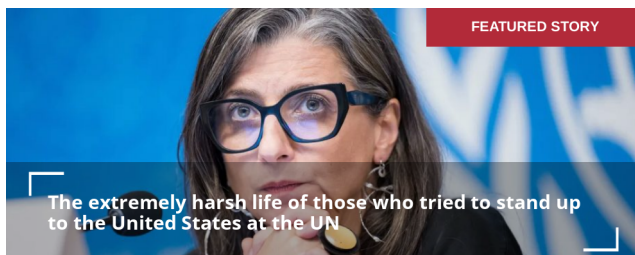


The extremely harsh life of those who tried to stand up to the United States at the UN

By Frank , 27 May 2026

The extremely harsh life of those who tried to stand up to the United States at the UN

From Guantánamo to Palestine, Washington has a long, brutal history of silencing, blacklisting, and deporting rapporteurs who dared tell the truth



When the United States government decided to impose sanctions against the UN Special Rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, honest defenders of human rights were astonished. The measure, announced in July 2025 by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, was presented as a response to what the U.S. government called the expert's "illegitimate and shameful efforts" to promote actions by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Israeli and American officials.

In practice, the sanctions meant much more than a diplomatic gesture. Albanese was included in restriction mechanisms linked to the U.S. financial system, which, in theory, may imply the freezing of assets under American jurisdiction, banking restrictions, and travel limitations. The decision is the most blatant attempt to intimidate a United Nations Special Rapporteur.

The importance of the Italian jurist's work helps explain why she became one of the main targets of Israel and its Western allies. Since assuming office in 2022, Albanese has produced forceful reports on the Israeli occupation system, describing it as a structure of permanent colonization, segregation, and apartheid. After the beginning of the extermination in Gaza in October 2023, she began arguing that there were plausible elements of genocide in Israel's military campaign.

Behind diplomatic closed doors, her work came to be seen by Israeli authorities as especially dangerous because it combined denunciations of humanitarian violations with a strategy of international legal accountability.

Despite the exceptional nature of the sanctions, the Albanese case did not emerge out of nowhere. Over the last several decades, the United States developed different methods of pressure against UN Special Rapporteurs considered excessively critical of its foreign policies, its allies, or its domestic human rights situation. Before reaching the point of imposing financial sanctions, Washington had already resorted to diplomatic campaigns, public attacks, attempts at de-legitimization, restrictions on access, and political pressure within the Human Rights Council. The most visible precedents of this pattern lie precisely within the mandate dedicated to the occupied Palestinian territories.

Before Albanese, two Special Rapporteurs became frequent targets of discrediting campaigns: John Dugard and Richard Falk.

A South African jurist and expert in international law, Dugard held the position between 2001 and 2008 and became known for drawing comparisons between the Israeli occupation and the apartheid regime that existed in South Africa. In reports presented to the UN, he argued that the combination of territorial segregation, checkpoints, settlement expansion, and severe restrictions on Palestinian mobility produced a system of domination incompatible with international law.

His positions provoked a strong reaction from Israel and growing discomfort in Washington. American diplomats, although often in a less strident manner than Tel Aviv, demonstrated systematic opposition to the rapporteur's conclusions within the Human Rights Council, orchestrating pressure campaigns on allies and countries that could influence key votes and decisions.

If John Dugard faced diplomatic resistance and attempts at political disqualification, his successor in the Palestinian mandate, Richard Falk, became the target of a far more aggressive and personalized campaign.

An emeritus professor of international law at Princeton, Falk took office in 2008 and quickly entered into open conflict with Israel and the United States. His criticism of the Israeli occupation, the blockade of Gaza, and the country's military offensives began generating frequent diplomatic confrontations.

Israel went so far as to bar his entry into the country in December 2008, when Falk attempted to carry out an official UN mission in the occupied territories. Detained at

Ben Gurion Airport, he was kept in custody and later deported. The episode triggered protests at the United Nations, since independent experts are, in principle, entitled to access in order to carry out their mandates.

Throughout his period as rapporteur, Falk came to argue that Israeli policies displayed characteristics of colonialism and apartheid, exposing the nature of Zionist oppression over Palestinians. At various moments, American diplomats accused the rapporteur of bias and unfitness for office simply because he did not fully follow the dictates of Tel Aviv and Washington, unlike what they had become accustomed to.

One of the most intense episodes occurred after Falk published comments on the national oppression of Palestinians and American foreign policy. Then-U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice publicly called for his removal from office, stating that he was “unfit to serve” as Special Rapporteur. Organizations from the Zionist lobby, such as UN Watch, also conducted permanent campaigns for his dismissal, accusing him of antisemitism and conspiracism.

Falk responded by saying he was the target of a systematic attempt at silencing. In interviews and public statements, he described the pressure he faced as a campaign of “personal attacks” intended to divert attention from the Israeli violations documented under his mandate.

Guantánamo and the War Against Anti-Torture Rapporteurs

The pattern of pressure seen in mandates on Palestine — public discrediting, diplomatic pressure, and attempts at institutional marginalization — would reappear on other fronts, especially when UN experts began investigating the consequences of the so-called “war on terror” launched by the United States after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The issue of torture became one of the main points of friction between Washington and international human rights mechanisms.

One of the most emblematic episodes involved Austrian jurist Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur on torture between 2004 and 2010. During his mandate, Nowak repeatedly sought unrestricted access to the military prison at Guantánamo Bay, where hundreds of detainees remained without formal trial under accusations of terrorism.

The Bush administration partially accepted a visit but refused conditions considered essential by the United Nations. Among them was the possibility of conducting private interviews with prisoners — a standard procedure in international

investigations into torture and mistreatment. Without such guarantees, Nowak refused what would have been a merely symbolic visit.

In public statements, the rapporteur argued that inspections without confidentiality would amount to a “guided tour,” incapable of producing any serious assessment of detention conditions. Even so, after analyzing documents, testimonies from former prisoners, and medical reports, he concluded that certain practices used at Guantánamo could be classified as torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

In the following years, other UN specialists would face similar reactions when addressing the issue.

Juan Méndez, Special Rapporteur on torture between 2010 and 2016, criticized the prolonged use of solitary confinement, classifying certain periods of extreme isolation as a form of psychological torture. American authorities challenged his conclusions and resisted allowing unrestricted access to prisoners.

Another relevant case was that of British expert Ben Emmerson, Special Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights. Emmerson called for criminal investigations into the CIA’s secret torture programs, including clandestine prisons (“black sites”) and interrogation techniques used after 9/11.

In a particularly strong position, he argued that it was a “legal obligation” of states to investigate and prosecute those responsible for acts of torture authorized in the name of combating terrorism. The American reaction was predominantly defensive, with officials maintaining that internal investigations had already taken place and rejecting international interference.

More recently, Swiss jurist Nils Melzer, also a rapporteur on torture, faced strong political resistance after denouncing abuses linked to U.S. security policy and the treatment of prisoners in contexts of war and international extradition. Although his case is more closely associated with the treatment of Julian Assange, Melzer also criticized the persistent impunity surrounding post-9/11 abuses.

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