



Omar Shakir is an alumnus of both Stanford University (2007) and Stanford Law School (2013). While in law school, he was deeply involved with the International Human Rights & Conflict Resolution Clinic (IHR&CRC). Omar has devoted his career to human rights work. Omar currently works as the [Israel and Palestine Director in Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW) overseeing research and advocacy on human rights abuses in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. His office investigates and documents abuses by a range of actors and calls for greater protection of human rights. Prior to this, Omar covered Egypt for HRW and worked at the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), where he represented men detained in Guantánamo Bay.

Omar generously offered to be the first IHR&CRC Alumni Spotlight even as he challenges a [deportation](#) order issued against him by the Israeli government for his human rights activism. [Amnesty International's Saleh Higazi](#) described this threatened deportation as

“a crushing blow to freedom of expression in the country and sends an alarming signal to human rights activists and civil society in general of the extent they are willing to go in their attempt to silence those who defend human rights”.

Omar briefly shared his experience in the IHR&CRC and unique career journey with us in August 2019:

I never felt like I chose to do human rights work, it was always what I knew I was going to do. To wake up each morning and work on issues I care about is a real privilege. Every issue I have taken on in my career has felt like the most important issue in the world to me – they have all been issues I cared deeply about. And, the communities and partners I have had the opportunity to work with make it extra meaningful.

My passion for human rights made the IHR&CRC a natural fit. However, before I took the clinic, I thought I knew all about human rights fact-finding and advocacy, so leaned towards exploring other legal disciplines. But, thankfully, I enrolled in the IHR&CRC during my second year winter quarter and had the opportunity to travel and launch advocacy and media campaigns related to the clinic's [report on the US's use of drones](#) in

Pakistan. This project had a profound impact on me, and I worked intensely on it, including long hours over the summer. After taking the clinic, I was an advanced clinic student every other quarter.

The IHR&CRC also taught me about the frustrations human rights advocates regularly face. For example, I traveled to Turkey and Yemen for exploratory visits, but ultimately, we halted these projects over concerns around security, lack of access to the affected populations, methodology, and value-add. The IHR&CRC helped me to realize that it is not always possible to deliver the results one hopes to bring and that responding to human rights challenges requires interdisciplinary approaches and flexibility.

Not only did I learn about the media and advocacy aspects of human rights lawyering, but I also gained practical experience that launched me forward on my career path. I graduated knowing I wanted to work on human rights in a way that was rooted in a universal vision, but with a focus, given my background and expertise, on the Middle East and the United States in the post 9/11 context.

In many ways, I got thrown straight into the fire right out of law school, as a fellow with HRW in Egypt covering the human rights abuses associated with the 2013 military coup, in particular the killing of protesters. I had written my undergraduate honors thesis on the Egyptian opposition movement. I wouldn't have gotten the fellowship without my IHR&CRC experience—my experiences in fact-finding and report writing, and my familiarity with academic texts on human rights practice came up in my interview with HRW. I also think my clinical training led HRW to base me in the field, not in headquarters like most other fellows.

My IHR&CRC experience allowed me to hit the ground running and handle a challenging work load in a very difficult environment. In this way not only did the IHR&CRC help me figure out what I wanted to do, but it helped to land amazing career opportunities and excel in those positions. I wanted to experience fact finding, human rights litigation, and human rights advocacy, and I was lucky enough to experience all three early in my career. HRW focuses on fact-finding and advocacy, while the Center for Constitutional Rights sees its role as litigation in support of a movements. But what I learned is that when you are working on such challenging and deeply entrenched problems, litigation and advocacy don't look so different and the strategies for both are often mutually reinforcing. Because the odds of winning in litigation are often low (particularly when a powerful government is the adversary), the intended outcome is often to name and shame and generate pressure to reach the desired outcome. I learned that it is often more about where one works—context and the human rights at issue—and less about whether you're working as an impact litigation attorney or in the fact-finding sphere. I think this is unique to human rights and the difference may be more apparent if I were to transition to another type of litigation.

Outside of taking the IHR&CRC, I encourage all SLS students to make the most of their experiences outside of the classroom. It sounds cliché, but clinics, internships, student groups, and events on campus greatly influenced my career. The International Refugee Assistance Program (IRAP) was particularly valuable. I was deeply involved in activities

outside of the classroom that broadened my law school experience. Besides the IHR&CRC, my internships were probably the most valuable when it comes to preparing me for a career in human rights work. I had the opportunity to explore three diverse aspects of social justice work: at the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the ACLU, and the Santa Clara County public defender's office. Each was eye-opening and helped me better understand what I wanted to do post-graduation. Understanding your preferences with regards to the subject matter, methodologies, politics, and location of the organization you want to work for is critical in setting a career trajectory in social justice lawyering and internships and clinics can help you find the right balance that works for you.