

# ICC must investigate Israeli war crimes, human rights groups say

Fri, 2021-02-26 02:29

Officials representing leading human rights groups on Thursday urged US President Joe Biden to remove sanctions imposed by his predecessor against International Criminal Court (ICC) officials, arguing war crimes committed by Israel against Palestinians must be investigated.

The ICC was created in 2002 based on the principles of the Rome Statute drawn up by the United Nations in 1998, and on legal precedents defined during the Nuremberg Trials after Second World War which prosecuted Nazi war crimes.

Although 123 nations have joined the ICC, more than 40 countries including the US and Israel, which originally supported the Rome Statutes, refuse to join and reject the ICC's authority because of investigations into Israel's military policies.

Katherine Gallagher, a senior staff attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights, and other human rights activists from around the world took part in a webinar panel on Thursday. The forum was hosted by the Foundation for Middle East Peace and its president, Lara Friedman.

"What we saw (Wednesday) in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva is the US expressing its intention to rejoin," said Dr. Michael Kearney, a legal researcher for Al-Haq, the Palestinian human rights agency based in Ramallah.

"But it is doing so on the condition that Palestine is removed from the agenda of the Human Rights Council. We have to be cautious about what the US is basing that re-engagement."

Former US President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the council in 2018. Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Wednesday the US would seek re-election to the council in 2022. He said probes into Syria and North Korea along with preserving LGBTQI rights and combating racism should be priorities.

"The Human Rights Council must support those fighting against injustice and tyranny," Blinken said.

"We acknowledge the challenges at the Council as well, including unacceptable bias against Israel and membership rules that allow countries with atrocious human rights records to occupy seats they do not merit."

The sanctions imposed on the ICC by Trump and mixed signals from the Biden administration have not dissuaded the organization from investigating allegations of Israeli war crimes in Palestine.

On Feb. 5, the ICC "pre-trial chamber" found that "the court's territorial jurisdiction in the situation in Palestine, a state party to the ICC Rome

Statute, extends to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, namely Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.”

This ruling opened the door for investigations into alleged war crimes perpetrated by “members of the Israeli Defense Forces, Israeli authorities, Hamas, and Palestinian armed groups,” Friedman said.

The panelists agreed that Israel has engaged in political policies to deny Palestine of any protected rights under ICC authority.

The ICC decision to move forward in its investigation came despite threats from the Trump administration, former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton. Trump issued an executive order imposing sanctions against top ICC officials, along with individuals and corporate entities assisting the ICC probe.

Yael Stein, a research director at the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights (B’Tselem), argued that Israel has created a sophisticated legal system to confuse the international rule of law as it applies to the actions of Israeli soldiers.

“Israel claims that it will investigate itself,” Stein said. “But it is not investigating the charges against itself. The Israelis do not investigate the orders. They only address the question, ‘Did the soldiers obey the legal orders they were given?’”

She said charges are watered down to “insignificant claims.”

“If a soldier kills a civilian, he is charged with not obeying an order so he can avoid a murder charge,” she said. “(Israeli authorities) are able to assert that they in fact do investigate cases.”

Hassan Jabareen, the founder of the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (Adalah), referred to this as “Israel’s legal black hole.”

“Israel creates a situation in which there is a black hole of legality where they ensure that legality is applied, and as a consequence, no one is charged or held to be responsible,” Jabareen said.

“One way they did this was in 2007 when Israel declared that Gaza is an ‘enemy.’ Therefore, everyone in Gaza is an enemy and even if someone is injured illegally, there will be no consequences against Israeli soldiers.”

The victims in Gaza, he said, are legally denied access to Israeli courts because they are all defined as “enemies” of Israel.

Kearney said that the significance of the ICC ruling this month applies directly to the illegal establishment of Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem that were occupied by Israel in 1967.

He said Israel tried to exclude the issue of war crimes in the Rome Statutes in 1998, specifically to prevent the inclusion of settlements and population transfers.

Gallagher noted that Biden has not yet lifted the Trump administration sanctions on the ICC because Israel is lobbying to keep them in place.



