Jerusalem.

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American taxpayers are funding "possible war crimes."



(Photo by Eyad Tawil/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

I visited the Al-Aqsa masjid, the third holiest site in Islam, in 2014. I had only ever seen it in contrasted images: iconic photographs of its grandeur or news clips of turmoil and police violence. But when I arrived, I was struck by the overwhelming sense of calm, of peace at the masjid—a stark contrast to the way it's portrayed as the site of constant struggle and violence.

Over the weekend, Israeli police attacked Al-Aqsa, penetrating the inner sanctum of the masjid itself, throwing stun grenades, firing rubber-coated bullets, and beating worshippers. This occurred during the last 10 nights of Ramadan, the holiest nights on the Muslim calendar, when Muslims believe that Qur'an itself was revealed.

Attacking one of Islam's holiest sites on the holiest nights of its holiest month is no coincidence. The attacks were *calculated* to disrespect, dehumanize, and provoke occupied Palestinians.

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Why? Benjamin Netanyahu is struggling to maintain his grip on power, yet unable to form a government after an unprecedented fourth election. He knows that maintaining power may be his only way to avoid accountability for corruption charges. So he's following the well-worn path of rightwing strongmen who cling to power: stoking fear and hatred against people who don't look like him and his supporters. Those are the circumstances in which his government has promoted efforts by settler organizations to illegally displace Palestinian families who've lived in their homes for generations in occupied East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. This is what Netanyahu had to say in response to international backlash to settler expansion in Jerusalem:

We firmly reject pressure not to build in Jerusalem. And sadly, these pressures have been increasing recently. I say to our closest friends: Israel is the capital of Israel. Just as every nation builds its capital and builds in its capital, we also reserve the right to build Jerusalem and build in Jerusalem. This is what we have done, and this is what we will continue to do.

> Except that East Jerusalem is occupied territory per international law. This kind of settler-colonialism is a recognized violation of human rights. This is what UN Human Rights Office Spokesman Rupert Colville said about it:

Given the disturbing scenes in Sheikh Jarrah over the past few days, we wish to emphasize that East Jerusalem remains part of the occupied Palestinian territory, in which International Humanitarian Law applies. The occupying Power must respect and cannot confiscate private property in occupied territory, and must respect, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.

> Colville also noted that expansion of civilian settlers into occupied territories is illegal and "may amount to war crimes."

Predictably and regrettably, the violence has escalated. I condemn any attack on innocent civilians, no matter the provocation or pretext.

That's why I shudder when people equate criticizing Israel's policies with anti-Semitism. That would be as absurd as equating criticism of Egypt or Saudi Arabia's atrocious human rights records (which I do regularly) with hating Egyptians or being Islamophobic. Besides, I love my Jewish sisters and brothers and revere their beautiful faith, history, and struggle too much to allow anyone to equate state-sponsored violence with Judaism or the Jewish people.

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Because ultimately, this isn't about one faith or ethnic group or another. This is about fundamental human dignity and human rights. It's also about standing up against the evil of racism itself—and the way that any and all forms of racism and power come together to rob people of their human rights.

It should force us to ask why American foreign policy so often*ignores* basic human rights—indeed, it should force us to ask why our foreign policy systematically *subsidizes militaries*that rob people of them. I wrote about our country's military aid to human rights abusers in *Healing Politics,*which I'll share here.

Many of the people who come to our shores are fleeing violence, despotism, or war abroad—too much of it subsidized by the American war machine. In 2018, U.S. troops saw combat in fourteen countries, all under the same 2002 war authorization to fight Al Qaeda–linked militants. In 2019 we are still conducting drone strikes over Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen. Under the Obama administration, which oversaw the first major expansion of drone warfare, the administration reported all strikes and casualties under a 2016 executive order that the Trump administration repealed in 2019. That may be because in the first few years of the Trump presidency there have been 2,243 drone strikes—365 more than there were through the entire course of Obama's eight-year term. Since the U.S. first initiated drone warfare, up to 1,725 civilians have been killed, 397 of them children.

> If we are serious about our ideals abroad, then we have to draw down the American war machine rather than continue to expand our footprint of destruction. We must seek nuclear nonproliferation as we also seek to decommission as much of our own nuclear arsenal as possible. And we must stop investing in useless projects like the ill-fated F-35 fighter jet program, into which we are expected to sink $1.55 trillion over the life of the program.
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> We have to learn to empathize with the people whom our foreign policy affects, to consider the consequences of war in destroying the lives and livelihoods of millions of people who ought to have the same dignity that we do. But it's not just war; American foreign policy has toppled democratically elected leaders while sustaining dictators—all in the name of our own national interests. Empathy calls on us to ask what the consequences of these policies look like in the lives of people living under those regimes [...]

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The classic American defense of our embarrassing support for despots and dictators and occupations has always been "stability in the region." Alongside our shameful support of Egypt's military dictatorship, our support for the Saudi monarchy is another example of this. After the discovery of vast oil reserves, Saudi Arabia has been one of our key "allies"—irrespective of their brutal exploitation of their own people, their subsidization and export of a repressive and dogmatic interpretation of Islam, and their material support of terrorism. How do Saudi Arabia's human rights violations, its extrajudicial killings of dissident journalists, and its civil war in Yemen make the region more stable?

Similarly, although unquestioning support for Israel remains a point of bipartisan consensus, we must ask, at long last: Why? We're told that it's because Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. Yet, like Saudi Arabia, Israel's government is under the control of a small cadre of extremists—and the country has perpetrated shocking violations of human rights and international law against the Palestinians, whose land it has occupied for the better part of a century. Are we not allowed to have a debate about a "democracy" that purposely maintains two classes of citizenship based on ethnicity? And perhaps there are so few democracies in the region because our country has so consistently backed dictators in the region.

Ultimately, America simply shouldn't be in the business of subsidizing foreign militaries, be they in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, or anywhere else. We shouldn't be putting bombs stamped "Made in the U.S.A." in another country's hands, certainly not the hands of human rights abusers.

Beyond ending military aid, we must ask, in the long term, if it makes sense to maintain strategic alliances with countries that violate human rights at all. If we are serious about upholding the dignity of all people, we cannot continue to turn a blind eye to these violations, however strong our historical alliance. Too often, our condemnation of these blatant abuses has been slow in coming—if it comes at all, it is tepid, like President Obama's response to the revolutionary uprising in Egypt. And worse, we have not followed our words with actions.

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