

Israel and Palestine: A Very Modern Apartheid

Marienna Pope-Weidemann explains why decades of occupation and oppression have led some people to call Israel an apartheid state.

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International Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) is an international series of events that seek to raise awareness of Israel's apartheid system over the Palestinian people and to build support for the growing [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions \(BDS\)](#) movement. Many people remember apartheid as a dark chapter in the history of South Africa and the world. But for the Palestinian people, apartheid isn't history; it is a brutal, daily reality.

Apartheid is the Afrikaans word for 'apartness'. It describes the system of racial discrimination that once existed in South Africa. Today, the United Nations defines apartheid as acts "inhumane acts...committed in the context of an institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime".

South African apartheid was established in 1948, the same year as the Palestinian Nakba or 'catastrophe' that saw the first 750,000 Palestinians forced from their homes. In the 1980s, these two apartheid regimes [shared deep economic and military ties](#). Israel trained and advised the South African military, both in domestic repression of the anti-apartheid movement and in military aggression in Namibia and Angola.

The Shadow of the Wall

The charge of apartheid has been made against Israel for many years by legal scholars and international institutions. An [exhaustive legal study](#) published in 2009 stated that Israel has implemented all the core characteristics of South African apartheid, by categorising and segregating the population along racial lines and subjecting the Palestinian population to extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention.

Racial discrimination is a fact of daily life for Palestinians in the occupied territory. Under Israeli law, and in practice, Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are treated differently in almost every aspect of life including freedom of movement, family, housing, education, employment and other basic human rights. Dozens of Israeli laws and policies institutionalise this prevailing system of racial discrimination and domination.

Segregation is carried out by implementing separate legal regimes for Jewish Israelis and Palestinians living in the same area. For example, Jewish Israeli settlers living in the illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank are governed by Israeli civil law, while Palestinians also living in the occupied West Bank are governed by Israeli military law.

This 'apartness' is also institutionalised through separate legal systems governing Jewish Israelis and Palestinians living in the same area, with Palestinians in the occupied West Bank governed by Israeli military law. In 2012 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination [condemned Israel](#) for precisely this, calling for an end to all policies of "racial segregation and apartheid."

Many of these practices are prohibited by the [UN Apartheid Convention](#), such as the forced transfer of communities to make way for illegal Israeli settlements and the denial of a host of fundamental human rights. Simply existing as a Palestinian in Palestine carries the risk of murder, torture and unlawful imprisonment.

The illegal Apartheid Wall, built by Israel in the West Bank, towers eight meters high, blocking access to schools, hospitals, loved ones and water supplies. Covered in watch towers, electric fences, cameras and military patrols, it is the ultimate symbol of 'apartness'.

The Memory of a Movement

Last year, new ground was broken when the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) published a report which not only named Israel as an apartheid state but [advocated BDS tactics to bring down the apartheid regime](#). It is in part because apartheid is synonymous with the call for BDS that calling the Israeli system by its name is so important.

In South Africa, it took two tidal waves to bring apartheid to its knees: first and foremost from within, was a radical mass movement of poor black South Africans; but boycott, divestment and sanctions advocated by the international community and solidarity movements also played a vital role by isolating South Africa's apartheid regime. This began as a grassroots effort by people of conscience across the world, who inspired by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, protested and lobbied corporations, universities, trade unions, churches and finally governments to get on the right side of history.

Like black South Africans, Palestinians confront a brutal and profoundly racist colonial occupation; and now, like black South Africans once did, they are building a global BDS movement to free themselves. The BDS movement strives to win freedom, justice and equality for all Palestinians, calling for an end to occupation, full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel and the right of all refugees to return home.

Over recent years, despite growing efforts at repression and censorship in Palestine and internationally, [this movement has grown](#) from strength to strength. It has forced major corporations like G4S and Veolia to quit Israeli markets and won large-scale divestments from banks complicit in Israel's human rights violations.

In 1997, Nelson Mandela famously said:

"We know only too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."

This was a sentiment shared with many South Africans as they threw off the yoke of 'apartness'. But there is also a sense in which it is true for all of us. As long as the powerful anywhere can detain, demolish and destroy life with impunity, all freedom is fragile.

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