
EDITORIAL

From the Editors

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, Human Rights Watch, and the Israeli NGO B'Tselem, and most recently a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in occupied Palestine, have in recent months confirmed what is glaringly apparent to a moderately perceptive observer: Israel is managing a system of apartheid in all the territories it controls throughout Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

The responses to Amnesty International's report, titled *Crime of Apartheid: The Government of Israel's System of Oppression against Palestinians*, have been predictable.¹ The most unhinged ones came from the Israeli government's *hasbara* machine. There was no engagement with the content of the meticulous 280-page report, but rather absurd assertions that likened Amnesty to a "hate-promoting organization," advancing propaganda that echoed "lies spread by terrorist organizations," claiming it was an example of "modern anti-Semitism" whose purpose was to "eliminate the state of Israel."²

The responses of U.S. officials were predictable. They overlooked the report's substance, rejected "the view that Israel's actions constitute apartheid," and stressed the U.S. government's "vehement disagreement" with that label, which it had "never used."³ Veteran Associated Press diplomatic reporter Matthew Lee questioned a State Department spokesperson about why the government was happy to cite Amnesty International's official reports on human rights violations in countries like China, Cuba, Syria, and Iran, but never did so with regard to Israel.⁴ He received no response.

The reactions of U.S. politicians were equally predictable. Former Democratic National Committee chairwoman Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) described the report as "steeped in antisemitism."⁵ For Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the "report diminishes the very real Apartheid that brutalized black South Africans for decades."⁶ Both officials partook in the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism to rebuff any critique of Israel.

Mainstream and corporate U.S. media responses were also predictable: there was no coverage of the report in the so-called papers of record, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.⁷ The Rupert Murdoch-owned *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Post* hewed closely to the Israeli government's line, serving as its reliable echo chamber in the United States, alongside a broad range of organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League.

When the mainstream U.S. media did cover the report, it failed to note that many figures, viewed in the United States as among the good and the great of Israel, agree with the apartheid label. Over the years, these have included former prime ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert, former ministers of education Yossi Sarid and Shulamit Aloni, former attorney general Michael Ben-Yair,⁸ former head of the Shin Bet Ami Ayalon, and luminaries such as the novelist A. B. Yehoshua. However, such widespread Israeli views are rarely reported in the United States. Nor was any mention made of the fact that 25 percent of U.S. Jewish voters in one survey agree that Israel is an apartheid state.⁹

Notwithstanding the ferocious pushback by the Israeli government and its U.S. enablers, this report, building on its two predecessors and now reinforced by the UN Human Rights report, has produced an exhaustive portrayal of Israel's discriminatory laws and its repressive system of control over the Palestinians. Yet the many insistent Palestinian voices that have put forth this analysis for decades have been all but ignored, even though it is *their* decades-long analytical and political labor that has illuminated the charge of apartheid most clearly. Such a politics of recognition and erasure echoes the celebration of Israel's New Historians, who in the early 1990s used the description ethnic cleansing to describe what happened during and after the 1948 war. The work of Palestinians who had carefully documented the same for decades was largely overlooked. Once again, we understand what Edward Said meant when he invoked the "permission to narrate."¹⁰

This was one among several themes in cogent Palestinian and Arab critiques of the Amnesty report. Citing the report's "damning documentation" of Israel's apartheid regime, Lana Tatour pointed out: "The failure to acknowledge settler colonialism as the overarching structure behind Israeli apartheid misses how citizenship in Israel is not merely the story of racial discrimination, but rather the story of colonial domination."¹¹ She emphasized that "the apartheid frame must include a settler colonial analysis and a recognition of Zionism as the racial ideology that drives settler colonialism and apartheid in Palestine. Refusing to acknowledge the racial foundations of Zionism when discussing Israeli apartheid is like refusing to address white supremacy when discussing the Black Lives Matter movement."¹²

Nihal El Aasar also critiqued the absence of a settler colonial framework in the Amnesty report, noting, "If one doesn't start from the premise that Israel is a violent settler colonial project with a range of violent methods of domination, then one will see the violence of settler colonialism and resistance to said settler colonialism as equally condemnable."¹³ Both authors point to the imperative of decolonization, as opposed to a rights-based approach that can only lead to what Mezna Qato and Kareem Rabie call "a better colonialism rather than the end of colonialism."¹⁴

Meanwhile, lost in the furor was Israel's recent military order accusing six Palestinian human rights NGOs (Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, Al-Haq, Bisan Center for Research and Development, Defense for Children International—Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, and the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees) of being terrorist organizations. These civil society organizations are now subject to even higher levels of persecution by Israel's security services.

Rather than simply charting the ups and downs of the discursive and media war in the arena of public opinion between the Palestinians and their multiple adversaries, this may be an opportunity for deeper reflection. The key thread to follow is to be found in some of the critiques of the logic informing the Amnesty report.

Most European *settler*-colonial systems were distinguished by strict legal and physical separation of ethnic or racial or religious groups within one sovereign jurisdiction. Examples include the Pale of Settlement in Ireland for several hundred years beginning in the twelfth century, followed by other religiously based separate but unequal legal systems for two different groups of the Irish population; reservations for Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada; enslavement and then apartheid for Black people in the United States in the so-called Jim Crow era; the *code de l'indigénat* introduced in Algeria in 1830 and subsequently used throughout France's colonies in South East Asia, West Africa, and the Caribbean to discriminate against native populations; and, of course, South African apartheid and Bantustans.

As indicated by Tatour and others, it is not clear whether the increasing willingness to describe the Israeli regime in terms of apartheid can lead to an understanding of the situation in Palestine as the product of similar settler-colonial processes that began with the Zionist enterprise's inception over a century ago. Grasping this historical essence of the problem means accepting the necessity for a radical decolonization, one that involves dismantling the powerful, entrenched legal, social, and economic structures of segregation that Zionism has produced.

Today, Israel continues to enjoy a high degree of impunity from global censure or pressure, largely because of abundant economic, military, and diplomatic backing from the United States and Europe, and because of the now-complacent attitudes of other major states like Russia, China, and India. Indeed, recently it even managed to turn a number of autocratic Arab regimes into junior allies as part of its bid for regional hegemony.

Change can only come from multiple directions. It includes uplifting new Palestinian leaderships that draw on and represent their people both inside and outside of Palestine. It also includes the grassroots majority struggling for Arab popular sovereignty being able to thwart the forces of absolutism and police state autocracy. While most Arab regimes are feeble, lacking in legitimacy, and are captive to the powerful influence of the United States and Israel, whose lead they follow where Palestine is concerned, their peoples overwhelmingly support the Palestinian cause.¹⁵ Lastly, such change will not transpire without a combination of internal, regional, and international pressures—notably from the United States and Europe—to bring a critical segment of Israelis to see that their country's current path can only ultimately lead to a dead end.

The Amnesty International report may represent a step in that direction, but more than anything, today as in the past, we must center and amplify the labor, the analysis, and the voices of Palestinians.

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Endnotes

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