

State Department documents confirm US hypocrisy on human rights

The case of Israel

17 September 1999

The Clinton administration justified its military onslaught against the people of Serbia with the claim that the massive bombing was motivated by concern over the violation of human rights in Kosovo. The State Department and the White House, backed by the American media, charged that the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was engaged in a Nazi-like campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Albanian majority in Kosovo.

The claim of humanitarian concern has been undermined by the events which have ensued in Kosovo since the Yugoslav surrender. Subsequent investigation has shown that Serb atrocities against the Albanians, while they did take place, were grossly exaggerated in order to provide a suitable pretext for war. Meanwhile the Albanian KLA has launched its own equally brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Serb minority, which has been largely expelled from Kosovo.

The claim of humanitarianism has been refuted from another source—in documents released by the American government itself, in the annual State Department review of human rights violations worldwide. In lengthy, country-by-country reports, the same agency which spearheaded the propaganda barrage against Yugoslavia details charges mass repression against many of the closest American allies.

These reports demonstrate irrefutably, out of its own mouth, that the American government is a well-informed, knowing collaborator in some of the worst atrocities being perpetrated against oppressed peoples around the world, arming and financing governments which engage in ethnic cleansing, the forced removal of the population of villages and entire regions, and mass murder.

We have selected four of these reports for careful review. All four countries—Turkey, Sri Lanka, Israel and Colombia—have governments considered friendly by Washington. As a result there will be no bombs dropped on their capital cities and no magazine covers with mug shots of their presidents, although the crimes committed by these regimes put Milosevic in the shade.

The US State Department report on Israel is a damning indictment of a nation based upon the brutal and institutionalized suppression of large groups of ethnic and religious minorities where basic democratic rights are violated on a daily basis. The report was released in February by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

Israel has consistently violated international laws governing the sovereignty of independent states and illegally occupies territory which used to form parts of four other nations. Israel was itself created as an independent state only through the expulsion of the bulk of the Arab population of the former British mandate of Palestine.

Far from suffering any consequences from the US government for carrying out, and enforcing to this day, one of the century's largest programs of ethnic cleansing, Israel relies entirely on American economic and military aid, worth billions of dollars every year, without which the

Israeli state would collapse.

Before we look at the US State Department's report findings on the plight of those in the occupied territories, a brief reflection on how Israel came to be in the first place is in order. Until 1948 the territory now called Israel was known as Palestine and the Palestinian Arab people constituted the majority of the country's population and owned the bulk of the land. Zionist groups forcibly drove out 85 percent of the Palestinian population through a campaign of bloody military terror. The United Nations estimated that 957,000 Palestinians were driven out of Palestine by Jewish militants in 1948, who had by year's end occupied 80.5 percent of the country's land. Today, nearly 2.5 million Palestinians are living in "security zones" under martial law policed by Israel, while another 4 million are scattered throughout the world, unable to return to the lands from which they and their families were forcibly evicted.

The Occupied Territories are the land Israel occupied after the 1967 War against Syria, Egypt and Jordan—the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. Israel signed agreements in 1994-95 that gave the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) civil rule over the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. These areas are economically poor and remain highly dependent on Israel, which also retains control of external security, foreign relations and security within the Jewish areas.

Israel rules in the Occupied Territories as it sees fit with no regard to basic human and legal rights. When the United Nations carried out investigations into human rights abuses in these areas, the Israeli government simply refused to cooperate, without suffering any penalty—let alone US bombing raids. When Iraq refuses to cooperate with UN inspection teams, a different standard is applied.

The violation of just about every conceivable democratic right and the brutalization of an entire ethnic population is the reason why Israel seeks to keep its rule in the Occupied Territories away from any scrutiny. Several passages from the State Department report speak for themselves:

"Israeli security forces committed a number of serious human rights abuses during the year. During the year, nine Palestinians were killed in violent confrontations with Israeli security units, who at times used live ammunition against Palestinian demonstrators and shot at demonstrators indiscriminately. For example, on May 14, the 50th anniversary of Israel's independence, Palestinian demonstrators clashed with Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Four Palestinians in Gaza and one in the West Bank were shot and killed by Israeli forces, who in some cases used live ammunition and shot Palestinians in the upper body and head.

