

This is a discussion paper prepared for Group 11. To the best of our knowledge/abilities, the information presented is accurate. We have discussed its contents with colleagues both in and outside of Group 11, who have pointed out inaccuracies and points in need of clarification. Remaining ambiguities are ours. If anyone finds errors, we would appreciate corrections. We hope Group 11 members will share their reactions and offer improvements. Above all, we hope to persuade our chapter members and the wider AI community to a more fair discussion of issues in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories and the Middle East in general.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL ON ISRAEL and PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

INTRODUCTION

We would like to persuade Amnesty International (AI), an organization with noble aims and powerful effectiveness, to be fairer in its positions and declarations regarding Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. The current turmoil and violence in the area makes this project even more difficult and more urgent. AI is a force for good in a fractured world, but at times it is singularly one sided and counterproductive in how it addresses the issues surrounding this crucial area.

A discussion of Israel, its occupation, its policies and the actions/reactions of AI and the US government are complex, difficult and interrelated topics, and inevitably, a comprehensive discussion will involve several seemingly peripheral issues.

**OUR POSITION REGARDING SOME
RELEVANT ISSUES**

1. We strongly support the right of all Israeli citizens to live in peace among their neighbors in a secular democratic Jewish state and equally, support the right of all Palestinians to live in peace, in a state of their own.

2. We thoroughly oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and the current Israeli government's defacto policy regarding negotiations with the Palestinian authorities. We deplore the current discriminatory views held by much of the Israeli public.

3. The existence and legitimacy of Israel as a nation state is not negotiable, but it is not accepted by its neighbors and by much of Europe and Asia and thus creates a very difficult position for its government to navigate.

4. AI is widely regarded as thoroughly anti-Israel. We believe that AI position papers appear to many to condone and encourage

widely held anti-semitic beliefs.

5. While we support the recent Iran anti-nuclear bomb deal, we recognize its dangers, particularly to Israel, and hope that AI and the US government will react appropriately to the inevitable minor and major violations by the Iranian side.

6. The recent violence by Palestinian youth has been condemned by AI and the press in Israel reported this as a possible sign for future impartiality by AI.

OUR CONCLUSIONS

AI has in the last few years issued many statements that are interpreted by many as biased against Israel. While some of the recent statements have also condemned Hamas actions and appear more even handed, a continuing discussion, by AI members, which focuses on evolving AI to appear and to actually be more even handed can help position the organization

to be more influential and effective in future events.

DISCUSSION

Two good publicly accessible documents (Wikipedia papers) are https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amnesty_International and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amnesty_International_USA

Criticism of the organization is addressed in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Amnesty_International

The difficulties encountered by AI and the

need for internal discussions of difficult issues are well illustrated by a quote from the last article:

“In 2010, [Gita Sahgal](#), an Amnesty senior official, publicly condemned the organization for its collaboration with former Guantanamo detainee [Moazzam Begg](#) of [Cageprisoners](#). In a letter to Amnesty's leadership, she wrote: *"To be appearing on platforms with Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban, whom we treat as a human rights defender, is a gross error of judgment."* She warned that it *"constitutes a threat to human rights."*¹ Begg has toured Europe with Amnesty officials. In 2010, Claudio Cordone asserted that Begg's views on holding talks with the

Taliban or the role of [jihad in self-defence](#) were not antithetical to human rights, even though he may disagree

with them. Cordone's assertion was criticized by Amrita Chichi, Sara Hossain and Sunila Abeysekera who said that "defensive jihad" or "defence of religion" is often used an excuse to violate human rights by Muslim, Christian and Hindu extremists.”

AI claims not to be a political organization. But almost everything in life is political and many, if not all, of AI campaigns and actions have political consequences. AI could play a useful role in conflict resolution, particularly in the Arab/Israeli context. Unfortunately, at present, it does not. AI is widely regarded, by Israelis across the political spectrum, as committed to an anti-Israel outlook, either due to its own naïveté or because of a fundamental and profound anti-Israel bias. Our aim is to alter the culture within AI (especially AI USA) to make it fair to all the combatants in the extended Middle East political/cultural/military conflict.

