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TODAY'S BIG QUESTION

Why has the State Department scaled down its stance on human rights?

The Trump administration has curtailed previous criticisms of human rights violations



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'Such shifts could signal inconsistencies in what are supposed to be core American values'

(Image credit: Illustration by Julia Wytrazek / Getty Images)



BY JUSTIN KLAWANS, THE WEEK US PUBLISHED AUGUST 14, 2025

The U.S. State Department has long compiled annual reports on human rights in other countries, but the recent edition from the Trump administration looks noticeably different. This has some outside observers questioning the department's methods. After putting out these reports since the 1970s, the State Department's latest iteration includes a slew of backtracks by the Trump administration about countries that have been accused of violating human rights.

What did the commentators say?

The reports contain individual databases about the human rights records of nearly every country in the world. But unlike prior editions, the latest reports "drastically reduce the types of government repression and abuse that the United States under President Donald Trump deems worthy of criticism," said NPR. The State Department has claimed that the reports were "streamlined for better utility and accessibility" compared to prior administrations.

But "critics say the reduced content lets authoritarians off the hook," said NPR. The Trump administration's reports "left out language on persistent abuses in many nations that was present in prior reports," said The New York Times. Language in "sections on El Salvador, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel — all seen as close partners by the Trump administration — was scaled back or excised." These were all countries that were heavily accused of human rights violations in prior administrations' reports.

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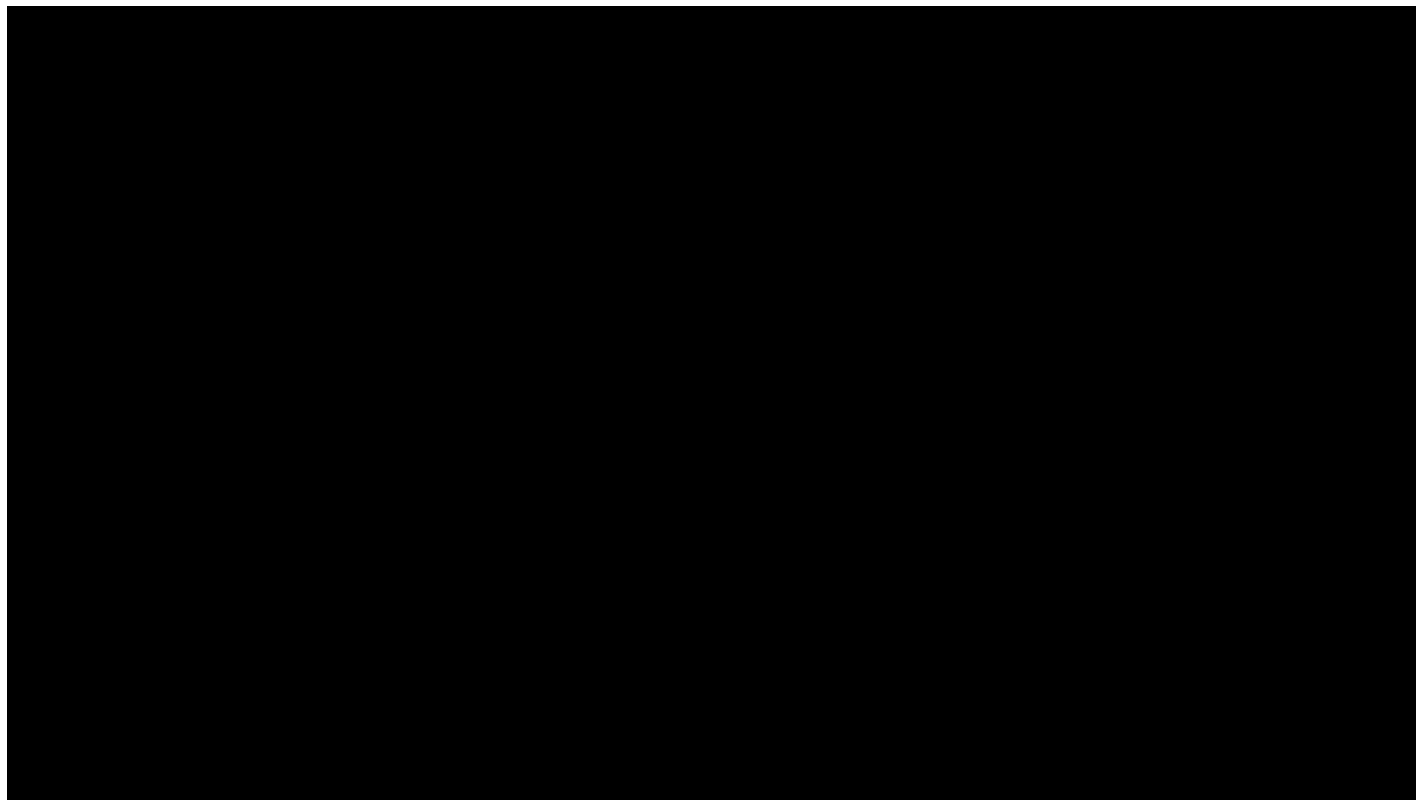


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While the Biden administration viewed Israel as an ally, its report had "many more lines in the executive summary on the country's human rights violations during the military strikes that followed the Hamas attacks," said the Times. In reference to El Salvador, Trump's State Department said there were "no credible reports of significant human rights abuses," a sharp contrast from the prior report which "talked about 'significant human rights issues' and listed them as credible reports of unlawful or arbitrary killings, torture, and harsh and life-threatening prison conditions," said The Guardian.

