

ARE WE THERE YET?

Has Israel already created an apartheid state in the Middle East?

By Daniel Saykaly

Few phrases are more explosive than “Israeli Apartheid”. The words conjure up colonialism, land theft, bantustans and the racist oppression of a third world people by a European elite.

Defenders of Israel go ballistic when they hear the term apartheid applied to Israel. They immediately denounce its use as anti-Semitism.

‘How can Israel possibly be guilty of such a crime?’ they ask, outraged. ‘Israel was created as a refuge for victims of oppression. It is a progressive, democratic state very much like Canada. It would not and could not be an oppressor. Yes, Israel uses force, but only to defend itself.’

So who is right, Israel’s defenders or the activists who condemn Israel’s occupation? Has Israel imposed an unjust system and is that system substantially like apartheid? Are we, in fact, already witnessing apartheid in the Middle East?

Unfortunately, we are.

Parallel goals, similar systems

Most Canadians are unaware that Israel collaborated closely with the South African government throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s, serving as one of the apartheid regime’s main allies and weapon suppliers . Those ties only ended when white rule gave way to democracy.¹

This co-operation, though shocking, was predictable and almost inevitable. The two countries were natural allies because they had a great deal in common.

Both countries were founded by European settlers – the Dutch Afrikaners of South Africa and the East European Jewish Zionists who created the state of Israel. Both groups had suffered persecution, the Jews in Europe and the Afrikaners in South Africa under the British. Both framed their nationalist goals in religious terms, drawing heavily on the biblical myth of conquering a “Promised Land”. And both groups were confronted by large indigenous populations - South African “blacks” and Palestinian Arabs - who already occupied the land and who had to be displaced if the colonists’ dreams were to be fully realized.

To be sure there are significant differences also. Whites in South Africa were a minority dominating a large black majority . Jewish Israelis today account for slightly more than half the population of all the land that Israel controls, including Israel proper and the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

¹ See “Israel, South Africa revive defense ties after 15-year hiatus” by Yossi Melman in the on-line edition of the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz, May 31, 2005 (www.haaretz.com).

There are other important differences. White South African blacks and whites shared a common religion; Israel and the Palestinians divide along religious lines. South Africa became internationally isolated, while Israel has managed to avoid becoming a pariah state and enjoys massive aid and support from both the United States and the large Jewish Diaspora around the world. South Africa imposed “petty apartheid” laws (separate benches and water fountains for whites and blacks, etc). Israel has avoided overt segregation methods that would tarnish its public image in the West. As a result, Israeli apartheid is far less obvious. Israeli Jews and Arabs, for example, both vote in the same elections and ride the same buses.

Beneath this superficial equality, however, exists a pervasive discrimination that is almost never reported in the Canadian press. Apartheid exists in Israel carefully camouflaged. In the occupied territories, however, apartheid is blatant, oppressive and ruthless.

Apartheid in Israel

Israel’s low -profile apartheid system has been extensively documented by Israeli academic Uri Davis in his book *Apartheid Israel , Possibilities for the Struggle Within* (Zed Books, 2004). Davis points out that Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel have very different levels of rights. The most important of these is the right to own and lease land. He has demonstrated that while 87% of South Africa was reserved for whites only, fully 93% of the land in Israel is reserved for Jews only.

Under a complex system of existing laws, *only Jews can buy or long-lease (3 years and more) any of the 93% of the land that has been set aside*. Palestinian Arabs owned most of this land until 1948, when 750,000 Palestinians were driven out. Yet today Arabs are effectively excluded from buying back or renting any of this land on a long-term basis. Without the chance to buy or rent land, housing and commercial opportunities are severely restricted and the possibility of advancement is limited.

Apartheid in Israel proper is also obvious in the state’s discriminatory funding of social services. Arab communities make up almost 20% of the population but receive a minute percentage of public funding for education, health and welfare. Indeed, some Arab communities are even denied official recognition by the state and are thereby deprived of all essential services, including electricity and water.

Palestinian Arabs who are citizens of Israel are also barred (“excused” in Israeli parlance) from military service. Military service is an indispensable gateway in Israel to numerous forms of advancement. Exclusion from the army isolates Palestinian Arabs in Israel and prevents them from enjoying many benefits offered to Jewish citizens of the State.