"Israeli security forces abused, and in some cases tortured, Palestinians suspected of security offenses. Human rights groups and lawyers say that abuse and torture is widespread and that Israeli security officials use a variety of methods designed to coerce confessions that threaten prisoners' health and inflict extreme pain, including the use of violent shaking. Prison conditions are poor, and Israeli authorities arbitrarily arrest and

detain persons. Prolonged detention, limits on due process, and infringements on privacy rights remained problems.”

“Israeli soldiers and police sometimes used live ammunition or rubber-coated metal bullets, which can be lethal, in situations other than when their lives were in danger and sometimes shot suspects in the upper body and head. During the year, Israeli soldiers shot in the head and killed, with rubber-coated metal bullets, three Palestinians under the age of 18. On March 11, Samer Bassem Karamah, 12, was shot and killed by a rubber-coated metal bullet during clashes with the IDF in Hebron that erupted following the killing a day earlier of three Palestinian workers by Israeli security forces near Hebron.”

“On May 14, Israel’s independence day, 4 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and 1 in the West Bank were shot and killed by Israeli soldiers and approximately 400 were wounded during violent clashes. One of the Palestinians killed during clashes in Gaza was a nurse who was shot while in a clearly marked ambulance. Palestinian officials charged that the IDF use of force was excessive, especially with regard to the use of live ammunition, and that Israeli soldiers shot to kill, hitting several Palestinians in the upper body and head. Israeli officials say that Israeli soldiers in Gaza did not always follow live-fire guidelines but they denied that soldiers deliberately tried to kill protesters.”

At one time or another since 1967 over 300,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned by Israel. During the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) from 1987 to 1992, the number of Palestinians killed by Israelis reached 1,119 and the number hospitalized 120,446, another 483 were expelled and 15,320 detained without charge, while 87,726 acres of land was confiscated and 2,065 Palestinian houses were demolished or sealed.

The report reveals that this persecution persists. “Israeli security forces abuse, and in some cases torture, Palestinians suspected of security offenses. There continue to be a high number of complaints of mistreatment and torture during interrogation, especially from Palestinians suspected of belonging to Islamic groups. Interrogation sessions are long and severe, and solitary confinement is used frequently for long periods. The GSS systematically uses interrogation methods that do not result in detectable traces of mistreatment of the victims, or which leave marks that disappear after a short period of time.

“Common interrogation practices include hooding; forced standing or squatting for long periods of time; prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures; tying or chaining the detainee in contorted and painful positions; blows and beatings with fists, sticks, and other instruments; confinement in small and often filthy spaces; sleep and food deprivation; and threats against the detainee’s life or family.”

The whole population of the Occupied Territories lives under prison-like conditions, with Israeli army and police checkpoints that halt traffic at will and can prevent workers from going to their jobs, parents from bringing sick children to the hospital and anyone from going abroad without official permission. Meanwhile, in their midst, Jewish settlements are built up whose residents suffer no such restrictions, because they are Jews, not Arabs.

These violations of human rights are carried out with the knowledge and authority of the highest political authorities in Israel. The report says, “Internal security is the responsibility of the General Security Service (GSS—also known as Shin Bet, or Shabak), which is under the authority of the Prime Minister’s office.... Members of the security forces committed human rights abuses.”

Abuses against the Palestinians are carried out and have been sanctioned by the highest court in Israel: “Israeli security forces abuse, and in some cases torture, Palestinians suspected of security offenses. Although laws and administrative regulations prohibit the physical abuse of detainees, they frequently are not enforced in security cases. The GSS was responsible for the widespread abuse of Palestinians suspected of security offenses.

