

Doesn't Trump know that Israel and Saudi Arabia keep bodies of those they kill?

written by Stanley Heller | March 14, 2025



One of the cemeteries where Israel buries Palestinians in numbered graves.

In his latest ultimatum to Hamas President Trump wrote, “Only sick and twisted people keep bodies, and you are sick and twisted!” Doesn’t he know that that his bosom allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, keep bodies as bargaining chips and for other reasons? Isn’t this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?

Israel

A group I head, the Middle East Crisis Committee (MECC), got involved in this issue in 2021. It came to our attention that on July 27 of that year an Israeli soldier shot to death a Palestinian plumber named Shadi Shurafi while he was fixing a pipe to his village of Beita. The army made up some story that Shurafi was advancing on a military post across the road armed with a wrench. A week later his body was still in Israeli custody and there were protests.

MECC started a petition calling for the Israelis to return the body to his family. We noted, “Since 2020 Israel has kept the bodies of any Palestinian it claims to have been involved in an attack against an Israeli. Military authorities don’t even have to prove that there was an attack. This practice is so widespread that sometime friends rush to bury a body before the Israeli military can grab it.” One article said the body was returned a week later, but another in November said the body still was in Israeli custody.

Actually, the practice of keeping bodies started well before 2020. The Palestinian National Campaign to Retrieve Martyrs’ Bodies stated that Israel has kept the bodies of 665 people in numbered grave yards, that is grave yards where there are no markers of any kind except for a metal plate with a number on it (reported by the Palestinian Information Center on 2-25-25). According to the Campaign, “some of those bodies have been detained by Israel since the 1960s and 1970s.” The article said these were bodies retained after they were killed in the West Bank. It had no information about those bodies retained in Gaza since October 2023. Two weeks later the Information Center wrote that the Palestinian Center for the Missing and the Forcibly Disappeared reported that 1,500 Palestinian bodies were being held.

National Public Radio (NPR) in 2016 said “human rights groups say Israel still holds nearly 300 bodies gathered over decades.” Not all are Palestinians. Some are Lebanese and some Jordanian. The report says one of these cemeteries is in a “military zone near the Jordanian border, marks graves with no names, just numbers, a few concrete blocks or sticks in the ground.” A picture of the cemetery illustrated the article.

Israeli courts find this practice legal. Back in 1948 the new Israeli state copied a British Mandate regulation which stated “it shall be lawful for a Military Commander to order that the dead body of any person shall be buried in such place as the Military Commander may direct.” The practice was challenged several times in court, but each time the Israeli court found the practice legal. Usually the retention of bodies is justified as being need for negotiations with forces holding Israeli soldiers or Israeli corpses, but that’s not always the reason. Another reason is to keep control of funeral ceremonies. In 2017 the Israeli Knesset passed a legislative amendment to its counter-terrorism law that explicitly authorized the police to place conditions on Palestinian funerals and to withhold Palestinian corpses until they could exact security assurances. In other words, only small groups of people and low-key mourning are allowed for Palestinians. Just this January (2025) the Israeli High Court ruled that authorities can keep bodies of “terrorists” to use as bargaining chips...even if they are Israeli citizens.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia too retains bodies. Take the case of Jamal Khashoggi, the *Washington Post* journalist, who was murdered by Saudi government agents in 2018 in a Saudi embassy in Turkey. Hideously, his body was cut up and taken somewhere. Though a Saudi court convicted the men most immediately guilty for the murders, his remains were neither returned to his family nor the location of his remains ever reported.

Less heard of in the West, but far more well known in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries, was the execution and imprisonment of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a leader of Shia in the kingdom and an advocate of a democratic society. He was convicted of “seeking ‘foreign meddling’ and ‘disobeying’ its ruler and other fanciful crimes. He was beheaded in 2016 and his body was kept by the monarchy.

It is much larger than these two cases. Saudi dissident Ali Al Ahmed told me,

“Over the years, thousands have been executed for various reasons including criminal offenses. All those executed are never returned to their families and secretly buried. There is nothing in written Saudi law or in the death sentences that requires such action. In another word, stealing bodies is not legal under Saudi laws. The bodies belong to the family and they cannot be changed or taken.”

In a 2024 case the Saudis refused to repatriate the body of a Filipino in Saudi Arabia whom they had executed. The Filipino news source GMA News wrote, the “Philippine Embassy in Riyadh said that this was the standard for executed individuals in the country.”

Presumably the bodies are kept to deter future crime or for reasons of vengeance.

International law requires parties at war to be “honourably buried, if possible according to the rites of the [victim’s] religion.” The Red Cross has noted that the

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance “imposes certain obligations on States Parties: to locate, respect and return the remains of the deceased.” In

2016 a UN committee called on Israel “to return the bodies of the Palestinians that have not yet been returned to their relatives as soon as possible so they can be buried in accordance with their traditions and religious customs, and to avoid that similar situations are repeated in the future.”

The use of bodies as bargaining chips or for deterrence or vengeance is repulsive. It should be considered a remnant from another backward age. But it is what it is. So Mr. Trump get off your high horse about who is “sick and twisted”.