

Are “Human Rights Equally Disregarded in Israel and Egypt”?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Cairo correspondent for the German publicly-funded radio station, Deutschlandfunk, one Cornelia Wegerhoff, in her broadcast on August 8 equated the human rights records of Israel and Egypt. This is what she said, clearly and unambiguously: “Human rights are equally disregarded in Israel and Egypt.” It’s important to note that only after the largest German daily, *Bild*, criticized Wegerhoff’s report, that a spokesman for the public radio station “regretted” the impression that Israel’s human rights record is comparable to

Egypt's. "This was neither intended by the editors nor by the correspondent herself. We regret this error and have corrected our website accordingly and deleted the audio," said the spokesman for the radio station.

They may have "deleted the audio," but hundreds of thousands of people had already heard her original statement; the damage was done. When Deutschlandfunk "corrected" the website, did they merely delete her offending remarks, or did they do what should be done in such cases by the offending journalist? To wit: the original statement ought to have remained, and Wegerhoff herself, not a station "spokesman," should both have apologized for the original remark and have provided the evidence of what was so wrong about her original equating of the human rights records of Egypt and Israel. Instead, the radio station's spokesman said the equivalence she made "was not intended" by her. Nonsense. There is no ambiguity, no shade of grey, in the statement that "human rights are equally disregarded in Israel and Egypt."

Let's see how wrong she was. In Egypt, when there are demonstrations against the government, people are clubbed, sometimes killed (as in Tahrir Square in 2011), or arrested and, after a speedy trial, sentenced to prison for the crime of having expressed their opposition to the government. Tens of thousands of such critics have been imprisoned in Egypt.

In Egypt, the government is a military dictatorship; international observers unanimously claim that the election held in March 2018 was neither fair nor free. Opposition figures, including some candidates, were picked up and detained on trumped-up "terrorism" charges. Five hundred people whose families have not heard from them are still held in detention. Journalists and members of NGOs have been arrested and jailed or expelled. Their trials are perfunctory; their punishments swift.

In Israel, no journalist is arrested for being against the

government. If a journalist makes fun of, or bitterly criticizes Netanyahu or any other government minister, instead of a prison sentence, he's more likely to be hired as a columnist for Haaretz. No television journalist has lost his job, no bloggers' websites have been taken down. The freedom of speech in Israel is as carefully preserved as it is in the great democracies of the West. Those Arab members of the Knesset who practically preach sedition from the Knesset floor, in complete freedom, are evidence of Israel's deep commitment to freedom of speech.

While in Egypt, high officials often – though not always, as in the case of Mubarak and his two sons) – escape punishment for non-political crimes, the situation in Israel is very different. The prison terms handed out to former Israeli Presidents Moshe Katsav (who served five years for sexual assaults) and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (who served 11 months in prison for bribery and corruption) show that in Israel, no one is above the law. Equality before the law is an important human right.

How are Arab citizens treated in Israel? They have the same political rights as do Jews, both as voters and as candidates. Arabs serve in the Knesset, sit on the Supreme Court, occupy high diplomatic posts. There are Arabs who serve, though they are not required to, in the Israeli military, both as officers and men. Arabic is an official language.

The Arabs in Israel suffer none of the disabilities, and share none of the fears, of the Copts in Egypt. The Copts exist not as by right in Egypt, but on Muslim sufferance. Longstanding Coptic complaints include the underrepresentation of Christians in the police, judiciary, armed forces, civil service, government, and education system. There is also a virtual ban on access to state-controlled radio and television.

There have been many attacks on Coptic churches,

neighborhoods, priests, and individual believers, by Muslim mobs, intent on terrorizing Christians and putting them in their place. The government has not been able to protect the Copts adequately from such assaults. Their religious rights are not the same as those of the Muslims. They need to obtain permission to build new, or repair old, churches. Unlike Muslims, they are not allowed to proselytize. The Copts exist in a permanent state of fear, never knowing when Muslims will suddenly turn on them, nor whether the state will adequately protect them.

Egypt has used its extensive anti-terrorism laws to conduct sweeps not just of terrorists, but of all those who are deemed to pose a political threat to the regime. This means political opponents can find themselves unable to have their speeches broadcast; their rallies may be cancelled; they themselves may be detained. The staffs of NGOs, whether Egyptian or foreign, find they are harassed, their offices monitored, sometimes the foreigners among them expelled from Egypt if they are deemed too inquisitive and too hostile. Television and press journalists in Egypt can lose their jobs, if what they broadcast or publish is not to the regime's liking. The government constantly scrutinizes the Internet; the websites of bloggers who are deemed critical of the government are shut down. They may find themselves permanently barred from posting anywhere on social media. At present, 32 Egyptian journalists are in prison. Many of the accused in the Egyptian system of criminal justice lack access to lawyers. The health of many of those we might describe as "political prisoners," who are physically softer than real criminals, often deteriorates in Egyptian prisons.

The German reporter, Cornelia Wegerhoff, also left readers with the impression that the treatment of homosexuals was the same in both Egypt and Israel. But as the newspaper Bild pointed out, there was a massive LGBTQ parade – some 250,000 people – in Tel Aviv, while there has been no parade or any

other kind of demonstration on behalf of LGBTQ in Egypt. While homosexuality is not illegal in Egypt, homosexuals are frequently the subject of abuse from ordinary Muslims. Police sweeps routinely round up homosexuals, who are then arrested and charged with “debauchery.” Egyptian homosexuals testify as to the fear they feel; few of them dare to come out of the closet. It’s just too dangerous.

Wegerhoff also seemed to think that the “human rights” of women are the same in Egypt and Israel. But in Egypt, the Muslim male rules the family; it is he who dictates how “his” women can dress, whether they are allowed to go out of the house, whether they can attend university, whether they can eat, study, work beside men who are not their relatives. Women’s rights activists, who work, for example, to increase the number of women in the government and higher education, are persecuted in Egypt. Women are treated better in Egypt than in Saudi Arabia and Iran, but that is faint praise. No one should confuse how women are treated in Egypt with the complete gender equality that women in Israel enjoy.

On the Index of Freedom put out by Freedom House, Egypt is rated as “Not Free.” Israel is rated as “Free.” It’s hard to imagine how someone could conclude that “human rights are equally disregarded” in the two countries.

German journalist Stefan Frank may have found the explanation. Frank, who has written extensively about German bias against Israel in the media and antisemitism in the press, wrote on Twitter: “Cornelia Wegerhoff, Cairo correspondent of @dlfkultur, has lost her mind.”

First published in