

Israel Must be Held Accountable by the International Community

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Last week, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued reports sharply critical of Israel's treatment of Palestinians living in the 1967 occupied territories. On February 1, Amnesty called on Israel to "dismantle the system of apartheid which is causing so much suffering and bloodshed". Amnesty argued that since the British-based organisation launched its "major campaign against apartheid one year ago, Israeli forces have killed 220 Palestinians, including 35 in January 2023 alone. Unlawful killings help maintain Israel's apartheid system and constitute crimes against humanity, as do other serious and ongoing violations by Israeli authorities such as administrative detention and forcible transfer".

Amnesty called for Israel to be held accountable by the international community. The organisation's Secretary General Agnes Callamard made the point that the failure to do so "has given Israelis] free rein to segregate, control and oppress Palestinians on a daily basis, and helps perpetuate daily violence. Apartheid is a crime against humanity, and it is frankly chilling to see the perpetrators evade justice year after year".

Callamard accused Israel of attempting to "silence findings of apartheid with targeted Smear campaigns, and [argued] the international community allows itself to be cowed by these tactics".

Amnesty reported, "Under apartheid, Israeli authorities control every aspect of Palestinians' lives and subject them to daily oppression and discrimination through territorial fragmentation and legal segregation. Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories [OPT] are segregated into separate enclaves, with those living in the Gaza Strip isolated from the rest of the world through Israel's illegal blockade, which has caused a humanitarian crisis."

In addition to enforcing apartheid on Palestinians, Amnesty listed other war crimes Israel is committing in the occupied territories: planting Israeli colonists in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem, forcing Palestinians to leave their home areas (to make way for colonies or military zones), and demolishing Palestinian homes and entire villages.

On February 2, Human Rights Watch (HRW) castigated Israel for its use of “collective punishment against Palestinians” by sealing and demolishing homes of Palestinians who attack Israelis. HRW accused the Israeli army of “unlawfully” mounting raids on Palestinian cities and refugee camps and Israeli colonists of attacking “Palestinians and their property [but] rarely face punishment for these crimes.”

While HRW local representative Omar Shakir said Palestinian attacks on Israel civilians were “reprehensible crimes,.. such attacks cannot justify Israeli authorities intentionally punishing the families of Palestinian suspects by demolishing their homes and throwing [their families] out on the street”. Home demolitions and “sweeping movement restrictions” are glaring examples of unlawful collective punishment.

HRW wrote, “International Humanitarian law, including the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention, prohibits collective punishment, including the relatives of those accused of committing crimes, in all circumstances. Courts around the world have treated collective punishment as a war crime” although this is rejected by Israel’s Supreme Court.

Although the release of these damning reports coincided with the arrival in Jerusalem of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, he expressed his condolences to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the “horrific terrorist attack” by a young Palestinian who killed six Israelis and a Ukrainian outside a building used as a synagogue in the illegal Nevi Yacov colony on the edge of Jerusalem. Blinken said nothing in public about 10 Palestinian deaths during Israel’s army raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank and two Palestinian fatalities on the eve of his arrival. Instead, he mouthed US support for the “two state solution” involving the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (plus Gaza) although he is well aware Israeli colonisation has made this impossible and the US is at fault for refusing to halt this enterprise before it became too late.

Blinken called on “all sides now to take urgent steps to restore calm, to de-escalate” with the aim of creating a sense of security for both Israelis and Palestinians.” Blinken is blinkered to the harsh fact that there can be no security for either Israelis or Palestinians as long as Israel continues to create and expand colonies, impose apartheid on Palestinians, conduct armed raids into Palestinian urban areas, and commit collective punishment against Palestinians. Instead of exerting pressure on Netanyahu to halt these illegal activities, Blinken reiterated the mantra that the US commitment to Israel is “iron clad”. Unless the US changes its approach, the cycle of violence will continue, waxing at times of unending Israeli provocations which heighten Palestinian feelings of hopelessness and make youngsters lash out.

To make matters worse, Israel’s peaceniks have been sidelined by the rightward shift of the country to the point that Netanyahu’s new government is the most hard-line, chauvinist, and expansionist ever. It is committed to expanding colonisation, cracking down on Palestinian resistance, and promoting both ultra-nationalism and religious orthodoxy.

Instead of taking a firm line with Netanyahu on his plan to reduce the powers of the

Supreme Court, Blinken weakly urged Netanyahu to build a consensus about his intentions.

Blinken ignored the hundreds of thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets to protest against Netanyahu's plan to undermine Israeli democracy by overhauling the court. These demonstrations have been the largest ever unrelated to the occupation and Israel's forever wars. Since the emergence of the state almost 75 years ago, the court's role to rein in excesses and illegalities has been increasingly important because Israel has no constitution to use as guidance.

Netanyahu, who is currently on trial for corruption and breach of trust, seeks to subvert the court to evade legal cases against sitting politicians, like himself and his choice for health and interior minister, Arie Deri, the leader of the Sephardi Shas party which has 11 seats in the Knesset and could bring down the current government by pulling out of the coalition.

Deri served nearly two years in prison in 2000-2002 for accepting bribes. In 2011, he resumed his leadership of the party, was re-elected to the Knesset but in 2018 was indicted for fraud, breach of trust, interfering in court proceedings, money laundering, and tax dodging. In 2021 most charges were dropped except tax evasion on condition he would not serve in public office for several years. Despite this deal, he was given two portfolios by Netanyahu when he formed his cabinet last December. The Supreme Court ruled last month he could not serve and was replaced by two Shas legislators chosen by Deri who remains as influential as ever.

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