Allegation: Israel is Committing Ethnic Cleansing

Some claim Israel is committing “ethnic cleansing” against the Palestinians. While there is no precise definition of ethnic cleansing under international law, the charge suggests that Israel is systematically working to rid its territory of Palestinians, including Israeli Arab citizens, through force or intimidation tactics in order to create a homogeneous society. This is a fundamentally inaccurate accusation.

In recent decades, there have been numerous episodes of ethnic cleansing campaigns by governments, including against the Kurds, several groups during the Bosnian conflict, Darfurians, the Rohingya, the Uighurs and others, aimed at expelling or forcibly assimilating these groups. Israel’s actions and intentions simply do not fall into the same category as these horrific episodes in human history.

Within Israel, Arab citizens are entitled to the full rights of citizenship, with safeguards for their equal treatment. Israeli laws and democratic institutions, including the independent courts and robust free press, uphold and speak out for these rights. There is also no doubt that Israeli Arabs experience discrimination, much like other minority groups in the US and around the world. While Israel must do better in dealing with issues of institutionalized bias, discrimination, inequity and racism, its policies and actions in no way constitutes ethnic cleansing.

And, while one can criticize Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, there is no significant Israeli ideology, movement, policy
or plan to exterminate or expel the Palestinian population from those areas. Israel argues that its policies towards the Palestinians are based on security concerns and the need to defend its population in the face of terrorist threats. Both inside Israel and out, critics accuse Israel of misusing this rationale at times to justify tough action. While these policies can certainly be scrutinized and even condemned, they do not constitute ethnic cleansing.

There are, to be sure, issues regarding the reality of Israeli Jews moving into traditionally Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, and the legal and social issues and inequities that are confronting these Arab residents. This dynamic is complicated and subject to internal, as well as external, advocacy and social action, but labeling it as driven by a policy of local, or even nationwide “ethnic cleansing,” is inaccurate, sensationalist and demonizing.