



United Nations Human Rights Council Orders an Inquiry into Israeli War Crimes Committed During the Recent Bombing Campaign in Gaza

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has launched a far-reaching investigation into war crimes committed by Israel in its latest bombing campaign of Gaza, which included the glaring targeting of civilian and residential infrastructure. The commission has been charged with investigating “all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability, and protraction of conflict, including systematic discrimination and repression based on national, ethnic, racial, or religious identity.” It is also open-ended, which means the panel is not limited to reaching a conclusion within a certain timeframe. Pakistan proposed the panel to the human rights council on behalf of the Organization of Islamic States, and it passed by a tally of 24-9. Ironically, the regimes in several countries that are known for their disregard of human rights such as Russia, China, and Venezuela voted in favor of the commission, whereas European countries generally voted against it or abstained. This highlights the difficulty that the international community has had in differentiating political concerns from legitimate humanitarian concerns with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel denounced the investigation as one-sided and biased, despite clear evidence as to its abusive behavior and the fact that the commission also has the scope to investigate the actions of Hamas.

The commission’s status as “ongoing” puts it in the same category as investigations into crimes against humanity in Myanmar and Syria, among others. The investigation has the scope to probe all violations that occurred during the most recent violence between Israel and Hamas, and is not solely limited to crimes committed by Israel. Despite this, Israel condemned the United Nations panel for what it called “anti-Israel bias,” and said that its actions were justified under international law. However, impartial observers point to the disproportionate and violative use of force that Israel has engaged in during recent months, both in its Gaza bombing campaign and towards activists and peaceful demonstrators opposing Israeli human rights abuses.

Israel has claimed that its actions in bombing civilian targets in Gaza were justified because Hamas was hiding military installations there, but according to Michelle Bachelet – the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – no evidence has been discovered that independently verifies Israel’s contention. Bachelet went on to say that if no evidence could be found to support Israel’s story, then the indiscriminate and disproportionate bombing campaign could constitute war crimes. She did also condemn Hamas’ actions in firing rockets indiscriminately into Israel, albeit with the caveat that this did not absolve Israel of blame.

The investigation into Israel marks the first time that a fact-finding mission has been authorized by the UNHRC into a member state of the United Nations. Israel’s foreign ministry called the investigation a sham, and said it would not be cooperating. The Israeli ambassador to the UN, Meirav Eilon Shahar, warned the body against making a moral equivalency between Israel and Hamas, despite the fact that Israel’s bombing campaign far exceeded the actions of Hamas during the conflict. The overwhelming majority by which the resolution passed indicates the tide of public sentiment turning away from Israel in favor of Palestinians. Human rights organizations roundly praised the creation of the commission as a strong step in combatting Israel’s ongoing abuse of Palestinians.