U.S. Human Rights Report Dedicates More Pages to Israel, Palestinians Than Anywhere Else

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The State Department's new report on human rights practices around the world, published on Friday, devotes 141 pages to the human rights situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, more than to any other country in the world except China (which was also covered in the same amount of pages.) The report details human rights violations by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian terror organizations such as Hamas.

The "country report" on Israel and the occupied territories devotes 69 pages to the situation in Israel proper, and another 72 pages to the situation in the occupied territories, where according to the report, there are widespread human rights violations being conducted by both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, as well as by Palestinian terror organizations.

Even when viewed as two separate reports, the number of pages devoted to each of the areas – Israel and the occupied territories – surpasses that of any other country in the Middle East region. Iran's human rights situation is covered in 48 pages, Syria's over 58, Iraq's over 65, and Libya's over only 32. Western Sahara, another region where there is an ongoing military occupation according to the UN, is covered in a short document, only 15 pages long. (Turkey, which is part of the Middle East but is filed under "Europe and Eurasia" in the human rights report, is covered in 75 pages.)

The report summary on Israel and the Palestinian territories states that "The most significant human rights problems were terrorist attacks targeting civilians and politically and religiously motivated societal violence; institutional and societal discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel, many of whom self-identify as Palestinian, in particular in access to equal education, housing, and employment opportunities; and institutional and societal discrimination against Ethiopian Israelis and women."

A number of events that dominated the headlines in Israel and the Palestinian Authority over the last year are mentioned in the report. For example, the report covers the events in the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran, which is located next to where the Israeli government is preparing to build a new community for Jewish residents called Hiran. The relevant part in the report stated:

"In January the Supreme Court ruled again that eviction orders issued against residents of the Bedouin unrecognized village Umm al-Hiran, where they had been moved by the Israeli military regime in 1956, were valid. The NCF (Negev Coexistence Forum, an Israeli NGO) reported that construction work on Hiran progressed and expanded during the year, reaching to within a few yards of Bedouin houses in Umm al-Hiran, and residents suffered from the dust raised by construction.

"As of November a group of 30 Jewish families who planned to move to Hiran remained in mobile homes in the forest outside Umm al-Hiran while waiting to obtain the land. The government offered plots of land and cash compensation to villagers who accept resettlement to the nearby Bedouin town of Hura, three miles away, but village leaders had rejected this option because, according to the Hura local council, there was insufficient space even for natural growth in the town and because of fears it would force the villagers to abandon a more traditional rural lifestyle for an urban one, with attendant problems of drugs, crime, and disintegration of the traditional family/clan structure. Village leaders expressed openness to almost any option that would allow them to remain in place, including living side-by-side with Jewish neighbors in an expanded community.

"Authorities scheduled demolition of structures that would have displaced approximately 30 to 40 persons in one extended family for November 22, but the Be’er Sheva Magistrate's Court postponed the demolition for a last-minute appeal, which the court denied the following day. As of November 30, the targeted villagers agreed to move to Hura and began self-demolishing in order to avoid steep fines and to reuse building materials."

In a chapter devoted to "Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings" in the occupied territories, covering such acts by both Israelis and Palestinians, there is a paragraph devoted to the Elor Azaria affair:

"On March 24, IDF soldier Elor Azaria shot and killed 20-year-old Abed al-Fatah al-Sharif after he stabbed a soldier in Hebron’s Tel Rumeida neighborhood, near the Israeli settlement of the same name. Video footage obtained by NGO B’Tselem and eyewitness testimony indicated that the solider shot al-Sharif in the head after he lay injured and motionless on the ground. Amnesty International (AI) also released a statement that the shooting of a wounded and incapacitated person was unjustified. The IDF reportedly considered charging Azaria with murder, then downgraded the charge to manslaughter. As of December the trial continued." (Last week, Azaria was sentenced to a year and a half in prison, but that isn't mentioned in the report, which was sealed weeks ago, before the trial ended.)

The report covers what it calls "persistent societal discrimination" against citizens of Israel of Ethiopian origin. One paragraph within it features a quote by Israel's chief of police that created a major controversy in Israel last summer:

"At a conference in Tel Aviv on August 30, Police Commissioner Roni Alsheich responded to a question about police violence against Ethiopians by stating, 'Studies the world over, without exception, have shown that immigrants are more involved in crime than others,' and, therefore, 'when a police officer meets a suspect, naturally enough his mind suspects him more than if he were someone else. That is natural.' Two days after an outcry against this apparent justification of excessive policing against Ethiopian-Israelis, Alsheich apologized for his comments."

The opening summary of the part of the report devoted to the occupied territories, states that "the most significant human rights abuses were Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli civilians and security forces, which killed eight Israelis in East Jerusalem and the West Bank." It also criticizes the Palestinian Authority for expressing public support for terrorism: "at times the PA or PA-affiliated media and social media failed to condemn terror and embraced as 'martyrs' individuals who died while carrying out attacks on Israeli civilians."

The summary also explained that "human rights problems in the parts of the West Bank under PA control included abuse and mistreatment of detainees, overcrowded detention facilities, prolonged detention, and infringements on privacy rights. Restrictions on freedom of speech, press, and assembly continued. There were limits on freedom of association and movement. Corruption - especially nepotism - violence against women, and societal discrimination were serious problems."

However, large parts of that section were also devoted to human rights violations by Israel in The West Bank, stating that "there were reports some children worked in forced labor in the West Bank, including in settlements. NGOs reported employers subjected Palestinian men to forced labor in Israeli settlements in industry, agriculture, construction, and other sectors. The PA was unable to monitor and investigate abuses in these areas and elsewhere because it did not control its borders and the Israeli government limited its authority to work in Areas B and C." This paragraph appeared under a section headlined "Trafficking in Persons."

Another harshly critical paragraph states that "access to social and commercial services in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including housing, education, and health care, was available only to Israelis. Israeli officials discriminated against Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem regarding access to employment and legal housing by denying Palestinians access to registration paperwork. In both the West Bank and Jerusalem, Israeli authorities often placed insurmountable obstacles against Palestinian applicants for construction permits, including the requirement that they document land ownership in the absence of a uniform post-1967 land registration process, high application fees, and requirements that new housing be connected to often unavailable municipal works."

The report also stated that "violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians continued to be a problem, although at reduced levels compared with 2015. Israeli authorities’ investigations of settler violence rarely led to indictments."

Hamas, which controls Gaza, also came under criticism in the report. The summary paragraph on the situation in Gaza stated that "Human rights abuses under Hamas included security forces killing, torturing, arbitrarily detaining, and harassing opponents, including Fatah members and other Palestinians with impunity. Terrorist organizations and militant factions in the Gaza Strip launched rocket and mortar attacks against civilian targets in Israel, and they did so at or near civilian locations in Gaza."