

Film Explores Striking Parallels Between South Africa and Israeli Apartheid

By [Abraham Greenhouse](#)

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A film still highlights the parallels between South African and Israeli apartheid policies.

([Roadmap to Apartheid](#))

Roadmap to Apartheid, a feature-length documentary by filmmakers Ana Nogueira (a white South African) and [Eron Davidson](#) (a Jewish Israeli), is an extremely ambitious project that is largely successful in achieving the difficult goals it sets for itself.

Not only is Roadmap the first documentary to offer an in-depth exploration of parallels between the [South African](#) and Israeli forms of [apartheid](#), but it presents the material in such a way as to serve as a fairly comprehensive and accessible introduction for audiences with no prior exposure to the issue.

Few films are ever made about the “parallels between x and y,” no matter how salient the comparison. The challenges of crafting such a film — structural, technical and otherwise — are many, and daunting even to the most experienced filmmakers. Yet first-timers Nogueira and Davidson have assembled a work which, at moments, rivals anything by heavyweight documentary artists like Errol Morris.

Physical and psychological aspects of apartheid

The sophistication of filmmakers’ technical skills is readily apparent throughout the film, which looks like anything but a first-time effort.

Roadmap employs striking data visualizations, animations and split screen effects, but does not overuse them. Decades-old footage is smoothly integrated with modern material, and the original footage is remarkably well-shot. The interviews employ a variety of different camera angles which help maintain an organic, conversational tone that never feels monotonous, and much of the on-the-ground footage of demonstrations and military incursions has an immersive, kinetic quality that pulls the viewer into the action.

The sheer breadth of the aspects of Israeli and South African apartheid that the film explores and compares will likely exceed the expectations of many viewers. The filmmakers cover nearly everything: siege mentality colonialism, forced migration, [checkpoints](#), passes, foreign natives, present absentees, partition and proxy rule, bombing and [boycotts](#), bulldozers and Bantustans. [Refugee](#) issues, central to understanding Palestine, get less screen time, but this is mainly because this is one of the numerous ways in which the Israeli

form of apartheid, as journalist Allister Sparks puts it, is “significantly worse than apartheid” in South Africa.

Some of the transitions and comparisons work better than others, but those which work best, such as the juxtaposition of a Boer laager and Israel’s infamous [wall in the West Bank](#), work remarkably well. That the film explores parallels not only between the physical aspects of apartheid, which are many and varied, but the psychological dimensions, for colonizer and colonized alike, is important. The most powerful moments of the film, in which the strongest links between the two forms of apartheid are made, are those which depict an emotional experience common to both struggles.

“There is no pain quite like being unloved, unwanted, in one’s own land, among one’s own kind,” laments South African poet Don Mattera, whose mesmerizing voice dominates several of the film’s most emotionally resonant moments, including a heartrending journey into the mind of a person watching as their home is physically destroyed. So powerful are Mattera’s words and voice that they tend to overshadow the uncharacteristically flat tone of the film’s narration by [Alice Walker](#). Of course, if one of your film’s worst problems is that someone managed to outdo Alice Walker, you probably don’t have that much to worry about.

Prominent voices, leading analysts

The film is packed with insights from the world’s leading authorities on both South African and Israeli apartheid, including Diana Buttu, Na’eem Jeenah, Jeff Halper, Yasmin Sooka, [Ali Abunimah](#), the late Dennis Brutus, Salim Vally, [Ziad Abbas](#), Eddie Makue, Angela Godfrey-Goldstein, [Jonathan Cook](#), [Jamal Juma’](#), Allister Sparks, Sasha Polakow-Suransky, [Phyllis Bennis](#) and others. Among this group, it would have been nice to hear from more black South Africans, and more women, but the film does manage to assemble a good mixture of very smart people saying very smart things.

Perhaps more importantly, the film includes just as prominently the voices of many ordinary South Africans and Palestinians who are experts on apartheid in their own right, by virtue of suffering, surviving and resisting it through the course of their own daily lives. The voices of ordinary Jewish Israelis are also included, exploring how Israeli apartheid offers them all manner of colonial privileges while erecting physical and psychological barriers that largely prevent them from observing its direct impact upon the indigenous Palestinians.

Individual and collective resistance

The discussion of [home demolitions](#), a practice common to both Israeli and South African forms of apartheid, does seem to take a bit longer than it should, but is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the film.

“Every time you destroy someone’s house, you destroy their life,” says an unnamed Palestinian man who has experienced this six times firsthand. “You kill that person, and they become like they are neither dead nor alive.”

Mattera, after recounting the 1962 demolition of his own home in Sophiatown, South Africa, remarks: “You can shave off my hair. New hair will grow. You can spit in my face. I will find water to wash it. You can take away my clothes and leave me naked. I will find a blanket. But if you take away my house, and dignity, where can I go? Where?”

Some answers to that question may be found in the film's closing segment, which examines individual and collective resistance to apartheid, and frameworks for imagining a shared future based on freedom and equality for all people. The global campaigns for boycott, divestment, and sanctions which helped end apartheid in South Africa, and which are well on their way to doing to same in Palestine, are discussed, but the emphasis here is more on the outcome than on the strategy.

Roadmap to Apartheid is an important achievement in the history of popular education about Palestine, which has long pointed to the parallels between Israel and South Africa, but has lacked a film that could present this framing in a comprehensive yet accessible way. For the filmgoer, it is well worth seeing. For the activist, it is well worth screening. For anyone who doubted that such a film could be made, Nogueira and Davidson have proven, just as Mattera declares when discussing the dream of free and equal society in historic Palestine, "It is possible. It is possible."

Roadmap to Apartheid premieres in New York City on Friday, 22 June. For more information and screenings, visit their website at roadmaptoapartheid.org.

Abraham Greenhouse is a longtime Palestine solidarity activist and [blogger](#) for The Electronic Intifada. Follow him on Twitter at [@grinhoyz](#).

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