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U.S. plans to ease human rights criticism of El Salvador, Israel, Russia

Leaked draft reports show the Trump administration is planning to eliminate or downplay accounts of prisoner abuse, corruption, LGBTQ+ discrimination and other alleged abuses. The administration says the reports are shorter for “readability.”

August 6, 2025

🔊 8 min

📄 Summary



931



President Donald Trump hosts El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, left, in the Oval Office in April. (Al Drago/For The Washington Post)

By [Adam Taylor](#), [Hannah Natanson](#) and [John Hudson](#)

Leaked drafts of the State Department's long-delayed annual human rights reports indicate that the Trump administration intends to dramatically scale back U.S. government criticism of certain foreign nations with extensive records of abuse.

The draft human rights reports for El Salvador, Israel and Russia, copies of which were reviewed by The Washington Post, are significantly shorter than the ones prepared last year by the Biden administration. They strike all references to LGBTQ+ individuals or crimes against them, and the descriptions of government abuses that do remain have been softened.

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The draft report for El Salvador — which, at the Trump administration’s urging, has agreed to incarcerate migrants deported from the United States — states that the country had “no credible reports of significant human rights abuses” in 2024. The State Department’s previous report for El Salvador, documenting 2023, identified “significant human rights issues” there — including government-sanctioned killings, instances of torture, and “harsh and life-threatening prison conditions.”

Several Venezuelans whom the Trump administration sent to a Salvadoran prison said they were subjected to repeated beatings.

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The leaked draft reports for El Salvador, Israel and Russia underscore how the Trump administration is radically rethinking America’s role in global human rights advocacy. The documents also are consistent with internal guidance circulated earlier this year by State Department leaders who advised staff to truncate the reports to the minimum required by statutory guidelines and executive orders signed by President Donald Trump, and to remove references to government corruption, gender-based crimes and other abuses the U.S. government historically has documented.

The State Department declined to address questions about the documents reviewed by The Post.

“The 2024 Human Rights report has been restructured in a way that removes redundancies, increases report readability and is more responsive to the legislative mandate that underpins the report,” a senior State Department official, speaking on the condition of

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anonymity to brief the news media, said Wednesday. “The human rights report focuses on core issues.”

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This official said the Trump administration will bring a new focus to some issues, including backsliding on freedom of expression in some countries allied with the United States, even as the administration has itself faced criticism on free-speech grounds for seeking to deport foreigners studying in the United States who have criticized Israel’s conduct in Gaza.

Trump presidency

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U.S. diplomats have compiled the State Department’s annual human rights reports for almost 50 years. Their findings are considered the most thorough and wide-ranging of their kind and are routinely relied upon by courts inside and outside the United States.

The human rights reports are congressionally mandated to be sent to lawmakers by the end of February. Public release typically happens in

March or April.

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The State Department is yet to officially release this year's reports, which cover activities and observations made in 2024. Current and former U.S. officials say most of this year's reports were nearly completed when the Biden administration transitioned out in January.

The drafts for El Salvador and Russia are marked "finalized," while the draft for Israel is marked "quality check." All were edited in the past few days, the documents show. It is unclear whether the reports eventually transmitted to Congress and released to the public will mirror the drafts.

The internal guidance circulated by State Department leaders earlier this year instructed diplomats responsible for drafting reports to remove references to numerous potential human rights violations, including governments that had deported people to a country where they could face torture, crimes that involve violence against LGBTQ+ people and government corruption.

The internal guidance was written by Samuel Samson, a Trump political appointee at the State Department. Samson, initially little known in Foggy Bottom, attracted attention after writing an article for the agency's Substack in May criticizing Europe for what he alleged was the continent's descent into "a hotbed of digital censorship, mass migration,

restrictions on religious freedom, and numerous other assaults on democratic self-governance.”

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Samson was tasked with reviewing the country reports for El Salvador, Israel and Russia.

While all three reports continue to describe human rights abuses in those countries, each was whittled down considerably from a year before and all bear significant changes to the language used to describe alleged abuses. The draft prepared for Israel, for instance, is 25 pages long; last year’s report was more than 100 pages.

Meanwhile, a comparison of the documents covering El Salvador shows the Trump administration downplaying the country’s history of prison violence, emphasizing that there has been a reduction overall while stating that purported deaths were under government review. Trump has expressed fondness for El Salvador’s president, Nayib Bukele, and hosted him in the Oval Office this year after the administration secured an agreement to deport people to the country’s notorious CECOT megaprison.