To optimize the possibility of a peaceful solution, we believe Israel needs to affirm

its identity as a vibrant/secular/democratic/Jewish state in the Middle East. Israel must commit to a just, stable and permanent solution to the Palestinian refugee problem that takes into account the security needs of all the states in the area. Extreme partisans on both sides deny the compatibility of these two essential goals, but there is no irreconcilable conflict between these two aims.

Despite tremendous military strength, Israel is, justifiably, very insecure in its neighborhood. It is the only nation on earth persistently threatened with annihilation, whether from rhetoric on the Arab street (and now, from seemingly random acts of violence), Hamas or Hezbollah incursions, or the fundamentalist states on or near its borders. Iran, for example, strong and potentially more dangerous after the recent negotiations with the west, continues to

affirm a commitment to destroy Israel more than 60 years after the state has been recognized by the international community.

Many pronouncements by western political leaders have, unintentionally perhaps, led the Arab leadership to conclude that a wait and see attitude will bring the world around to their point of view. The Arab nations must be offered respect and understanding, but also consistent reminders that their total rejection of a Jewish state in the Middle East has not solved the problems in the area for the past 60 years and will not do so in the future. To move the needle towards more acceptance of Israel on the Arab street, the political leadership in the west, and strong international organizations such as AI, must encourage all positive events and condemn all atrocities — no matter who the perpetrator. For example, all pronouncements, especially those by

Iranian leaders, calling for the destruction of the state of Israel must be immediately and consistently denounced by the US government and by AI. Calling for the destruction of an existing state is, after all, a profound violation of civil human liberties.

As a first step forward, we propose an amnesty for past infringements and injustices and strongly suggest that from now on, all AI responses to all events in the region be balanced and truly even handed to all sides. (In the sense that AI should respond from now on in even handed ways — no matter what it did in the past.) We must start with the current on the ground situation in Israel/Palestine and work forward. Calls for destruction and annihilation or resettlement, from either side, should be deemed unacceptable and be condemned no matter what the source. Evenhandedness in all AI statements and

declarations, in appearance and in fact, are essential.

Certain red button issues like Dimona should be off the table for AI USA to be able to establish credibility in Israel. Dimona is, of course, shorthand, accepted by Israel, for the atomic doomsday deterrent that it may or may not have. It is widely accepted that this ambiguity has kept catastrophe in more or less check. Even Israel's most severe critics have concluded that all governments of that state have handled the Dimona policy in a very responsible manner. Some issues are better not raised in the interest of stability and peace. This is one of them. AI calls for more humane treatment of Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli former nuclear technician and peace activist who, citing his opposition to weapons of mass destruction, revealed details of Israel's nuclear weapons program

to the British press in 1986, served a jail sentence for this revelation, and has restrictions on his movements, are counter-productive. They do not accomplish anything and make it appear to Israelis that AI does not understand their security needs. For example, AI was not nearly as sympathetic to Jonathan Jay Pollard, a former intelligence analyst for the United States government, who served a long prison sentence for spying for Israel.

On a very practical level, to move the needle politically in Israel, we must combine criticism of its bad policies and harsh occupation while confirming and recognizing its right to live in peace with its neighbors.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

To facilitate discussion one needs to understand how several commonly used

terms appear in this context. *Human shield* is a military and political term describing the deliberate placement of [non-combatants](#) in or around combat targets to deter the enemy from attacking these targets. It may also refer to the use of persons to literally shield [combatants](#) during attacks, by forcing them to march in front of the combatants. A third meaning is when a combatant holds another person in front of him or her to shield him or her from projectiles (usually [bullets](#)), often by holding that person in a [headlock](#) or [nelson hold](#). Using this technique is illegal by nations that are parties to the 1949 [Geneva Conventions](#), the 1977 [Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions](#), and the 1998 [Rome Statute](#).

