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Israel, the Arabs, & Human Rights (1)

Our government and the people of the United States are fortunately more concerned about human rights than most anybody else. Of late, much of this concern has been focused on the Middle East, where indeed massive human rights violations are everyday occurrences. Remarkably, however, virtually all of that concern seems to be directed towards Israel, and hardly any of it to the Arab states in conflict with Israel. In recent years, for instance, nearly 10% of all resolutions passed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights have targeted Israel; there was not a single resolution regarding any human rights violations by any of the 21 Arab states. It seems quite out of balance. Is Israel's human rights record really that bad? Is that of the Arabs really that good?

What are the facts?

■ The Western world compares Israel to the Western democracies and applies to Israel Western standards of behavior, especially in the area of human rights. Israel is, of course, a democracy, in which the liberties that we take for granted are equally available to all citizens — Jews and Arabs alike. Thus, Israel measures itself and expects others to measure it by such standards. Among the Arab countries, not a single one adheres to even minimal standards of human rights, and the Western world does not expect it from them. While to us in the United States, the behavior and the human rights performance of other countries is mostly a matter of abstraction, it is a daily reality for Israel. It expects to and is expected to adhere to high principles. But the enemies surrounding it, virtually all of them (with the notable exception of Egypt) having Israel's destruction close to the top of their agendas, do not play "by the rules".

■ For instance, Israel is bitterly denounced and condemned for having deported a handful of Palestinians, who were convicted of crimes against public order and virtually all of whom had previously been imprisoned for violent crimes against the state. Compare that with the routine expulsion of people from the Arab nations, of which hardly anybody takes any notice. The Palestinians, who are residents of most countries of the Middle East, are particularly vulnerable to expulsion, for the most insignificant offenses, or simply because their presence is not deemed to be in the best interest of the host country. The small country of Kuwait, for instance, deported 27,000 (!) people in 1986, many Palestinians among them. In February of 1988, Kuwait expelled many more, in order to quell demonstrations supporting Palestinian rioters in the territories administered by Israel.

■ Much is made of the loss of life in Israel and in the administered territories since the beginning of the so-called "intifada", the civil disobedience campaign by the Palestinians. Every human life is precious, of course. Israel is much aware of that. But, in view of how long this has been going on, it is remarkable how few people have died, considering the violence and the hatred on the part of the Arabs. The relatively small number of casualties is testimonial to the restraint of the Israeli military and the Israeli government. Who can doubt that the "intifada" could have been suppressed in a few days, had Israel followed the cruel norms of the area in which it is located. Some Arab states conduct wholesale massacres of political opponents as state

policy. In 1982, for instance, Syrian president Hafez Assad ordered the killing of over 20,000 civilians in the city of Hama. Iraq routinely executes so many people even for bizarre "offenses" (such as insulting the president) that Amnesty International has given up counting them. Iraq has also recently reached a new low in human rights abuse by killing more than 5,000 of its own Kurdish citizens by poison-gas, because they were not thought to be politically reliable. The Democratic Republic of Yemen has periodic mass executions. Even the so-called "moderates" among the Arab states know how to handle civil disobedience "efficiently". Saudi Arabia, where slaves are still being kept and where public amputations for small offenses are the norm, killed over 400 Muslim pilgrims in one bloody day in Mecca in 1987. Egyptian troops killed over 100 people during public riots in 1986. In April of 1989, Algerian government troops opened fire in the city of Souk Ahras against Algerian citizens who were protesting food prices and corruption. 350 people were killed in less than an hour. These are just a few examples of human right violations by Arab governments. The world seems to expect it and scarcely takes any notice of it.

■ Effort is expended, much of it successful, in discrediting the human rights record of Israel in its treatment of the Palestinians in the administered territories. In the climate of violence created by the intifada, during which hundreds of Palestinians have been killed by their fellow Arabs, the occasional act of violence by individual Israelis is perhaps to be expected. Every such violation is contrary to explicit laws and standing military orders and is investigated, prosecuted and punished. Certainly, human rights violations against Palestinians are totally contrary to Israeli laws and Israeli policy. Compare that with the human rights violation and the ruthlessness of the Arab states against the Palestinians living in their midst. With the sole exception of Jordan, not a single Arab state has granted citizenship to its Palestinians. Egypt, which administered the Gaza strip for 19 years, never did grant its inhabitants Egyptian citizenship. In fact, Gazans could not attend Egyptian universities and could travel to Egypt itself only in the most exceptional and pressing circumstances. In 1970, during the so-called "Black September" uprising, Jordan killed 3,400 Palestinians in just ten days. In 1976, the Syrian army killed over 23,000 Palestinians. In the three-year "war of the camps", the death toll of Palestinians reached 3,000. At least that number of Palestinians is reliably reported to languish in Syrian prisons.

Israel is a democratic country, with a freely elected government that is fully responsible to its citizens for its actions. It is the only such country in the entire Middle East. It shares with the Western democracies a fundamental commitment to human rights. If any individual acts of human rights violations occur, they are swiftly prosecuted and punished. Israel is a totally open society, accessible to the media of all countries. Individual human rights violations are promptly put under the microscope of public scrutiny. Virtually all Arab countries are ruled by self-appointed tyrants and are secretive and closed. Their massive and brutal human rights abuses go largely unreported. Journalists and T.V. reporters are allowed in these countries by invitation only. When there, they'd better know what to report and how to report it if they don't wish to be killed, kidnapped or officially executed, as recently happened in Iraq.

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