Ironically, Israel does permit two Arab minorities, the Druze and the Bedouins, to serve in the army. Neither group identifies itself with the Palestinian cause. Yet even these groups are not exempted from Israel’s racist land laws. Neither group can buy or long-lease any of the land set aside for Jews only. And when these non-Jewish soldiers die in the service of Israel, they cannot be buried with their Jewish co-citizens. Even in death, Israel discriminates against its non-Jewish minorities.

Israel: a state for the Jewish people, not a state of all its citizens. Perhaps most significantly, Israel declares itself to be the “state of the Jewish people”, *not* a “state of all its citizens”. This distinction highlights the racism that underpins Israeli apartheid.

Consider: Anyone who is Jewish can become a citizen of Israel without delay and can bring his/her family into the country. By contrast, *Palestinians who were born in the territory of Israel and driven out in time of war* are denied the right to return and live in Israel, even though Israel explicitly undertook to permit this return when Israel joined the United Nations. Israel also prevents Israeli citizens who marry Palestinian Arabs from bringing their spouses into the country.

Israeli racism has become especially evident in its debate about its “demographic problem”. The topic of “demography” (population trends) has become a central topic of Israeli society. The fast growing Arab population of Israel is considered a ‘threat’ to state (or rather, to the ‘Jewish character of the state’). Academic conferences discuss the “transfer” of the Arabs out of Israel and out of the occupied territories. “Transfer” is an Israeli euphemism for the war crime of forced population transfer (ethnic cleansing). Transfer, once denounced in Israel as an extremist and unacceptable final solution to the Arab problem, has now become a respectable topic. It is seen by a growing portion of Jewish Israeli society as the necessary solution to Israel’s “demographic problem”.

Apartheid in the Occupied Territories

Discrimination in Israel is subtle compared to what happens in the occupied territories. Here every vestige of civil society drops away and is replaced by the brute rationale of “security” and by the fanatical settler vision of “redemption of the land”. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that everywhere one turns in the occupied territories, one encounters an apartheid system in full bloom.

Racial separation: Since Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, it has set up numerous colonies on land confiscated from Palestinians. These settlements are strictly *for Jews only; no Arabs allowed*.

As the number of these settlements grew, a problem arose. How were settlers to travel safely from settlement to settlement and on into Israel. The settlers did not want to see or encounter “the Arabs”. Israel solved this problem by constructing hundreds of kilometres of high security roads to link the settlements to each other and to Israel. These roads have been carved through the Palestinian countryside, through orchards, fields and property, destroying everything in their paths, cutting a swath *two football fields wide* through the delicate ecology of the West Bank. And, in classic apartheid style, these roads are all for *Jews only; no Arabs allowed*.

The security roads gave Israel an opportunity to shrink the Palestinian presence in the West Bank and crowd the Palestinian population into a series of South African style “bantustans”. South Africa’s Bantustans were small “statelets” - ‘native reserves’ surrounded on all sides and crowded with the indigenous population. Israel adopted this strategy, using the security roads to cut the West Bank into no less than 64 separate sectors. Each sector was isolated from the others by the mined and fenced off security roads and by over 700 military checkpoints that the Israeli

occupation forces set up to block the movement of people, goods and services between Palestinian communities.

More recently, Israel has constructed a vast system of “security” walls on Palestinian land. The walls *de facto* annex about 10% of the West Bank to Israel, incorporating many of the main Israeli settlement blocks with Israel while excluding as many Palestinians as possible. The wall – 28 feet high and hundreds of kilometres long – has been built mostly on Palestinian land, in violation of international law and has been condemned by the International Court of Justice.

Israel has used a variety of strategies to ethnically cleanse portions of the West Bank. A favourite technique has been to declare some area a ‘military zone’ and then to prevent the local Palestinians from using their land. After a few years, the land is declared ‘abandoned’ and is turned over to settlers, who then transform it into yet another *Jews only, no Arabs* apartheid colony.