The U.S. has also previously criticized alleged human rights violations in Afghanistan, China, Iran, North Korea, Russia and Venezuela. While the "human rights reports describe abuses in all these nations, the level of detail has been reduced" under the Trump administration's guidelines, said The Washington Post.

What next?

Many policy officials have "expressed concern that such shifts could signal inconsistencies in what are supposed to be core American values," said the Post. The "muted release of the reports — while Congress is in recess — is notable," especially given that Secretary of State Marco Rubio often "made a point of highlighting the importance of the reports during his years as a Republican senator from Florida."

The reports were "perceived as relatively impartial, because they tried to reflect well-articulated standards" and were "composed by professionals reporting from the ground," said The Atlantic. But with the current iterations, the "details of the reports are less important than the overall impact." The reports are "very bad for human rights defenders in places like Cuba or China," and "none of them can now claim that the State Department Human Rights Report has any factual standing, or indeed that any U.S.-government document on human rights is an objective measure of anything."

"This essentially says the United States is no longer your ally, that the United States doesn't see clearly beyond the rhetoric of your regime," a former official with the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor told The Atlantic. "And I think that's really, really tragic."

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Today's big question



Justin Klawans, The Week US



Justin Klawans has worked as a staff writer at The Week since 2022. He began his career covering local news before joining Newsweek as a breaking news reporter, where he wrote about politics, national and global affairs, business, crime, sports, film, television and other news. Justin has also freelanced for outlets including Collider and United Press International.

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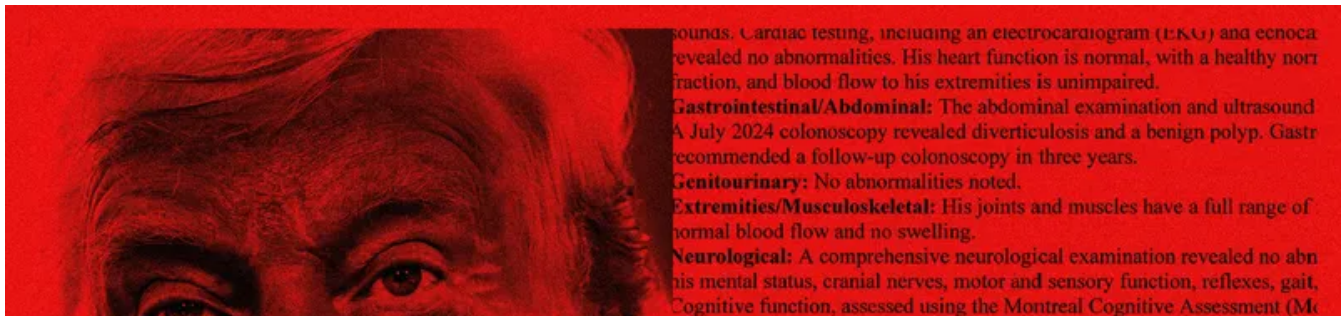
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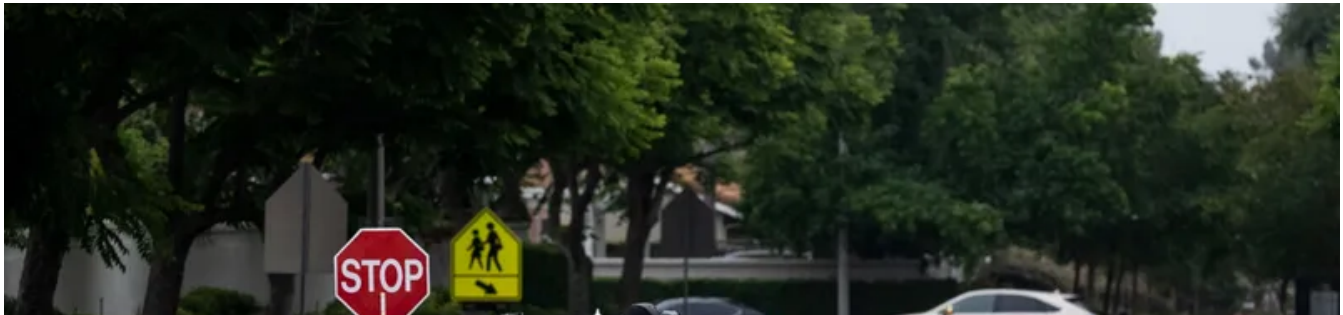


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