As a UN envoy, I saw my colleagues' anti-Israel obsession first-hand

The ex-special rapporteur on torture says that by failing to fully acknowledge the horrors of October 7, the body has abandoned neutrality

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Dr Alice Jill Edwards was appointed UN special rapporteur on torture in July 2022 Credit: Siggi Bucher

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Bullet holes splattered in every wall bore grim testimony to the onslaught. But what hit me hardest were the bullets that had smashed everyday appliances, such as the microwave oven or the fridge. I had a knot in my stomach as the desperate mothers of the two young women taken hostage led me through the shattered glass and rubble of their daughters' modest, small single-floor houses.

I tried to remind myself that I needed to avoid feeling too emotional. After all, I was a neutral observer – the role each United Nations special rapporteur is supposed to fulfil. Yet the suffering of these mothers made me realise that we must consider hostage-taking as a form of torture. Not only were the victims themselves likely to be sexually abused, starved, shackled or confined in dark tunnels, but I could now see that – agonisingly waiting to know the fate of their girls, imagining the worst – the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers of the hostages were also victims of psychological torture.

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The whole of Kfar Aza, a kibbutz around two miles from the Gaza strip, was a horrific crime scene. It had been 14 months since 251 men, women and children had been taken hostage from southern Israel. In this kibbutz, more than a quarter of the inhabitants were either dead or had been taken captive.

It had been brave of the mothers, Mandy Damari and Simona Steinbrecher, to agree to let me see the ruined homes of their daughters Emily and Doron. After all, the UN, which I would be seen as representing, had done so little to help them. It had even worsened their anguish by refusing for so long to acknowledge that the attackers on October 7 2023 had conducted not just murders but also sexual molestations, rapes and other horrific violence.



Edwards visits the Kfar Aza kibbutz, a target of the October 7 2023 attack by Hamas Credit: Reuters/Stoyan Nenov

I felt ashamed. I am still outraged that Francesca Albanese, the UN's special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, and Reem Alsalem, the UN special rapporteur for violence against women, never formally documented these horrors, despite the growing body of evidence which to most of us is indisputable, but which they dispute (Alsalem has pointed to Israel's refusal to grant her entry and access as the reason she cannot investigate further). Instead, both have continued to issue a stream of what I regard as one-sided and vitriolic reports, and hard-to-justify excuses for their lack of attention. That, families and returned hostages have told me, only added to their anguish.

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My colleagues said nothing, even when the Hamas captors put videos online with Hebrew subtitles showing captives in horrifying scenes. In one, an emaciated hostage was digging what he said in Hebrew was his own grave. It was a form of abusing hostages' families so that they would put pressure on the Israeli authorities to give in to Hamas demands. That too is a form of torture.

Even after the hostages were brought back, Albanese and Alsalem have failed to give any weight to their first-hand accounts of the tortures and privations they had gone through.

My role as special rapporteur on torture – which I held until earlier this year – was to see both sides and support victims, whoever they are. For many years in my previous work as chief legal counsel for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, I had been, seemingly, on the other side – protecting Palestinians from discrimination, and hearing accounts of Israeli violations. I had drafted the UN's position on Palestinian refugees, and pursued cases in the highest European court to safeguard it. This year, I issued a second detailed report on abuse of prisoners held inside Israeli jails.

But I feel strongly that during the Gaza-Israel war, the UN has been doing itself no favours by obsessively focusing on only one set of abuses – especially as neutrality, independence and impartiality are the cornerstones of a trustworthy UN.

When I issued a report on what had happened on the kibbutzes on October 7, and the slaughter of more than 370 young people enjoying a music festival, only one other special rapporteur had the courage to sign it. The others declined to sign, while several tried to get content in my report suppressed.



Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, has developed something of a reputation as an anti-Israel provocateur Credit: Getty Images/Kristian Buus

I'm glad to say I did achieve one significant result that stemmed in large part from my kibbutz visit: I managed to get the UN General Assembly to pass a resolution requiring states to designate hostage-taking as a form of torture.

But, as with many other aspects of the role I've just held for four years, it wasn't easy. In an increasingly polarised world, rapporteurs have a tough job to do. Many are doing it tremendously well, and yet they are subject to criticism across the political spectrum, both online and in public meetings. I have had my share of attacks from governments and have a list of countries where, simply for performing that role, I would no longer venture for fear of arrest.

The role of a UN special rapporteur – which is unpaid – also has so much scope for abuse. Firstly, the money allocated for each rapporteur to

investigate is minimal and – as more and more of these roles are created – there is even less money available per rapporteur. That presents a serious problem, as it means relying on second-hand accounts from non-governmental organisations. In my portfolio, it has also meant that we simply cannot deal with all the allegations sent to us by email, or in handwritten letters. There are more than 2,000 allegations that are simply sitting in our file.

I was allocated a budget for one assistant and enough money for only one foreign fact-finding mission per year. I had to personally fund my own trip to Israel and Palestine.

Also rife for abuse is that an individual country or group of countries can provide funds for specific rapporteurs, which could be benign gifts or nefarious attempts to peddle influence. At a minimum, it has caught some rapporteurs in the crosshairs of accusations that they are being politically influenced.

I've heard from victims' lawyers too who are worried about sharing confidential information with rapporteurs who are receiving funds from the very governments that are the alleged perpetrators of abuses. In my view, donations should go to a central budget for all the rapporteurs and be distributed equally.

However, despite these problems, and many others, there appears little appetite to fix the system – not even by the UN secretary-general, Antonio Guterres, (who, incidentally, was my former boss as UN High Commissioner for Refugees). He recently said in an interview that rapporteurs were independent and therefore "many are not under control".



Antonio Guterres, the UN's secretary-general Credit: Pacific Press/Getty Images/Lev Radin

Independence is both the strength and the vulnerability of these positions, but when misused to dogmatically pursue political agendas, the UN as a whole is weakened.

Now, the contest for the next UN secretary-general is heating up and presents an opportunity to tackle some of these problems. With more wars today than at any time since the organisation's founding in 1945, the next secretary-general needs to take a more decisive role and exercise a greater amount of the power that is actually at his or her disposal. Guterres has in my view failed to carry out the original mandate of the UN – to step in efficiently and fairly as a mediator to dampen down international conflicts.

While the blame for today's wars can't be laid at his feet, it's disappointing that he has adopted a rather fatalistic posture – as though he has no sway other than to convene meetings.

The process to succeed Guterres is also not without its flaws. To be selected as the next secretary-general, the candidates need to walk a careful line that avoids upsetting the US, China or Russia. Yet it is Russia that provoked the current low point in the 80-year history of the UN when it invaded Ukraine against the principles of the UN Charter (it cannot be lost on anyone that there's a lesson from history here: one of the fatal blows

to the League of Nations was the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland, which saw the USSR expelled).

I have been shocked by the extent and the nature of the torture carried out by Russian security forces against captured Ukrainian soldiers, and against many civilians in the occupied eastern Ukraine who the Russians suspect could be spies or opponents. Some, released in occasional prisoner swaps, tell me how their torture system works: first an overseer, then an interrogator, then a separate torturer – an orchestrated system of abuse intended to obtain information or to instil fear in occupied areas.

I often wonder what my grandfather, who fought in the Second World War but wouldn't ever talk about the trauma of the war, would say if he were still alive today about the UN and whether it should survive. He would be right to be very worried.



Edwards says outside donations can politically influence rapporteurs Credit: Siggi Bucher

But, despite all the frustrations, and occasional efforts to bully me into silence, my role in combating torture has sometimes been deeply gratifying. I have gathered torture victims from many conflicts or security actions in conferences and created a survivors' charter, written in large part by the victims themselves. For the first time, there is momentum

behind the idea that the norms of international law should be implemented by and with those most affected by them.

Perhaps my most moving moment was when Shireen Khudeeda, a young Yazidi survivor of Isis captivity, sexual enslavement and abuse in Iraq and Syria, told me that she had been granted a scholarship to study and had passed her exams. She had survived, thrived and is now working constructively against torture in her own country.

A small but significant victory for humanity in a world beset by the abuse of power – even by those, like the UN, who are supposed to act to prevent it.

Alice Jill Edwards was United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, between August 2022 and July 2026

As told to Paul Martin, founder of Conflict and Peace Reporting

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