“The head of the GSS is empowered by government regulation to authorize security officers to use ‘moderate physical and physiological pressure’ (which includes violent shaking) whilst interrogating detainees. These practices often led to excesses. Despite repeated challenges, the High Court of Justice has avoided ruling on the legality of the practices of ‘shaking’ and other forms of coercion. The Government claims these practices are justified as ‘special measures’ to be used in ‘special circumstances’ in the fight against terrorism.... In no case did the High Court overrule a GSS decision to use ‘moderate physical pressure’.”

Palestinian detainees do not have the same rights as Jewish citizens and even harsher restrictions are imposed on peoples who are not even residents of areas controlled or occupied by Israel. The report gives the example of 101 non-Palestinian Arabs in Israeli government detention centers. Fifty-seven are Lebanese citizens, twenty-one of them are being held without charge or trial, eleven of them for over 10 years. They are being detained by the Israeli government as human bargaining chips.

According to the report, “The High Court of Justice ruled in May that the Government is entitled to continue holding them for use in a possible exchange of hostages to obtain the return of an Israeli who may still be held by hostile forces. The High Court’s ruling stressed that national security needs take precedence over the detainees’ individual rights under Israeli and international law.”

Security detainees are held without charge and transferred to detention camps inside Israel. The Israeli Defense Force is under the direct authority of the Defense Minister and administers its own camps. The report reveals that last year, “The total number of Palestinian prisoners and administrative detainees held by Israel, approximately 3,565 at the beginning of the year, fell to 1,634 by year’s end.” Of these, 354 were detained without charge or trial and, “One of these detainees has been held without charge or trial since 1994.”

Those detained for “security” reasons are essentially stripped of any democratic rights. “Defendants are considered innocent until proven guilty and have the right to writs of habeas corpus and other procedural safeguards. However, a 1979 law permits detention without charge or trial, which is used in security cases.” Those affected most by these laws are Palestinians which the report says are treated in a manner not equal to that of a Jewish citizen. “Most of the protections afforded by law are not extended to Palestinian detainees, who fall under the jurisdiction of military law even if they are detained in Israel.”

Many Palestinians are detained and sentenced on the basis of “confessions” obtained through torture, as the report says, “in practice security prisoners have been sentenced on the basis of the coerced confessions of both themselves and others.”

The report says that while the judiciary system is ostensibly independent, in practice it “routinely acquiesces to the Government’s position in security cases.” Even in civil matters, “A substantial percentage of criminal cases are tried with no legal representation for the defendant.”

Racial discrimination in Israel is systemic and institutionalized. Large groups of ethnic minorities are treated and seen as second class citizens despite the fact that they are Israeli citizens. The report makes some damning observations:

“The Government does not provide Israeli Arabs, who constitute 20 percent of the population, with the same quality of education, housing, employment, and social services as Jews. In addition, government spending is proportionally far lower in predominantly Arab areas than in Jewish areas. According to the press, an Interior Ministry report released during the year notes that non-Jewish communities receive significantly less government financial support than their Jewish counterparts. Israeli-Arab organizations have challenged the Government’s ‘Master Plan for the Northern Areas of Israel,’ which listed as priority goals increasing the Galilee’s Jewish population and blocking the territorial contiguity of Arab

villages and towns, on the grounds that it discriminates against Arab citizens.”

Even though Israeli Arab children comprise a quarter of all students in public schools, many face overcrowding, lack of resources, no sports facilities and a curriculum dominated by Jewish culture and heritage. The report continues:

“Relative to their numbers, Israeli Arabs are underrepresented in the student bodies and faculties of most universities and in higher level professional and business ranks. Well-educated Arabs are often unable to find jobs commensurate with their level of education.... The Government has allocated only very limited resources to enforce landmark 1995 legislation prohibiting discrimination in employment. In practice, Israeli Arabs are not allowed to work in companies with defense contracts or in security-related fields.”

