

The Ways Israeli War Crimes Buy Good Will

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I recently interviewed Jeff Halper about his excellent new book, [War Against the People](#), which examines the way Israel has crafted an indispensable role for itself doing what Halper calls “niche-filling” in the “war on terror”.

Put in the simplest terms, Halper’s argument is that Israel develops, refines and tests things – weapons, missile interception systems, surveillance, crowd control, biometric data collection, new interpretations of international law – using the Palestinians as guinea pigs. The occupied territories are test beds, demonstrating how well such “innovations” work in the field. That knowledge and experience can then be sold on to other international players, including, of course, the biggest: the United States.

Craig Murray, a former British ambassador (one who went rogue, from the British government’s point of view) has a very interesting post about the latest efforts of David Cameron’s government to justify the extra-judicial murder of two Britons in Syria over the summer by claiming that such actions accord with international law. The US began doing similar things in the Middle East to its citizens, also using drones, a few years earlier.

Israel, of course, led the way decades ago on this kind of murder from the skies, before most people had heard of drones. Israel refers to these murders as “targeted assassinations”, and has spent the intervening period trying to persuade the world that they are legal in international law.

I have been covering the Israel-Palestine conflict long enough to remember a time when no one took that argument seriously. In fact, Israel was regularly castigated by the US and others for carrying out such attacks, perhaps most famously in 2002 when it dropped a one-tonne bomb on a residential neighbourhood of Gaza, killing at least 10 children as they slept, as it “targeted” Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh.

Then 9/11 happened and the US, backed by the UK, launched its endless “war on terror”. Usefully, Israel had been there long before and had a blueprint for how to conduct such a sustained offensive. After all, it had been waging its own war on terror – aka an illegal, belligerent occupation – against the Palestinians for decades.

It is worth bearing all this in mind as you read Murray’s piece (and I recommend you do) on the execution of the two Britons in Syria. I don’t know what drones were used by the UK but there has to be a good chance they were made by Israel. Britain is the biggest importer of drones in the world, and most of them come from Israel – in fact, 55 were [bought](#) by the UK between 2010 and 2014. But Israel’s role in this is about much more than the hardware, as Murray’s post illustrates.

What did Tony Blair and Jack Straw do back in 2003 when they needed to support the US in its illegal attack and invasion of Iraq? Unfortunately for them, international law is clear about such attacks, just as it is about extra-judicial murder on foreign soil. An unprovoked attack on another state - one that is not in self-defence from an imminent and credible threat - is a war crime. In fact, it is worse than that: it is defined as “the supreme war crime”.

That is the advice Blair and Straw received when they tried to get their in-house lawyers to sanction the attack.

So what did they do? They brought in an outside expert. They turned to Daniel Bethlehem, a lawyer beloved of Israeli prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as the Israeli army. He had spent many years advising the Israeli military as it tried to develop new legal principles that justify states using massive firepower that kills chiefly civilians. That nonchalance you see from Israeli officials every time Israel murders hundreds of children in Gaza relies on the legal sophistry provided by rent-an-excuse lawyers like Bethlehem.

Israel and its enablers have tried to create a loophole in international law, arguing that an “imminent” threat exists - whether from a country like Iraq or two blokes with guns in Syria - and justifies self-defence even if the country has no weapons that pose a credible threat or the people killed aren’t involved in an attack on the aggressor state, imminent or not.

This is exactly the kind of tough, thankless work Israel has been doing that, in our age of permanent “war on terror”, is highly marketable. States buy weapons systems and they pay people like Bethlehem big bucks to put their names to bits of paper spouting nonsense about international law.

But most of all, as Halper argues, this kind of usefulness is not paid for in hard currency. It buys good will. Lots of it. Which is why you won’t see the British or US governments making life hard for Israel soon, however much their own publics may be outraged by Israel’s behaviour.

www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2015/09/exclusive-i-can-reveal-the-legal-advice-on-drone-strikes-and-how-the-establishment-works

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