Sometimes settlers simply set up so-called “illegal outposts”² and begin harassing local Arab communities so as to drive them off the land. At other times, Israel declares Palestinian areas to be located within the boundaries of adjacent Israeli colonies. The maximal boundaries of Israel’s colonies are large and secret and, presumably, changed as often as the government desires. But those boundaries always extend far beyond the limits of the land actually being used by the colonists at any given moment.

Whatever method is used by Israel, the result is the same: Palestinians are forced off their productive land and herded into tiny enclaves in their cities and towns. These population centres become *de facto* holding pens for the indigenous population. The purpose of these enclaves is exactly the same as that of the Bantustans in South Africa and the results are even more punitive. Because the occupied territories are so small and Israeli expansion is so aggressive, Palestinians are being crowded literally into ghettos which cannot support the citizenry. Not for nothing did Nelson Mandela, the great South African liberation leader, denounce Israel’s occupation as being apartheid and worse than apartheid.

And here is the most ironic aspect of Israeli apartheid: it is a ‘deluxe occupation’ whose costs are largely borne by the international community instead of by Israel.

Under international law such as the Geneva conventions, an occupying power is required to protect and provide for the people whose land it temporarily occupies. In this case, however, Israel contributes very little to the welfare of Palestinians living under occupation. In fact, the human suffering and privation that results from Israeli apartheid is largely ignored by Israel, which contributes mere token quantities of food and medical aid. The cost of providing relief to Palestinian civilians living under occupation falls on international donor nations, and work of co-ordinating the relief effort has had to be taken over by the UN. Even these relief efforts are regularly disrupted and prevented by the Israeli occupying army.

² These are more accurately called ‘unauthorized outposts’. In terms of international law, all of Israel’s settlements in the West Bank and Gaza are illegal. International law specifically prohibits the colonization of land seized in war and militarily occupied.

Israeli apartheid is made even more unbearable by the presence of over seven hundred (700) military checkpoints throughout the territories. These checkpoints prevent the circulation of people and goods between Palestinian towns – but never prevent the movement of the masters: the Jewish Israeli settlers.

As a result of the harsh and often arbitrary rules at checkpoints, life is made nearly impossible for the Palestinians. Unemployment in the territories has skyrocketed and food is often in short supply. Malnutrition has become common and is especially acute among Palestinian children.

Apologists for Israel argue that these problems are unfortunate but necessary because of Israel's security needs. According to them, Palestinian attacks on Israelis oblige the army to keep tight control over the territories.

In reality, Israel's repressive presence in the territories is strictly due to Israel's desire to keep large areas of occupied territory and to colonise them. If Israel ended the occupation and pulled back to the 1967 frontiers – the frontiers recognised by the UN, Canada and the entire world as Israel's legitimate frontiers – the occupation could end immediately. With international aid, a Palestinian state would emerge on all of the West Bank and Gaza. Life for the Palestinians would improve immensely. *Israel could build a security wall along the full length of its own frontier with Palestine and thereby keep out any attackers.* Israel's massively powerful army would be in a better position to defend Israel by abandoning the territories to which it has no legitimate claim in international law.

Despite indignant denials by Israel's defenders, there can be no denying Israel's apartheid system, both within Israel and in the territories it occupies. This apartheid is marked by the racial separation of peoples; the theft of land and resources from the indigenous population, the herding of the population into tiny bantustans; the presence of a western colonising people; the use of massive military superiority to repress the locals and make them knuckle under to "the white man's ways".

Israeli jargon for apartheid is different, of course and designed to camouflage the racist nature of the regime. Israelis talk of "separation, of "us over here and them over there". They talk of "redeeming the land" when what they really mean is the theft of territory owned by the Palestinians. They talk blandly of "transfer" when they mean the war crime of ethnically cleansing their Arab population. They use legal double standards to enforce racially determined access to land in Israel and in the territories. And all the time, they claim that Israel is "a democracy very much like Canada".

All of this is apartheid and the worst kind of hypocrisy. The sooner that Canadians see Israeli apartheid for what it is and begin to condemn it openly in the UN and other world forums, the sooner Canada will be in a position to play a decisive role in settling the Middle East crisis, just as Canada played a crucial role in ending white South Africa's immoral and criminal apartheid regime.