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## [Lebanon's top Christian cleric calls for international conference](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-26 02:14

BEIRUT: Lebanon's top Christian cleric on Thursday reiterated his call for the country's politicians to come together to form a new government. Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai wants an international conference on the issue that would protect Lebanon, the Taif Agreement, "and equality," but his sermons are falling on deaf ears. The country's lawmakers have failed to agree on a new administration since the last one resigned after the devastating Aug. 4 port explosion in Beirut. There has also been a sharp increase in tension between President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri. "We have reached a point where it is impossible for us to communicate or reach an agreement," Al-Rai said on Thursday. "We must diagnose our problem and treat it based on three constants: The Taif

Agreement, the constitution, and the Charter. All the country's problems are caused by foreign interventions."

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah rejected Rai's proposition, calling it "the internationalization and cover for a new occupation. Nobody messes with us," he said.

Nasrallah's words sparked criticism from Christian parties on social media, and several Arab and foreign diplomats visited Al-Rai to voice their support for his proposal.

"There is a need to properly implement the Taif Agreement, which guarantees the national unity and civil peace of the country," Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Lebanon Walid bin Abdullah Bukhari said.

Delegations from the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and other opposing parties also visited the patriarch.

"We are living in hell as a result of drawing Lebanon into the Iranian-American conflict," Lebanese Forces MP Antoine Habshi said.

"This makes it imperative to resort to the international community as Lebanon is being held as a hostage."

Former Information Minister Ghazi Aridi, a PSP member, said Lebanon's president does not want Hariri as prime minister.

He also dismissed efforts by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by Aoun's son-in-law MP Gebran Bassil, to be included in the government's formation.

"Bassil's insistence on having the bloc third in the government is a failed attempt," Aridi said. "There will not be any third."

An FPM delegation also met with Al-Rai on Thursday, while Bassil spoke on the phone with the patriarch.

MP Roger Azar reiterated the FPM's demands and said: "We informed the patriarch of the FPM's readiness to discuss any suggestion within the constitutional norms and terms, and on the basis of a comprehensive national partnership."

Former MP Ahmed Fatfat said any attack against Al-Rai just solidifies his position as an important reference in the country.

"Al-Rai is waging a basic and clear battle and has the support of all political parties and communities in Lebanon," Fatfat said. "Intimidation attempts are useless."





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## [Egypt backs Sudanese proposal to mediate GERD negotiations](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-26 01:49

CAIRO: The Egyptian Foreign Ministry has announced that Egypt welcomes and supports a Sudanese proposal to form an international quartet committee to mediate stalled negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), made at a meeting of interested parties with the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) African Union (AU) presidency coordinator, Alphonse Ntumba. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed his support toward the proposed committee, which would be convened under the auspices of Felix Tshisekedi, the president of the DRC.

Shoukry expressed hope that the move would push negotiations forward and assist Cairo, Khartoum and Addis Ababa in reaching an agreement as soon as

possible over Ethiopia's filling of the GERD's lake.

Spokesman Ahmed Hafez said that during the meeting, Shoukry expressed his appreciation for the DRC's endeavors during its presidency of the AU, and that he looked forward to the key role Kinshasa can play to help reach a legally binding agreement on the rules of filling and operating the GERD, taking into account the interests of the three countries.

Hafez added that Cairo had confirmed to the Congolese delegation that the proposed committee should include representatives from the US, EU, and the UN.

Mohammed Abdel Atty, Egyptian minister of water resources and irrigation, affirmed Egypt's commitment to safeguarding its water rights, and insisted that a legally binding agreement between the three sides was the only acceptable way to end the dispute.



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## [Syrian war being forgotten in UK as poll shows growing apathy](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-02-24 22:45

LONDON: The civil war in Syria is being forgotten by the British people as apathy toward the decade-long conflict grows, according to a UK-based charity.

The [results of a YouGov survey, released on Wednesday](#), showed only a little more than half (58 percent) of those polled were aware the war was still going on. A spokesman for Syria Relief said Britons have “turned off their minds” to what is happening in the country.

The poll, which marks the upcoming 10th anniversary of the start of the conflict, found 38 percent of 1,753 people questioned in the UK were not sure of the current status of the war, while four percent believed it had ended.

Public awareness of the conflict was higher in August 2019, when a survey found that 77 percent people knew about the conflict, according to [Syria Relief](#).

“I believe that after 10 years the UK has become fatigued about the Syrian crisis because of its protracted nature,” Charles Lawley, head of communications and advocacy at Syria Relief, told Arab News. “They are accepting that this is a place where tragedies happen on a daily basis, so they turn their minds off to it – and this is a great tragedy.

“I think it is a symptom of British society becoming less concerned about issues beyond our own borders and, to be frank, it is almost as if the suffering of Syrians is boring them.”

This year also marks 10 years since the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad targeted 10 schools and a hospital in attacks that claimed the lives of more than 20 people, more than half of them children, something that would not be tolerated in the UK, Lawley said.

“If this would have happened in Britain it would have been treated akin to our 9/11: a national tragedy that would be remembered for generations,” he said. “Yet because it happened in Syria, no one knows about it.

“We wouldn’t tolerate children being bombed as they sit in the classrooms of British schools so why on earth do we tolerate it in Syria or anywhere else in the world?”

Extensive media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit negotiations has meant that UK national news updates on the Syrian conflict have been increasingly rare in the past few years, which makes the efforts of charities to help the victims of the conflict much harder, Lawley said.

“It is so difficult for organizations like Syria Relief to get the UK or the world to care about suffering and death in Syria,” he said. “When we just allow Syria to be a place where bombs can be dropped on schools or hospitals, we devalue the lives of Syrians.

“But, tragically, our apathy to the plight of the Syrian people compounds their suffering as there is no pressure on governments to act to stop warring parties in the conflict from committing crimes against humanity.



“Ultimately, the British people need to remember that Syrians are people too. Their lives are just as valuable as any human life; the only difference between them and (us) is where they were born. They didn’t ask for this.”

While the UK has pledged billions of pounds in aid for Syria since 2012, politicians and the media in the UK need to do more to shine a light on the conflict and the suffering of ordinary Syrians, Lawley said, especially after the government’s recent announcement of cuts to the aid budget.

“The UK government is the third-biggest donor to the Syrian humanitarian aid response and should be proud about the enormous amount of good it is doing to help the people impacted by the conflict,” he said.

“However, with the recent announcement of the government about plans to cut the aid budget, this is making us at Syria Relief, and many of our colleagues in the (nongovernmental organization) community very concerned about what this could mean to the Syrian people – many of whom are some of the most vulnerable people on the globe.

“I think the government should be shouting from the rooftops about the incredible things that the UK aid budget has achieved. If it had, I think there would have been more opposition from the public about the announcement to cut the budget.

“Being a global leader in helping the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people should be worn as a badge of national pride, not treated like a dirty little secret.”

The war in Syria began in 2011 amid pro-democracy protests in Deraa. Tensions escalated after the Assad regime crushed dissenters who staged a “day of rage” on March 15, which ultimately led to more people flooding city streets demanding the president step down.





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## [Jordan reimposes Friday curfew as virus surges](#)

Author:

AFP

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AMMAN: Jordan has reimposed an all-day curfew on Fridays to stem the spread of coronavirus as cases rise, officials said Wednesday.

"Starting this week, the government is imposing a curfew throughout the kingdom from 10 p.m. (2000 GMT) Thursdays until 6 am Saturdays," Information

Minister Ali Al-Ayed said in a statement.

Walking to a mosque for Friday prayers, however, is permitted, he said. An existing nightly curfew will begin at 10 p.m. instead of midnight, while from Sunday a maximum of 30 percent of public-sector employees will be allowed at their workplace.

The toughening of Covid-19 restrictions returns Jordan to rules imposed in March last year, and which were only eased last month.

“The kingdom has witnessed a rapid spread of Covid in recent weeks. This is why swift and strict measures are needed,” Health Minister Nazir Obeidat said.

Jordan, which began vaccinations last month, has officially recorded more than 376,000 novel coronavirus cases and over 4,600 deaths out of a population of 10.5 million people.



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