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Israel and Judaism

Is It Fair to Use the Term “Apartheid” to Characterize Israel’s Occupation?

By Allan C. Brownfeld



An elderly Palestinian man walks past a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews on a street in Jerusalem’s Old City, Sept. 22, 2016. (THOMAS COEX/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

MANY CRITICS of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem have used the term “apartheid” to characterize this policy. In 2006, former President Jimmy Carter published a book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (available from AET’s [Middle East Books and More](#)), to help stimulate a debate on the Palestinian issue. For this, he was bitterly attacked, even called “anti-Semitic” by some.

According to Alon Liel, a former Israeli ambassador to South Africa, and a former director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry: “Many of us tend to believe that the conflict can be managed forever and Israel no longer has a ‘Palestinian problem.’ However, this is pure deception. The continuing settlement expansion threatens to make a two-state solution to the conflict impossible. Israel is sliding into a situation where, short of apartheid, or expulsion of the Palestinians, a one-state solution with equal rights for all would become the only possible way out of the conflict. This is the South African model.”

Another Israeli ambassador to South Africa, Ilan Baruch, resigned in 2011 “because he had a hard time defending the policies of Israel’s current government.”

In an essay titled “Israel and Apartheid,” in the book *Apartheid in Palestine*, edited by Prof. Ghada Ageel, Canadian attorney Edward C. Corrigan writes: “The Netanyahu government’s ‘Jewish nation-state’ bill is moving Israel even closer to being an apartheid state that discriminates on the basis of race and religion...Israel’s mistreatment and violations of Palestinians and Palestinian rights are best described in the words of Moshe Goral, the legal analyst for *Haaretz*: ‘Chief Supreme Court Justice Aharon Barak used the phrase “long term occupation” to justify the Israeli government’s permanent, massive investments in the territories. To describe a situation where two populations, in this case one Jewish and the other Arab, share the same territory but are governed by two separate legal systems, the international community customarily uses the term apartheid.’”

In the Sept. 2 issue of *The Forward*, columnist Jay Michaelson asks, “If Israel’s occupation is permanent, why isn’t it the same as apartheid?” Citing a poll in August that showed that only 58 percent of Jewish Israelis still support a two-state solution—and, Michaelson notes, “that’s counting those who support it in principle but not in practice”—he declares, “I’m not clear how a one-state, Jewish-controlled solution isn’t apartheid...For two-state Zionists, the status quo in the West Bank is temporary, and thus cannot be truly analogized to apartheid, which was intended to be permanent. (Of course, the occupation has now lasted 49 years, more than the 46 years of apartheid.) The occupation is unjust, but it is meant to end once both sides’ concerns about security, borders, autonomy, water, justice and so on are addressed...But for the 43 percent of Israelis who no longer believe in two states, the status quo must be regarded as the permanent status...Thus, we must ask anew what, if anything, differentiates the occupation from apartheid.”

In Michaelson’s view, “Israel’s occupation, like South African apartheid, restricts movement, land ownership and other rights. Palestinians in the West Bank cannot enter Israel freely, and can travel through the West Bank itself only by negotiating a maze of checkpoints and inspections. Towns cannot expand, and indeed, land that had for decades been part of Palestinian Arab villages is regularly expropriated for Jewish settlement.”

According to Michaelson, the most important difference between the occupation and apartheid is one which will soon be coming to an end: “From its inception, apartheid was

minority rule. Whereas, by the time Israel acquired (or conquered) the West Bank in 1967, there were more Jews than Arabs between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, thanks to decades of immigration... Within a few decades, however, that will no longer be the case. Without a two-state solution, the Jewish state will, like the white South African state, be a system of minority rule—the very opposite of democracy. Without a two-state solution, only through the permanent disenfranchisement of 5 million people can the ‘Jewish state’ even exist. And that is where the final difference finally falls apart. Contrary to the left’s slogans, Israel isn’t an apartheid state today. But without a two-state solution, it will soon become one. As a temporary policy, the occupation is unjust. As a permanent one, it is apartheid.”

In an interview in the May 5 *In These Times*, Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, who now teaches at the University of Exeter in England, was asked, “Can one be a liberal and a Zionist or is this a contradiction in terms?”

“Of course, it is,” Pappé responded. “It’s like Jewish democracy. They’re oxymorons. Zionism is the last remaining active settler-colonialist movement or project. Settler colonialism is, in a nutshell, a project of replacement and displacement, settlement and expulsion. Since this is the project, that you take over someone’s homeland and you’re not satisfied until you feel you’ve taken enough of the land and you’ve gotten rid of the native people, as long as you feel that this is an incomplete project, you will continue the project.”

Such a project, Pappé continues, “is based on dehumanization and elimination. It cannot be liberal. It cannot be anything universal because it is an ideology that wants to get rid of another group of people. In most of the universal values, we’re trying to offer guidance of how human beings should live together rather than instead of each other.”

“Apartheid” is not simply a pejorative term of insult but has a specific legal meaning, as defined by the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1973 and ratified by most U.N. members—but not the U.S. and Israel. According to Article II, the term applies to “acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”

Saree Makdisi, professor of English at UCLA and author of *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation* (also available from [Middle East Books and More](#)) points out that “Jewish residents of the occupied territories enjoy various rights and privileges denied to their Palestinian neighbors. While the former enjoy the protections of Israeli civil law, the latter are subject to the harsh provisions of military law. So, while their Jewish neighbors come and go freely, West Bank Palestinians are subject to arbitrary arrest and detention and to the denial of freedom of movement; they are frequently barred from access to educational and healthcare facilities, Christian and Muslim sites for religious worship and

so on...The question is not whether the term ‘apartheid’ applies here, but why it should cause such an outcry when it is used.”

Henry Siegman, a former director of the American Jewish Congress, says that Israel’s settlements have created an “irreversible colonial project” and involves having Israel “cross the threshold from ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’ to the only apartheid regime in the Western world.” Denial of self-determination and Israeli citizenship to Palestinians amounts to “double disenfranchisement,” which, when based on ethnicity, amounts to racism, Siegman argues. Reserving democracy for privileged citizens and keeping others “behind checkpoints and barbed wire fences” is the opposite of democracy.

To more and more observers, using the term “apartheid” to characterize Israel’s occupation seems to be an accurate appraisal of what is, in fact, taking place. 🟡

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