

# Harvard forced to reverse decision denying fellowship to critic of Israel

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The dean of the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) issued a statement on Thursday reversing his previous decision to deny a fellowship to Kenneth Roth, the former head of Human Rights Watch (HRW), on the grounds that Roth held an “anti-Israel bias.”

Following widespread public condemnation and calls for his resignation by students and faculty, Douglas W. Elmendorf, dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and former director of the Congressional Budget Office, sent an email to the HKS community saying he would name Roth to the fellowship.

As reported by *The Harvard Crimson*, Elmendorf wrote, “I now believe that I made an error in my decision not to appoint him as a Fellow at our Carr Center for Human Rights.” The dean added, “I am sorry that the decision inadvertently cast doubt on the mission of the School and our commitment to open debate in ways I had not intended and do not believe to be true.”

At the same time, Elmendorf claimed that he had not come under pressure from financial contributors to veto Roth’s appointment, saying, “Donors do not affect our consideration of academic matters.”

In a further effort to save face, Elmendorf also claimed he did not block the retired Human Rights Watch leader from being granted the position at Harvard because of his criticism of Israel. Instead, the dean said he made the decision “based on my evaluation of his potential contributions to the school.”

Responding to an inquiry by the *New York Times*, Roth said he was “pleased by the decision” and acknowledged that the outpouring of support by faculty and others had forced Elmendorf to reverse course. Roth also said, “Dean Elmendorf has said he made this decision because of people who ‘mattered’ to him at

the university. He still refuses to say who those people who mattered to him were.”

Roth is now a fellow at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perry World House, having accepted a position there following his rejection by Harvard.

*The Nation* first published an article on January 5 reporting that Roth had been denied the Kennedy School fellowship following his retirement as executive director of HRW because of concerns about his “tweets on Israel,” according to Kathryn Sikkink, a noted HKS professor. When Sikkink inquired further about the decision, Elmendorf told her that HRW has an “anti-Israel bias.”

Elmendorf’s initial decision against Roth was motivated by the increasing attempts of the Israeli government and the US national security apparatus to label any exposure of the racist and criminal treatment of the Palestinians by the Zionist state as a manifestation of anti-Semitism. Since Roth had, during his tenure at HRW, referred to Israeli policy as apartheid, both he and the organization had been labeled as being “biased.”

Kenneth Roth, who is the son of a Jewish refugee who fled Nazi Germany, is a leading figure of the Democratic Party political establishment. Under his direction, HRW became a principal vehicle for the development of imperialist military intervention around the world based on “human rights” justifications. Roth’s work also included participation in the establishment of the International Criminal Court, which the US government does not recognize.

Last April, after Roth announced plans to step down from Human Rights Watch, he was actively pursued for the fellowship by the Kennedy School’s Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. The center recruited Roth “because he is one of the most distinguished human-

rights leaders of our time,” according to director Mathias Risse.

However, when Roth met with Elmendorf to introduce himself, the dean asked him if he had any enemies. In an op-ed in the *Guardian*, Roth wrote, “It was an odd question. I explained that of course I had enemies. Many of them. ... But I had a hunch what he was driving at, so I also noted that the Israeli government undoubtedly detests me, too.” Two weeks later the fellowship was withdrawn.

The campaign against Elmendorf’s decision included hundreds of Harvard affiliates signing an open letter calling for the dean to resign because he carried out an “act of censorship and a threat to free expression and academic freedom.”

The current director of HRW, Tirana Hassan, wrote that “the vetoing of Mr. Roth’s fellowship because of his important work on a specific country sends a chilling message to all scholars and advocates, whatever part of the world they research, that Harvard University may not judge them by the quality of their work, but rather on the say-so of well-funded detractors,” Hassan wrote.

What did Roth and HRW actually say about Israel? In a report titled, “A Threshold Crossed,” published in April 2021, HRW wrote that “Israeli authorities methodically privilege Jewish Israelis and discriminate against Palestinians ... authorities have dispossessed, confined, forcibly separated, and subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity to varying degrees of intensity ... these deprivations are so severe that they amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution.”

At the time of the HRW report, Roth told the *New York Times*, “While much of the world treats Israel’s half-century occupation as a temporary situation that a decades-long ‘peace process’ will soon cure, the oppression of Palestinians there has reached a threshold and a permanence that meets the definitions of the crimes of apartheid and persecution.”

That these statements of fact could be characterized as biased is a measure of the desperate lengths that supporters of Zionism and US imperialism in the Middle East will go to in defending and covering up the brutal treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

The forced reversal by Elmendorf also takes place

while mass protests have erupted in Tel Aviv against the most far-right government in the history of Israel. Two weeks after the formation of the new coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu—which includes racist and fascist parties that stand for Jewish supremacy and apartheid rule—100,000 people demonstrated at Habima Square against undemocratic measures being prepared by the new regime.



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