

New York Times op-ed piece: another "nothing to hide" apologia for Israeli war crimes

Chris Marsden
9 May 2002

The May 4 edition of the *New York Times* contained an op-ed piece by Yuval Steinitz that purports to account for Israel's refusal to allow a United Nations inquiry into Jenin.

The author titles his article, "Israel Has Nothing to Hide", but once again demonstrates the precise opposite.

Steinitz reiterates the stock accusation that the UN is a hotbed of anti-Semitism and "ingrained bias against Israel", but still says, "Nevertheless, Israelis were so confident that an honest fact finding would exonerate Israel of the wild charges being made by Palestinians and humanitarian organizations that they initially acquiesced to the proposal."

So what accounts for the Likud-Labour coalition government of Ariel Sharon's change of heart? According to Steinitz, it was the dawning realisation that "Secretary General Kofi Annan had set a trap for Israel." What was the nature of this trap?

"In order to render a fair and unbiased judgment on the conduct of any military operation, two basic conditions must be met. First, the operation must be placed in the context of the causes that gave rise to it. Without that context, no judgment on the proportionality of the response is possible. Second, the operation must be assessed in comparison to other such military actions."

Steinitz insists that Israel's action in Jenin was a legitimate counter-terrorism operation. He also complains that "the United Nations committee was asked to examine the Israeli Defense Force's actions in Jenin and the suffering of Jenin's inhabitants without reference to the earlier terrorism coming out of the Jenin camp that had triggered the Israeli action."

In short he argues that Palestinian terror attacks justify Israeli war crimes. But he does not end his argument there. He insists that this standard is already being applied by the United States and other Western Powers. He asks, "Imagine a team sent to investigate American military action in Afghanistan without reference to the attacks of Sept. 11 or Osama bin Laden's boasts that he would destroy America.

And imagine asking that investigation to ignore the sanctuary the Taliban gave Mr. bin Laden and his Qaeda operatives despite previous American warnings.

"Stripped of that context, the United States would inevitably be found guilty of having assaulted one of the poorest and most backward countries on the face of the earth and of inflicting unnecessary harm on the civilian population. A similar inquiry into the massive allied bombing of Germany in World War II would have resulted in charges of war crimes against Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill."

Steinitz argument is, from a legal and historical standpoint, absolutely wrong. For his claim is that the context (of a supposed "war on terror") justifies war crimes, when in truth the Geneva Conventions—which Israel is accused of violating—are meant to uphold essential standards of behaviour precisely *under the most extreme conditions of war*.

Steinitz argument boils down to the claim that the Geneva Conventions should only be applied to the "bad guys", whereas the "good-guys"—i.e. the Israelis—should be exempt by dint of the crimes perpetrated against them. But there have been four Geneva Conventions, stretching back to the late nineteenth century, all of which sought to uphold humane standards of treatment of the enemy, regardless of the causes of the conflict, its rights and wrongs, as conceived of by the opposing parties.

It is the fourth convention that is specifically at issue with respect to Jenin. It was first ratified in 1949 and largely replaced the first three conventions, but it did more than this. The 1949 convention was drawn up in the aftermath of the terrible experiences of the Second World War. It was specifically conceived of as a means of limiting the policy of *Blitzkrieg* —or total war. Waging war against the civilian population and infrastructure was pioneered by Nazi Germany, but taken up by the Allied powers by the war's end—a fact that found expression in not just the carpet

bombing of German cities, but the use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The 1949 Geneva Convention therefore brought civilians under the protection of international laws prohibiting murder, torture, hostage-taking, and extra-judicial sentencing and executions. In 1977, two protocols extended protection to victims of conflicts not formally declared as wars (such as Israel's invasion of the West Bank) and to victims of civil conflict within a state.

Amongst its many provisions, the Geneva Convention stipulates that persons who do not or can no longer take part in hostilities are entitled to respect for their life. It is forbidden to kill or wound an adversary who surrenders or who can no longer take part in the fighting. The wounded and sick must be collected and cared for by the party to the conflict that has them in its power. Medical personnel and medical establishments, transports and equipment must be spared. The red cross or red crescent on a white background must be respected.

The Geneva Convention also stipulates what are legitimate methods of war. It insists that neither the parties to the conflict nor members of their armed forces have an unlimited right to choose methods and means of warfare. It is forbidden to use weapons or methods of warfare that are likely to cause unnecessary losses or excessive suffering. The parties to a conflict must also distinguish between the civilian population and combatants in order to spare the civilian population and civilian property. Neither the civilian population as a whole, nor an individual civilian may be attacked. Attacks may be made solely against military objectives.

The Steinitz argument, that Sharon's crimes against Palestinians whether they are combatants or civilians are a justified response to suicide bombings, is, therefore, untenable. Moreover his equating of Israel's actions in Jenin with US actions in Afghanistan only proves that the Bush administration should also stand accused of war crimes alongside its Zionist ally.

He can make his claims without challenge within the pages of the *New York Times* only because Steinitz is preaching to the converted. There are few voices within the corrupt milieu of American liberalism that any longer take a stand on humanitarian principles. Instead they cite humanitarian motives as a rationale for their support of whatever predatory militaristic adventure the major powers are presently embarked upon—whether in the Balkans, Afghanistan, or the Middle East. No one knows this better than Steinitz, who is himself a prime example of liberal political renegacy.

Billed by the *New York Times* as chairman of the Knesset Foreign and Security Relations subcommittee on Defence

Planning and Policy, Steinitz is a key figure in the Sharon government. He earned his position because of his political evolution from a leading representative of the pacifist group, *Peace Now*, to one of the most bellicose advocates within Likud of all out war against the Palestinians.

This author does not claim to be an expert on the biography of Mr. Steinitz, but as early as December 1999 he was writing apocalyptic articles with titles such as, "When the Palestinian Army Invades the Heart of Israel".

The website, *IsraelBehindTheNews.com* published an account of a speech by Steinitz delivered in May 2001, in which he rejected any cease fire, "demanding that Israel disarm the PLO and its armed forces that continue to attack Israel on all fronts." He described a scenario whereby the Palestinian Authority (PA) is acting as the vanguard of a future pan-Arab army, "engaged in a policy of smuggling enough weapons to cripple the state of Israel."

In July 2001, Steinitz returned to his theme, arguing, "The Palestinian Authority is preparing to play a key role in any future Arab assault on the Jewish state."

On a website supporting Sharon's major rival for control of the Israeli right, Binyamin Netanyahu, Steinitz admits that Israel has already moved towards an aggressive strategy against the PA, "by rapidly transferring the battleground to enemy territory and/or attacking the enemy's infrastructure by means of air power." He wanted to go much further, putting an end once and for all to the supposed threat of a Palestinian invasion of Israel. And nothing that the PA does will convince him of its peaceful intentions: "Even if the Palestinians agree to demobilize their state from both army and weapons, who can guarantee Israel that after a certain amount of time an army will not be formed, despite the agreement, which will camp at the gates of Jerusalem and the approaches of the coastal plain, and pose a substantive threat to Israel's security?"

No one would argue that context does not matter, but Jenin cannot be explained as a response by Israel to the desperate actions of Palestinian suicide bombers. This turns reality on its head. Rather the crimes committed by the Israeli Defense Force at Jenin took place as part of a campaign on the part of the Sharon government to destroy the Palestinian Authority and subsume the occupied territories within a Greater Israel—a strategy for which Steinitz is a leading advocate.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact