

Silencing Palestine: The Suppression and Targeting of Palestinian Human Rights Defenders

Israel's unlawful occupation of Palestine and settler-colonial apartheid regime, which has now been committing genocide in the Gaza Strip without any tangible response from the international community, has not only dispossessed the Palestinian people of their land and denied the exercise of their inalienable right to self-determination and return, but has also waged an unrelenting campaign to silence their voices, distort their narratives, and punish their resistance to its genocidal acts.

Over the past 77 years, the machinery of this oppression has evolved to now include the sophisticated use of digital surveillance, arbitrary sanctions and detentions, and reputational warfare. When Palestinian human rights organisations demand Israel's compliance with international law, and pursue accountability for its breaches thereof, they have come to expect systematic retaliation from the State and private actors, including verbal smears, physical, legal and digital attacks, as well as threats to funding. Labels of "terrorism" and "antisemitism" have been co-opted and baselessly deployed by Israel to discredit and delegitimise Palestinian human rights defenders. Central to this effort has been the promotion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, which conflates antisemitism with criticism of Israel. This definition has been adopted by numerous governments and institutions, leading to the cancellation of events, blacklisting of speakers, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territory,¹ and chilling of academic and activist spaces. In recent years, Palestinian human rights organisations have come under particularly aggressive attack, facing not only domestic repression by Israeli authorities but also the unprecedented weaponisation of international tools such as United States (US) sanctions.

Such acts both suppress factual documentation of human rights abuses and serve Israel's broader genocidal objective: the systematic erasure of Palestinian society, identity, resistance, and existence. In this context, the international legal order – especially the United Nations (UN) system – has largely failed to protect those at the forefront of the struggle for justice and Palestinian self-determination, including the right of return.

¹ Ben Knight, "Germany: Second talk by top UN official cancelled", DW (19 February 2025), <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-anger-over-cancelled-talks-by-un-special-rapporteur-for-palestinian-territories/a-71662122>

The Escalating Attacks against Palestinian Human Rights Organisations

In October 2021, the Israeli Minister of Defence took aggressive and unprecedented measures against Palestinian organisations by issuing an order that designated six Palestinian non-governmental organisations as “terrorist organisations.” These six organisations are Al-Haq, Addameer, Defence for Children-Palestine (DCI-P), the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), the Union of Palestinian Women Committees (UPWC), and the Bisan Center for Research and Development (Bisan). A subsequent military order outlawed the six organisations in the West Bank, authorising the Israeli Occupation Forces on suspicion of membership in or association with a terrorist group, to arrest and detain their employees, raid their offices, freeze their bank accounts and seize their property. These orders aimed at exerting pressure on their funders and jeopardising their operations, while simultaneously attempting to create a chilling effect on other human groups pursuing accountability for Israel’s mass atrocities and historic injustices.

In January 2022, Al-Haq submitted a joint report to UN Special Rapporteurs in which it warned that “the past two years have reached an unprecedented level in the deterioration of civil society organisations and individuals’ freedom of action”.² It highlighted how, in the ten years previous, Israel had advanced its settler-colonial apartheid regime through a sophisticated set of laws, policies and practices to discredit and defund organisations that work to expose human rights violations in Palestine, Israel and the occupied Golan. This follows decades of Palestinian human rights defenders being systematically targeted for their work advocating for the protection of human rights in Palestine. Israel’s deployment of sophisticated spyware and innovative forms of surveillance against Palestinians across the occupied Palestinian territory, in clear violation of their right to privacy, means they are under constant scrutiny from security and military apparatuses which limit “their expressive spaces and plunges them into a state of constant anxiety”.³ Rapid technological advancements in this field, which is now implementing AI software unconstrained by regulations which lag far behind, have allowed Israel to herald in a new era of occupation – an era in which many components of its brutal military rule can be automatised and carried out at a convenient distance. The deployment of such spyware against peaceful human rights defenders exemplifies how Israel is not only criminalizing dissent but is actively monitoring and suppressing the infrastructure of Palestinian civil society. This reflects

² Al-Marsad, Al-Haq, PHROC, ESCR-Net, Cornell Law School International Human Rights Clinic & Boston University Law School International Human Rights Clinic, ‘Repression of Human Rights Defenders in Israel, the Occupied Territories of Palestine and the Golan: Joint Report Submitted to the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory, the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, the Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Contemporary Forms of Racism by International Human Rights Clinics, Centers, and Human Rights Organisations’ (31 January 2022) <https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/02/14/repression-of-human-rights-defenders-by-israel-special-rapporteurs-1644827668.pdf> 1

³ Mona Shtaya, ‘Nowhere to hide: The impact of Israel’s digital surveillance regime on the Palestinians’ (Middle East Institute, 27 April 2022) <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/nowhere-hide-impact-israels-digital-surveillance-regime-palestinians>>

a broader strategy of oppression and racial domination, in which surveillance as a form of control renders Palestinian life hyper-visible to the oppressor while keeping the oppressor's actions shrouded in impunity.

Beyond Israel's use of spyware as a tool of intimidation and oppression, attacks, death threats, arbitrary arrests, travel bans, deportations, and defamation and smear campaigns attempt to delegitimise and discredit the work of civil society and human rights in Palestine – all with the desired effect of drying out funding for Palestinian civil society.⁴ The financial obstacles faced by Al-Haq and other Palestinian organisations was noted by the UN Secretary-General in his latest report on 'Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights: Report of the Secretary-General'. In the report, the Secretary-General found that the six organisations designated by Israel in 2021 – which have been included in the reports of the Secretary-General since 2022 based on allegations that their designations stemmed from their cooperation with the UN and human rights and humanitarian work – continue to face challenges regarding their banking transactions, including de-risking practices by banks, intermediary banks and donors leading to some organisations being unable to receive or send any funds.⁵

This report was released less than a week after the Trump administration, rather than end its complicity in Israel's settler-colonial apartheid regime and ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, imposed sanctions under Executive Order 14203 against Al-Haq, Al-Mezan, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR)⁶ – the leading human rights organisations working on international criminal accountability for perpetrators of atrocity crimes in Palestine.

The designations under the Executive Order itself are intended to prevent the organisations from engaging in crucial accountability work in the OPT and supporting the work of the International Criminal Court. Along with the patterns of attacks on journalists in Gaza, the denial of entry of experts to investigate crimes in Gaza, the sanctioning of the organisations by

⁴ Al-Haq, Addameer, SHAMS, 'Joint Submission to the UN Secretary-General on Intimidation and Reprisals for Cooperation with the UN in the Field of Human Rights (Reporting Period from 1 May 2021 to 30 April 2022)' (15 April 2022) <https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/04/16/submission-to-the-un-secretary-general-on-intimidation-and-reprisals-1650118540.pdf>; Al-Haq, 'Al-Haq's Written Submission to the (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, Mr. Clément Voule for his report to be submitted to the 50th Session of the Human Rights Council with focus on "Access to Resources"' (18 February 2022) <https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/02/19/submission-un-sr-freedom-of-expression-and-assembly-on-shrinking-space-access-to-resources-1-1645269537.pdf>; OBS, OMCT & FIDH, *Target Locked: The Unrelenting Israeli Smear Campaigns to Discredit Human Rights Groups in Israel, Palestine, and the Syrian Golan* (April 2021) <https://target-locked-obs-defenders.org/IMG/pdf/obs_palestine2021ang-1.pdf>

⁵ UN Human Rights Council, 'Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights: Report of the Secretary-General' (9 September 2025) UN Doc A/HRC/60/62, paras 93-94

⁶ Al-Haq, 'Al-Haq, PCHR, and Al-Mezan Condemn US Sanctions and Call for Global Solidarity to End the Genocide in Gaza and the Oppression of Palestinians' (5 September 2025)

<<https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/26662.html>>

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the US at the behest of Israel, further amounts to complicity in genocide, enabling Israel to destroy the Palestinian people with impunity.

Threatened by the impact and role of our legal work in exposing Israel's ongoing international crimes, the US has resorted to punishing individuals and organisations seeking to uphold the international legal system. The implications go beyond Palestine: by protecting Israel from accountability, the US is dismantling the international legal order and undermining the possibility of justice for victims of grave crimes anywhere.

The Sidelining of Palestinian Voices in the Context of Israel's Genocidal, Settler-Colonial Apartheid Regime

The targeting of Palestinian human rights organizations is central to Israel's ongoing Nakba and historical goal of Palestinian erasure. The attempts at silencing Palestinian voices outlined above are the latest in a relentless campaign by Israel and its allies to eliminate the Palestinian people and systematically deny their collective right to self-determination and return, with impunity.

Since the establishment of Israel, Palestinian perspectives and experiences – as told by Palestinians – have been sidelined by Israel's Zionist regime and its allies. Israeli and Western narratives have dominated the discussion, while any analysis of Palestine's lawful fight for liberation has been buried through censorship in mainstream media, and now equally on social media platforms; active and escalating smear campaigns against organisations and individuals defending the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people; and stripping Palestinian human rights defenders of the very means to function.

Israel is using all means available to prevent Palestinian human rights defenders from shedding a spotlight on its escalating annexation of Palestine and destruction and displacement of its people, and ensuring that those organisations that collect crucial evidence on the ground for accountability, are silenced and immobilised. The designation and sanctioning of the organisations by Israel and the United States, further amounts to the "Persecution of organizations and persons, by depriving them of fundamental rights and freedoms, because they oppose apartheid", which under Article 2(f) of the Apartheid Convention is an act of the crime of apartheid.

The Failure of the UN System

Despite overwhelming documentation of the multi-faceted attacks against Palestinian human rights defenders, the UN system has proven largely incapable of providing protection. Palestinian human rights defenders who engage with UN mechanisms, such as special

procedures or treaty bodies, do so at great personal risk. Yet even when targeted, there are no meaningful consequences for the perpetrators.

The UN Charter emphasises State sovereignty, yet any meaningful, legally binding action to protect related principles of international law require Security Council approval – which continues to be routinely blocked by the US as it protects its own geopolitical, capitalist interests, rather than the supposedly universal values of the international community. As a result, international law becomes a rhetorical tool rather than an operational one.

Recommendations:

- Use all available means to restore and protect the rights of all human rights defenders operating in the OPT, as required under Articles 2, 19 and 22 of the ICCPR, and ensure that no new laws are enacted which stifle the voices of human rights defenders;
- Repeal the following laws, and any other laws that violate Articles 2, 19 and 22 of the ICCPR: the Mandatory Disclosure of Foreign Entity Funding Law; the Law for Prevention of Damage to the State of Israel through Boycott; Amendment No. 28 to the Entry to Israel Law; Israel—the Nation-State of the Jewish People Law; Nakba Law; and the Breaking the Silence Law;
- Condemn the application of Executive Order 14203 as an internationally wrongful act of apartheid and genocide, and exert meaningful pressure on the United States to lift all sanctions imposed under Executive Order 14203;
- Pursue a Protective Presence in Gaza, an aid convoy, sanctions, and the creation of an IIIM accountability mechanism for Palestine;
- Use all means necessary to implement the recommendations in the ICJ Advisory Opinion on *Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem*.