

# [Dems Attack Amnesty Report on Israel to Justify US Complicity in Rights Abuses](#)

This is indicative of the Democratic Party's shift to the right on foreign policy in recent decades.

By [Stephen Zunes](#) , [Truthout](#) Published February 10, 2022

The Biden administration and congressional leaders of both parties have launched a full-frontal assault on the integrity of Amnesty International, the world's largest human rights organization. This decidedly mainstream nongovernmental organization (NGO) — which is a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, boasts more than 10 million members worldwide and is cited frequently by U.S. government agencies — was embraced by most leading Democrats until it released its latest report last week regarding systemic violations of international human rights law by Israel, a very close U.S. ally.

The [280-page report](#) systematically examined Israel's fragmentation of the Palestinian population into zones of control, dispossession of land and property, segregation, restrictions on economic and social rights, home demolitions and forced evictions, family separations, and other human rights violations. It made a very strong case that such practices collectively constitute the [legal definition of apartheid](#) — that is, serious human rights violations “perpetrated in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over another, with the intention to maintain that system.”

Despite the compelling nature of Amnesty's investigation, U.S. Ambassador to Israel [Tom Nides](#) immediately called the well-researched report “absurd,” and State Department spokesperson [Ned Price](#) roundly rejected the report's conclusion as well, adding “the Jewish people must not be denied their right to self-determination” — even though there was nothing in the report questioning that. Price [prevaricated](#) when asked by a reporter why the State Department was so quick to denounce Amnesty in this case while being quite willing to cite Amnesty authoritatively when it criticized governments opposed by Washington.

Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) (D-New York) falsely claimed that Amnesty's detailed report on Israeli violations of international human rights law constituted “delegitimizing the existence of the State of Israel” — despite absolutely nothing in the report questioning Israel's legitimacy in any way.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair [Robert Menendez](#) (D-New Jersey), without offering specifics, accused Amnesty of slander and misinformation, baselessly claiming that the organization was “denying Israel's right to exist.” The Senate Democrats' de facto foreign policy spokesman insisted that the Israeli government actually “values human rights,” despite findings to the contrary in countless well-documented reports from Amnesty and other human rights groups.

Rep. [Gregory Meeks](#) (D-New York), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, claimed that implementing Amnesty International's recommendations to challenge Israel's apartheid policies in the West Bank “would threaten Israel's existence.”

Democratic House Majority Leader [Steny Hoyer](#) (D-Maryland) made clear that the Democratic Caucus remained solidly in support of the Israeli government against human rights groups, insisting that Amnesty was “fuel[ing] hatred against Jews” and pledging that, “Our Democratic House Majority will continue to stand with Israel and Jewish communities in efforts to end the spread of misinformation and the vilification of Israel and Jews.”

Other congressional Democrats jumped on the attack. [A joint statement](#) by Representatives Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Florida), Brad Schneider (D-Illinois), Lois Frankel (D-Florida), Elaine Luria (D-Virginia), Kathy Manning (D-North Carolina), Josh Gottheimer (D-New Jersey), Dean Phillips (D-Minnesota), Brad Sherman (D-California) and Jake Auchincloss (D-Massachusetts) explicitly denied well-documented Israeli human rights abuses and insisted that Israel was actually a “vibrant democracy where all citizens, regardless of religion or race have rights.” These prominent Democratic lawmakers insisted that “the biased report is steeped in antisemitism,” and claimed that Amnesty’s willingness to criticize well-documented violations of international human rights law was part of “Amnesty’s broad, decades-long campaign to criminalize and delegitimize the world’s only Jewish state.”

In addition, [Sen. Gary Peters](#) (D-Michigan) called the report “outrageous and anti-Semitic.” [Rep. Ritchie Torres](#) (D-New York) referred to the report as a “hysterical demonization of Israel” that would “incite hatred” and “violent antisemitism.” Similarly, [Rep. Dina Titus](#) of Nevada accused Amnesty of “fanning the flames of Antisemitism.” [Rep. Tom Suozzi](#) (D-New York) accused them of “unjust and libelous attacks.” [Rep. Shontel Brown](#) (D-Ohio) claimed that the report intended to “delegitimize Israel, a robust democracy, and will only serve to fuel rising antisemitism.” [Rep. Ted Deutch](#) (D-Florida) claimed the report was designed “to delegitimize” Israel. Rep. Kathleen Rice of New York claimed it would “only serve to incite antisemitism against Jews worldwide.” [Rep. Henry Cuellar](#) of Texas called the investigation “lies” that would “incite antisemitic behavior against the Jewish people” and “incite violence.”

A review of these statements reveals that the objections were based in part on the accusation that Amnesty had labeled Israel as an “apartheid state” — a phrase that the 280-page report never explicitly used, even as it documented the ways in which Israeli policies toward Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and elsewhere do indeed constitute a form of apartheid.

Indeed, in recent years, as the discrimination against Palestinians in areas controlled by Israeli state has become increasingly severe and institutionalized under a series of U.S.-backed right-wing governments, multiple other human rights groups, including [Human Rights Watch](#) and the Israeli group [B’Tselem](#), have also started using the term apartheid in regard to Israeli policies, as have world leaders including former [UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon](#), French Foreign Minister [Jean-Yves Le Drian](#) and former [U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis](#), among others.

And, despite claims by a number of these Democratic critics that there is no comparison with South African apartheid, Black South African leaders, including the late [Archbishop Desmond Tutu](#) and [President Cyril Ramaphosa](#), have also acknowledged the accuracy of the apartheid label to describe Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.

A second charge by Biden officials and congressional leaders was that Amnesty International was unfairly singling out Israel for its criticism. In reality, over the past dozen years, Amnesty International has published over 2,000 reports, and only 35 have been about Israel.

