

Kashmiri Oppression and Suffering. Self-Determination and the Derogation of Fundamental Civil Rights

My presentation on May 9, 2020, at the 'Justice in Ramadan' conference

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There are certain basic freedoms to which all people are entitled. Foundational to all of them is self-determination. Once that principle is enshrined in any nation, such freedoms as speech, press, movement, etc. follow. People who live under any system in which the concept of self-determination is at least minimally respected enjoy these benefits to a greater or lesser degree.

I first became interested in Kashmir because of my work on freedom for the Palestinians. The oppression of both nations is strikingly similar. Both peoples suffer due to United Nations decisions dating back over seventy years, and both have suffered for that length of time. Both are victimized brutally by powerful nations, Palestinians by Israel and Kashmiris by India. The Kashmiri suffering, like the suffering and oppression of the Palestinians, has mainly been ignored by the international community. India's own actions in August of last year caused that to change, although not to the degree necessary, by suspending Kashmir's constitutional autonomy, closing Kashmir's borders and sealing that nation off even from social media contacts.

Palestinians and Kashmiris, under the occupying governments, are considered second-class citizens at best, and less than human at worst. Israel has declared itself the nation-state of the Jewish people and only the Jewish people, thus completely discounting the 20% of Israeli residents who are Arab, most of whom are Muslim. India's revocation of Article 370 of its constitution opened the doors to additional repression of the Kashmiri people.

Opportunities that we all take for granted – the ability to find and hold gainful employment, keep our families safe, and live relatively free from government-sponsored terrorism – are completely lacking for Kashmiris and Palestinians.

There can be no doubt about India's intentions in Kashmir: the Indian government simply seeks to render it non-existent. In mid-November of last year, three months after Article 370 was revoked, Sandeep Chakravorty, [India's](#) consul general in New York, made this clear. In the quotation I'm going to read, the refugees he refers to were Kashmiri Hindus who fled in 1989 after a rebellion: "I believe the security situation will improve, it will allow the refugees to go back, and in your lifetime, you will be able to go back ... and you will be able to find security, because we already have a model in the world." He further said, "I don't know why we don't follow it. It has happened in the [Middle East](#). If the Israeli people can do it, we can also do it." He then said that the Indian government is determined to do so. He was

referring, of course, to colonization.

One might reasonably wonder why the global community doesn't act. It seems that many nations, often at the behest of the United States, are forever rushing into various countries for 'humanitarian assistance'. Why not Kashmir? Why not Palestine?

As with most of its foreign policy, the U.S. is more concerned with profits than with people. The U.S. is now India's largest trading partner, and while it could use this as leverage to obtain significant concessions from India, including, perhaps, even a complete end to the occupation of Kashmir, it is simply easier to maintain the status quo, and count profits rather than Kashmiri victims. This may appear to be a harsh view, but again, the parallels between the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Indian treatment of Kashmir are clear. The U.S. gives \$4 billion annually to Israel in foreign aid; it would be interesting to see how quickly Israeli policies would change if that funding were to be withheld. Similarly, how long would India continue its colonization of Kashmir, if U.S. trade dollars were not flowing so freely?

In February of this year, U.S. President Donald Trump met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and received a very warm reception, mainly because he didn't bother to bring up the subject of Kashmir. There is much that the U.S. president could have done, as I mentioned earlier, but Trump has shown an affinity for what he calls 'strong' leaders, expressing admiration for Russia's Vladimir Putin, Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, each of whom runs a nation with dismal human rights records. And since Modi is cut from the same mold, as demonstrated by his actions toward Kashmir, he has no reason to fear censure from the U.S. president.

Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001, the U.S. launched the so-called 'war on terror', mainly by unleashing horrific terror against other nations. It referred to Iraqi freedom fighters as 'insurgents', and India is now taking a page out of the U.S. terrorism handbook. Resistance against the occupation of Kashmir is 'terrorism', we are told, and the Indian government has no choice but to repress it. We should remember that resistance to occupation is a right under international law. Here we see another parallel with Palestine. Any acts of resistance to that occupation are considered by Israel to be acts of terrorism, leaving that apartheid nation with 'no choice' but to bomb Palestine and arrest and kill its citizens, all in the name of 'national security'.

In 2012, then U.S. Secretary of State (and later Democratic presidential candidate) Hillary Clinton said this "We reject any equivalence between premeditated murders by a government's military machine and the actions of civilians under siege driven to self-defence". Is it not unrealistic to consider a brutally occupied nation to be 'under siege'? Would not such a people, as Clinton expressed, be 'driven to self-defence'? One might think so.

The reason we have gathered today is because of our shared concern about the people of Kashmir, their brutal repression and the unspeakable suffering they are experiencing. But our goal is not simply to learn, but to be part of the solution. We know about the suffering, and because of that, we are obligated to help resolve it. What can we do? I have a few suggestions:

1. Don't allow the Kashmiri oppression and suffering to be ignored. Use whatever platform you have to publicize it. Repost articles you see on your social media

accounts, including LinkedIn. For a long time that was almost exclusively used for employment networking, but every avenue available must be used to inform the world about Kashmir.

2. Contact your elected officials. I hesitate to refer to them as 'representatives', because so few of them truly represent me. Meet with them when you can, politely and cordially, but clearly let them know your stand on the issue. For those of us in Canada, we must let our elected officials know our expectation that Canada will stand for human rights around the world. They can do this by working with member states of the United Nations Security Council to keep Kashmir on its agenda. Remind those officials that Canada seeks a temporary seat on the Security Council, and has vowed to "stand up for things that matter". Let them know that Kashmir matters.

When you cannot meet with them, write to them. All officials have emails. In most cases, you will receive a form letter in response. Those that I have receive generally thank me for my email, and say that the official is 'carefully monitoring the situation', or some such meaningless tripe. Don't be discouraged! It only takes a minute to send an email, so keep on sending them. Eventually, the people you send them to will begin to understand the importance of this issue to you, and to their re-election chances. Email addresses of all officials are available online.

3. Keep informed. Through forums like this one, or contact with people in Kashmir, when that is available, or through any means possible, keep updated on the situation in the country. Know the stories of deprivation, cruelty and suffering. This will make your publicizing of the issue, and your contacts with elected officials, more effective.
4. Finally, do not despair. There is a quotation attributed to the late anthropologist Margaret Mead that you have probably heard, and that I like very much: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, organized citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." We may, at present, be a small group, but we are growing, and we are committed and increasingly well-organized. We don't need to change the entire world right now: just India's oppression of Kashmir. It's a tall order, but we must be up to the challenge; too many suffering people are relying on us for us not to do everything in our power to assist them.

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