Israeli discrimination is not limited to Palestinians, the report admits, but affects other non-Jewish minorities: “The legal system often imposes far stiffer punishments on Christian, Muslim, and Druze persons than on Jewish citizens.... The Government made little headway in reducing institutionalized legal and societal discrimination against Israel’s Christian, Arab and Druze citizens, who constitute just over 20 percent of the population, but do not share fully the rights provided to, and obligations imposed on, the country’s Jewish citizens.”

Religious discrimination in Israel is both widespread and institutionalized. Orthodox Jewish religious authorities have exclusive control over matters of marriage, divorce and burial. They do not recognize marriages or conversion to Judaism even when performed in Israel by Conservative or Reform rabbis. Family members of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union are not recognized as Jews inside Israel. Jews who want to be married in secular or non-orthodox religious ceremonies are forced to do so abroad and the report acknowledges that many do. Muslims also have no access to civil courts for issues concerning family status, such as divorce and child custody cases.

The report notes, “The Government provides proportionally greater financial support to institutions in the Jewish sector compared with those in the non-Jewish sector, i.e., Muslim, Christian, and Druze. For example, only 2 percent of the Ministry of Religious Affairs budget goes to the non-Jewish sector, despite the fact that Muslims, Christians, and Druze constitute 20 percent of the population.” Even after a court challenge where it was ruled that the budget allocation did constitute “prima facie discrimination,” the court refused to rule against the government. In 1997 a law was also passed banning written material that encouraged conversion to non-Jewish religions; an even more restrictive bill passed its first parliamentary hearing last April.

Discrimination and violence against women is both legal and societal. The report notes: “Trafficking in women and girls has become a significant problem in recent years. According to a study by the Israel Women’s Network, every year hundreds of women from the former Soviet Union are brought to Israel by well-organized mafia networks and forced through violence and threats to work illegally”.

The report says that at least 13 women were killed last year by either their husband or another male relative and that five of these were “family honor” killings. Some 200,000 women are victims of domestic violence each year and 7 percent of them do so on a regular basis, the report says that in 1997 over 60,000 women were sexually assaulted or abused—60 percent of which were 18 or younger. Despite this, there are only 10 government-funded shelters for abused women and only five for abused children.

Women have only recently been given the right to divorce before rabbinical courts. However ample evidence of abuse must be presented and even then, not all courts will allow a woman to divorce. The report also says there is an increase in violent physical attacks by religious extremists on women they consider to be “dressed immodestly in public.”

A 1996 US government report spells out the complete dependence of Israel upon the US: “US-Israel relations have evolved from an initial American policy of sympathy and support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in 1948 to an unusual partnership that links a small but militarily powerful Israel, dependent on the United States for its economic and military strength, with the US superpower trying to balance competing interests in the region.”

The “competing interests,” of course, are the US relations with oil-rich semi-feudal Arab states like Saudi Arabia and the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf, many with large populations of displaced Palestinian Arabs.

The US government has bankrolled Israel for more than 40 years, and played an increasingly important role from the early 1970s, when Arab states began to accumulate larger financial and military resources. In 1973, the Nixon administration decided to replace Israeli losses of weaponry and materiel suffered in the first days of the war with Egypt, an action that was critical in shifting the military balance.

At about the same time, the US began to underwrite Israel’s increasingly deficit-ridden finances, with economic aid increasing steadily to the point where, in 1984, Congress passed a law guaranteeing that US subsidies to Israel would be at least as much as the amount Israel required to make payments on past loans. In effect, Israel was given an unlimited line of credit at the US Treasury. Some \$21 billion in military and financial assistance has been in the form of loans which were subsequently “waived”—i.e., turned into grants which did not have to be repaid.

The US supported and financed the establishment of a Jewish state in the Middle East, not out of humanitarian concern for Jews trying to escape the Nazi Holocaust—US borders were closed to Jewish immigration throughout Nazi rule in Germany—but as a means of asserting its own interests in a vital oil-rich area, under conditions where Britain and France were compelled to give up their colonies in the region. In that context, the rights of the Palestinian people, who were displaced and remain homeless and stateless, have been of no concern to Washington.



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