Nothing in the report was antisemitic. Indeed, over [a dozen prominent Israeli NGOs](#) have penned a letter defending Amnesty from these spurious charges, noting how “the struggle against antisemitism in the world is being weakened by the unbearable, inaccurate and instrumentalized use to which the

antisemitism accusation is lodged for political ends, in order to avoid debate about Israel's oppressive policies towards the Palestinians.”

Given these brazen misrepresentations, it is doubtful that the Congress members or Biden administration officials who are criticizing the Amnesty report have actually read it fully. What mattered was that it challenged a basic premise of U.S. Middle East policy: that Israel is — as described in the [2016 Democratic platform](#) — a beacon of “democracy, equality, tolerance, and pluralism.” This assertion has for decades been used to justify tens of billions of taxpayer dollars to arm that country's right-wing governments, block the United Nations Security Council from taking action to resolve the conflict, defend Israeli war crimes, and advance the notion that it is the Palestinians under occupation — not the Israeli occupiers — who are responsible for the failure to reach a negotiated peace settlement.

What may have also provoked such a fiery reaction is the section of the report which appears to be referring to the United States. [It reads](#), “Apartheid has no place in our world, and states which choose to make allowances for Israel will find themselves on the wrong side of history. Governments who continue to supply Israel with arms and shield it from accountability at the UN are supporting a system of apartheid, undermining the international legal order, and exacerbating the suffering of the Palestinian people.”

It is this recognition that the United States has a moral and legal responsibility to end its support for violations of international human rights law committed by strategic allies that has led so many leading Democrats to side with the Republican right in its attacks on Amnesty International.

Amnesty has been the subject of vitriol from the right wing for decades, going back to its criticisms of U.S. allies like the Shah of Iran and the Thiệu regime in South Vietnam in the 1970s. This intensified in subsequent decades when the organization reported human rights abuses by U.S.-backed Latin American dictatorships and paramilitaries, exposed the massacres by U.S.-backed Indonesian forces in East Timor, criticized torture by U.S. interrogators in Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere, and documented the large civilian death toll in airstrikes by U.S.-armed Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip and U.S.-armed Saudi forces in Yemen. While Amnesty was at least as critical of repression by Communist regimes and other autocracies outside the U.S. orbit, the organization's willingness to challenge the official U.S. line regarding friendly dictators was deemed unacceptable.

This time, however, as an indication of the rightward drift of the Democratic Party, the Biden administration and congressional Democratic leaders have agreed with the Republicans that research documenting violations of international human rights law by U.S. allies can no longer be tolerated. They have decided to take the political risks of attacking the world's leading human rights organization and lie about the contents of its reports to justify U.S. complicity in human rights abuses.

Why would so many prominent Democrats risk alienating so many people in their base — including millions of liberals who have long supported Amnesty and other human rights groups — by making demonstrably false charges against this beloved and well-respected NGO? Perhaps they assume that relatively few people will actually read the report and that enough of the public will believe their false claims about it to undermine Amnesty's reputation for fairness.

Amnesty's reputation for critiquing human rights abuses across the board has been one of its greatest strengths. The organization has been critical of human rights abuses regardless of the violator's ideology, geopolitical alignment, ethnicity, religion or anything else. Indeed, Amnesty's most vehement critics have tended to be from anti-imperialist activists who allege that Amnesty reports about human rights abuses in China, Russia, Belarus, Iran, Syria, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela have been fabricated in order to advance Western interests.

Yet Amnesty has been a thorn in the side of successive administrations regarding arms transfers to dictatorial regimes and other human rights abusers. The organization's reports have fueled movements to end U.S. culpability in war crimes, which threaten the profits of politically influential arms exporters. Perhaps the Biden administration and its supporters are making these false accusations that Amnesty International actually seeks to "delegitimize" or "unfairly single out" Israel in the hopes that it will damage Amnesty's reputation enough that reports about violations of international human rights law by other U.S. allies will not be taken seriously either. If the Biden administration and Democratic congressional leaders can get away with attacking Amnesty International for its criticisms of Israel's violations of international law, they could also start attacking Amnesty for its criticisms of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and other U.S. allies.

Given the preeminence of Amnesty International in the global human rights movement, this is nothing less than a frontal attack on the human rights community as a whole. Making statements that are so demonstrably untrue is a desperate attempt by Democratic Party leadership to destroy the reputation of the thousands of activists, researchers, informants, and others who have in many cases risked their lives to document human rights violations around the world. In order to discredit Amnesty and related global campaigns for human rights, these Democrats are allying with defenders of Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other autocracies who share their fear of empirical studies that expose human rights abuses — and, unable to find anything of substance to challenge, they are resorting to misrepresenting and attacking the researchers.

This is indicative of the Democratic Party's shift to the right on foreign policy in recent decades. Even when Democratic leaders initially rejected calls for sanctions on white minority-ruled South Africa, they opposed military aid to the regime and were outspoken in their opposition to apartheid. By contrast, today, they [support unconditional military aid to Israel](#), deny that the system imposed by that right-wing government on the occupied West Bank is a form of apartheid and attack reputable human rights groups that present evidence otherwise. The Democrats figure that with so many people scared of a Republican takeover of the House and Senate in November, human rights supporters will be reluctant to challenge their war on Amnesty and other groups.

This may end up hurting the Democratic Party, however. With Biden administration officials, both the House and Senate majority leaders, heads of both the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees, and scores of other congressional Democrats joining *Fox News* and the Republicans in attacking, misrepresenting and outright lying in an effort to discredit and marginalize one of the world's foremost human rights organizations, people may start wondering whether they can support both human rights and the Democratic Party.

*Note: This article has been updated to use the term "international human rights law" in place of "international humanitarian law."*

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