EXAMPLES OF AI STATEMENTS WITH
SOME COMMENTARY

1. AI statements about the 2014 conflict in Gaza are examples of just condemnations of brutal armed actions, while totally ignoring circumstances that gave rise to the armed response:

An AI (annual) REPORT 2014/15 can be read in its entirety at [https://](https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories/report-israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories/)

www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories/report-israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories/

Portions are reproduced below with some comments

“Israeli forces committed war crimes and human rights violations during a 50-day military offensive in the Gaza Strip that killed over 1,500 civilians, including 539 children, wounded thousands more civilians, and caused massive civilian displacement and destruction of property and vital services. Israel maintained its air, sea and land blockade of Gaza, imposing collective punishment on its approximately 1.8 million inhabitants and stoking the humanitarian crisis. In the West Bank, Israeli forces carried out unlawful killings of Palestinian protesters, including children, and maintained an array of oppressive restrictions on Palestinians’ freedom of movement while continuing to promote illegal settlements and allow Israeli settlers to attack Palestinians and destroy their property with near total impunity. Israeli forces detained thousands of Palestinians, some of whom reported being tortured, and held around 500 administrative

detainees without trial. Within Israel, the authorities continued to demolish homes of Palestinian Bedouin in “unrecognized villages” in the Negev/Naqab region and commit forcible evictions. They also detained and summarily expelled thousands of foreign migrants, including asylum-seekers, and imprisoned Israeli conscientious objectors.”

The serious charges above are without references or documentation and the report makes no attempt to put any actions into context such as possible provocations from either side.

2. Other parts of the same report seem more even handed. For example, the Background section contains,

“Tensions between Israelis and Palestinians mounted rapidly amid the collapse of US-sponsored negotiations in April, a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, and Israel’s continuing illegal settlement expansion in the West Bank and blockade of Gaza. The tensions flared into renewed armed conflict in July following the killing of at least 15 Palestinians by Israeli forces since the beginning of the year, the abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank by Palestinian men affiliated to Hamas, the reprisal killing of a Palestinian youth by Israelis, and rocket-firing from Gaza into Israel.

The Israeli military launched an offensive, Operation Protective Edge, on 8 July against the Gaza Strip while Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups increased rocket firing into southern Israel. After 10 days of air strikes, Israel launched a ground invasion in Gaza, withdrawing shortly before a US and Egypt-brokered ceasefire took effect after 50 days of hostilities.”

3. Internet searches reveal more even-handed reports. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Navi Pillay](#), accused Hamas militants of violating international humanitarian law by "locating rockets within schools and hospitals, or even launching these rockets from densely populated areas." The [European Union](#) condemned Hamas, and in particular, were against "calls on the civilian population of Gaza to provide themselves as human shields." An opinion piece referring to a UN report on the Israel/Gaza war including references to Hamas use of human shields, can be found at <http://nypost.com/2015/05/02/un-report-outlines-how-hamas-used-kids-as-human-shields/>

Related reports can be found at http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=157&doc_id=15070

[France24](#) confirmed the use of [urban warfare](#), filming a rocket launch pad which was placed in a civilian area next to a hotel where international journalists were staying. Peter Stefanovic of Australia's Channel Nine News tweeted that rockets had been fired "over our hotel from a site about two hundred meters away. So a missile launch

site is basically next door.” Janis Mackey Frayer of Canada's CTV reported seeing a Hamas gunman dressed in a woman's headscarf with a "tip of a gun poked out from under cloak.” Harry Fear reporting for Russia Today tweeted that rockets were fired from near his hotel. His tweet was later deleted, and he was expelled from Gaza. Several journalists who alleged Hamas use of human shields and rocket locations close to civilian infrastructure reported being threatened by Hamas. An article on the AI report finding Hamas violations can be found at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/26/amnesty-international-says-hamas-committed-war-crimes-too/>

4. In a September 2014 interview, a Hamas official acknowledged to the [Associated Press](#) that the group fired at Israel from civilian areas. He ascribed the practice to "mistakes," but said the group had little option due to the crowded landscape of the Strip, with its dearth of open zones. He denied accusations that rockets were launched from "from schools or hospitals when in fact they were fired 200 or 300 meters (yards) away." In an 2014 interview, a Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal ...

said to a CNN interviewer that the group did not use its people as human shields.