The Salvadoran Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Scrutiny of corruption and judicial independence also is significantly scaled back in the draft report for Israel. The 2023 report compiled by

the Biden administration addresses the corruption trial of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, another of Trump's international allies, and judicial overhaul efforts, which critics say threaten the independence of the country's judiciary. The Trump administration's draft report for Israel makes no mention of corruption or threats to the independence of Israel's judiciary.

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Previous human rights reports also have mentioned Israeli surveillance of Palestinians and restrictions of their movement, including an Amnesty International finding on Israel's use of an "experimental facial recognition system to track Palestinians and enforce movement restrictions." This issue is not addressed in the draft report either.

The Israeli Embassy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.



President Donald Trump welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House in April. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

The draft reports examined by The Post contain no reference to gender-based violence or violence against LGBTQ+ people. Keifer Buckingham, who worked on these issues at the State Department until January, said it was a “glaring omission” in the case of Russia, where the country’s Supreme Court had banned LGBTQ+ organizations and labeled them “extremist,” with raids and arrests last year.

The Russian Embassy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Buckingham chastised Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who as a U.S. senator for many years was a vocal defender of human rights.

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“Secretary Rubio has repeatedly asserted that his State Department has not abandoned human rights, but it is clear by this and other actions that this administration only cares about the human rights of some people ... in some countries, when it’s convenient to them,” said Buckingham, who now works as managing director at the Council for Global Equality.

During his time on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rubio praised the State Department’s annual human rights reports. In 2012, he said that “the world has been a better place [for two centuries] because America has strived to defend these fundamental human rights both at home and abroad.”

“The State Department’s annual human rights report sheds light on foreign governments’ failure to respect their citizens’ fundamental rights,” he said a statement then, adding that it was important for the world to know that “the United States will stand with freedom-seeking people around the world and will not tolerate violations against their rights.”

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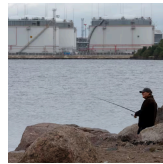
U.S. officials have repeatedly pointed to a speech given by Trump during a visit to the Middle East in May as an example of the new way Washington relates to the world, with an emphasis on sovereignty over universal rights.

Speaking in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Trump had criticized “Western interventionists ... giving you lectures on how to live or how to govern your own affairs.”

Trump's presidency



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This shift of the U.S. role in promoting human rights has coincided with a change in U.S. promotion of democracy. In a cable sent in July, Rubio instructed diplomats to no longer publicly comment on other countries' elections, including making an assessment of whether the election was “free and fair,” unless there is a “clear and compelling U.S. foreign policy interest to do so.”

The move was a shift from long-standing U.S. practice — even under Rubio himself. The secretary has personally congratulated world leaders in Trinidad and Tobago as well as Ecuador for conducting “free and fair” elections since January.

Last month, the Trump administration tightened sanctions on Brazilian Supreme Federal Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, stepping up a feud with the Brazilian government for the prosecution of former president Jair Bolsonaro, a Trump ally, for his alleged role in a violent coup plot in 2022.

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In announcing those sanctions, the U.S. Treasury Department invoked the Magnitsky Act, a law that allows the American government to impose penalties on foreign nationals accused of corruption and human rights violations.

In a statement, Rubio said that Moraes had committed “serious human rights abuse, including arbitrary detention involving flagrant denials of fair trial guarantees and violations of the freedom of expression.” Moraes has said that the court will not yield to foreign pressure but on Wednesday eased some house arrest restrictions on Bolsonaro.

Clara Ence Morse and Meg Kelly contributed to this report.

CORRECTION

A previous version of this article incorrectly called Keifer Buckingham's organization the Council for Global Quality. It is the Council for Global Equality.

 **931 Comments****By Adam Taylor**

Adam Taylor writes about national security and foreign policy for The Washington Post.

 @mradamtaylor**By Hannah Natanson**Hannah Natanson is a Washington Post reporter covering Trump's reshaping of the government and its effects. Reach her securely on Signal at 202-580-5477.  hannah_natanson**By John Hudson**

John Hudson is a reporter at The Washington Post covering the State Department and national security. He was part of the team that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for coverage of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. He has reported from dozens of countries, including Ukraine, China, Afghanistan, India and Belarus. [X](#) @John_Hudson

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