

UN report accuses Israel of silencing of civil society to repress Palestinians

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United Nations, June 12 (RHC)-- Civil society groups in Israel and Palestine face serious human rights violations by Israeli authorities seeking to perpetuate an illegal occupation and apartheid regime, according to a report published by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The report -- authored by the Independent International Commission Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory -- examines "attacks, restrictions, and harassment of civil society actors by all duty bearers," including the Israeli government and occupation forces, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Hamas in Gaza.

"We concluded that all duty bearers are engaged in limiting the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful association," U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said in a statement. "We were particularly alarmed by the situation of Palestinian human rights defenders, who are routinely subject to a range of punitive measures as part of the occupation regime."

The commission found that "the Israeli authorities' silencing of civil society voices that challenge government policies and narrative is intrinsically linked to the goal of ensuring and enshrining the permanent occupation at the expense of the rights of the Palestinian people."

"This includes criminalizing Palestinian civil society organizations and their members by labeling them as 'terrorists,' pressuring and threatening institutions that give a platform for civil society discourse, actively lobbying donors, and implementing measures intended to cut sources of funding to civil society," the report states.

According to the publication:

The Israeli authorities' use of anti-terror legislation to categorize civil society organizations as terrorist organizations aims to delegitimize and isolate them and undermine their activity, and to harm their international funding and support. The commission concludes on reasonable grounds that the designations by Israeli authorities of six Palestinian NGOs as terrorist organizations and a seventh Palestinian NGO as unlawful were unjustified, undertaken to silence civil society voices, and violate human rights, including freedom of association, freedom of expression and opinion, and the rights to peaceful assembly, to privacy, and to fair trial.

Israeli officials claim the six humanitarian groups—Addameer, AlHaq, the Bisan Center for Research and Development, Defense for Children International—Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees—have ties to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a secular political movement with an armed wing that has carried out resistance attacks against Israel. The groups deny the accusation, and a probe by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency found no evidence supporting Israel's claim.

The report further states that "Israeli authorities are increasingly using surveillance to monitor the activities of human rights defenders, including through spyware planted on mobile phones," including by planting Pegasus spyware manufactured by the Israeli company NSO Group on the phones of Palestinian human rights workers and Israeli activists participating in 2020 protests against the last Netanyahu government.

A section of the report on the far-right government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu notes:

In late 2022, a new government in Israel was sworn in, with a stated mission of weakening the judiciary and increasing government control of the media and freedom of expression, which would have a significant impact on civil society in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In February 2023, the government started enacting new legislation to weaken judicial independence amid large-scale nationwide demonstrations. The proposed changes would dismantle fundamental features of the separation of powers and of the checks and balances essential in democratic political systems. Legal experts have warned that they risk weakening human rights protections, especially for the most vulnerable and disfavored communities, including Palestinian citizens of Israel, asylum-seekers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons.

The report states that Israeli authorities are subjecting both Israeli and Palestinian journalists to monitoring and harassment, with Palestinians being "particularly targeted" for intimidation, "attacks, arrests, detention, and accusations of incitement to violence, seemingly as part of an effort to deter them from continuing their work."

According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, Israeli forces have killed 20 journalists this century, with none of the killers ever facing prosecution. These include at least one U.S. citizen, Al Jazeera correspondent Shireen Abu Akleh, who was shot dead by an Israeli sniper while covering a May 2022 raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. Al Jazeera producer Ali Samodi was shot in the back but survived. An independent international probe subsequently concluded that Abu Akleh's "extrajudicial killing" was "deliberate."

On Wednesday, 22-year-old Palestinian photojournalist Momen Samreen, who was covering Israeli forces' demolition of a suspected Palestinian militant's family home—an illegal act of collective punishment—was shot in the head with a "less-lethal" projectile and was hospitalized in serious condition.

The Israeli government -- which maintains that the commission of inquiry "has no legitimacy" -- rejected the report's findings. Israel's U.N. mission in Switzerland said that "Israel has a robust and independent civil society which is composed of thousands of NGOs, human rights defenders, [and] national and international media outlets, that can operate freely."

The report also states that the Palestinian Authority and Hamas are targeting human rights defenders "with the aim of silencing dissenting opinions," and that activists, journalists, and others have been harassed, intimidated, and in some cases arbitrarily arrested and jailed.

"The commission has received information on the use of torture and ill-treatment to punish and intimidate critics and opponents by internal security officials in Gaza and intelligence services, preventive security officials, and law enforcement officials in the West Bank," the report says. "The frequency and severity, and the absence of accountability, suggest that such cases are widespread."

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