5. AI released a report on Hamas torture and executions during the 2014 Gaza war: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/05/gaza-palestinians-tortured-summarily-killed-by-hamas-forces-during-2014-conflict/> According to the report, Hamas used Operation Protective Edge (the Israeli name for the Gaza conflict) as a cover to settle scores with rivals. Many of these unlawful killings were publicly billed as attacks against people assisting Israel during the July and August 2014 conflict as part of an operation, codenamed “Strangling Necks,” to target “collaborators.” However, in reality, at least 16 of those executed had been in Hamas custody since before the conflict broke out. Many had been awaiting the outcome of their trials when they were taken from prison and summarily executed. Hamas forces also abducted, tortured or attacked members

and supporters of Fatah, their main rival political organization within Gaza, including former members of the Palestinian Authority security forces. No one has been held accountable for the crimes committed by Hamas forces against Palestinians during the 2014 conflict. All indications are that these crimes were either ordered or condoned by the authorities.

6. A typically one sided AI press release dated October 27, 2015: Israeli forces in Occupied Palestinian Territories must end pattern of unlawful killings. It can be found at

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/israeli-forces-must-end-pattern-of-unlawful-killings-in-west-bank/> and a small portion is reproduced below.

“A clear pattern has emerged of lethal force being used unlawfully by Israeli forces following a wave of recent stabbing attacks by Palestinians against Israeli civilians and military or police forces in Israel and the occupied West Bank,” said Philip Luther, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty

International.

“Unfortunately, Israel’s investigation systems have long served to perpetuate impunity for unlawful killings of Palestinians by Israeli military and police forces. While we urge the Israeli authorities to conduct independent, impartial investigations into all these incidents, wilful killings of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention, over which all states can exercise universal jurisdiction.”

6. Some of the treatment by the NYC Jewish Press is also one sided. A sample reaction can be found at

<http://www.algemeiner.com/2015/11/04/the-true-mission-of-amnesty-international/>

A TO-DO LIST

1. AI’s reports, to be taken as serious documents, must be balanced and unbiased. Where we notice **systemic bias**, as at times regarding the Israel/Palestine situation, corrective steps—perhaps involving **greater oversight of personnel—should be recommended.**

2. Let us start a lively discussion and move the Middle East war/peace needle more towards the peace end. A good starting place is the AI organization chart. The Washington office has Country Specialists; one of the “countries” is Israel-OPT-PA. The solution to the Middle East conflict and policies that contribute to the Israel-Occupied Palestinian Territory-Palestinian Authority solution must involve players from outside these designated areas. Perhaps the Israel-OPT-PA country specialist needs to become the Middle East Specialist with broad, neutral policy guidelines.

3. The Middle East conflict is not simple. Many say, if it were, it would have been solved long ago. We believe that is mostly an excuse for total inaction. At a minimum, action is needed to ensure that negotiations towards a peaceful resolution will be restarted in the near future. AI needs to call

for the unconditional resumption of negotiations.

4. We are fairly certain the interested reader can find many AI pronouncements that call for tougher action against hate speech on the Israeli side. Israeli hate speech should **indeed**, be thoroughly denounced along with a denunciation of hate speech from the other side. That is equally important but not done. For example, we quote a recent item: **Gaza cleric calls on Palestinians to stab Jews: A Gaza-based cleric gave a sermon at a Rafah mosque on Friday October 9 encouraging Palestinians to stab Jews amid a surging wave of terror that has seen near-daily stabbing attacks against Israelis since the beginning of that month. Apparently there were no AI reactions to this incitement to violence.**

5. Events in Israel and the Palestinian

Occupied Territories continue to deteriorate. At the moment the only thing to do is to call for ceasing attacks, tamp down inflammatory language on both sides and urge a prompt return to the negotiating table by Israel and the Palestinians. We ask the members of Group 11 to support us in this call and to endorse a call for fair and evenhanded AI pronouncements on the Arab-Israeli conflict. We hope that, after discussion, appropriate resolutions will be passed by Group 11 in support of these goals.

Eleanor and Irwin Kra
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