cultural rights has been light and slight. In short, Amnesty International has not managed to coordinate itself with the updated subjects that are the target of the human rights and still it mainly focus on the indexes and goals of the first generation human rights.
- b. Amnesty International is made up of several bodies in its functions and performances, and the system of its decision-making is democratic. This structure makes the process of decision-making slow, and in some cases, such slowness ruins the golden opportunities of the timely decision-making.
- c. The most activities and participations of the Amnesty International is being done without considering the transparent relationship between the two principles of universality and cultural relativity in Asian, African, third world, and developing countries while its presence and its reports in and about the developed countries and 5 stronger countries of the world are low and inconspicuous.
- d. Since one of the main goals of the Amnesty International is to support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one can claim that the human rights is affected by the activities and performance of the powerful countries of the world because the third world countries have had no role in compiling the Declaration. Accordingly, in cases that a person or organization violates the principles of the human rights in such countries, the reports of the Amnesty International will be inconspicuous for the mentioned cases.
- e. Since the Amnesty International has been established in England, naturally we can imagine that its policies and activities are affected by the policies of the British government. For example, while all countries were condemning the Apartheid system of the South Africa, Amnesty International ignored the issue and argued that the Apartheid is a political system and it is not a matter of racial discrimination. This ignorance of the Apartheid by the Amnesty International will always remain as a blot in the history of the Amnesty International.

- f. Another weakness of the Amnesty International is that this organization usually suffices to report the cases of human rights violation and rarely offers some solutions to prevent the violations of the human rights.

By and large, according to the findings of this research, we can claim that the activities of the Amnesty International, as one of the active non-governmental organizations in the field of human rights have had an effective role in promoting and developing the human rights but in some cases, the Amnesty International has been affected by the two factors of time and place. In such cases, it seems that the Amnesty International has to establish more constructive and systematic cooperation with other human rights NGOs considering their role in organizing and directing the public opinions as an agenda of the foreign policies of the countries.

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