

Institutionalised Discrimination: Amnesty International Report on Israel's Treatment of Palestinians

By [Michael Jansen](#)

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The February 1st Amnesty International report on Israel's treatment of Palestinians broke a new ground. Amnesty became the first major international human rights organisation to state explicitly that since its establishment in 1948, Israel has always practiced apartheid against Palestinians living under its rule.

In the 211-page document entitled, “Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime against Humanity”, Amnesty provided the historical context and documented “Israel's institutionalised and systematic discrimination against Palestinians” and its use of “attack” to maintain this system which “amounts to the crime against humanity of apartheid”.

Amnesty pointed out that the Zionists who established Israel found that before 1948 Palestinians constituted 70 per cent of the population of the country and possessed 90 per cent of privately owned land while Jews were 30 per cent and owned only 6.5 per cent. Therefore, the Zionists transformed the situation in 1947-48 by displacing “in what amounted to ethnic cleansing” 800,000 of the 1.2 million indigenous Palestinians. The 150,000 who remained were granted citizenship but were placed under military rule until 1966 and have faced discrimination, dispossession and deprivation of the same rights accorded to Israeli Jews.

Since then, Amnesty stated, “Israel has pursued an explicit policy of establishing and maintaining Jewish demographic hegemony and maximising its control over land to benefit Jewish Israelis while minimising the number of Palestinians and restricting their rights and obstructing their ability to challenge” this policy. After Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel drove another 350,000 Palestinians into Jordan and extended apartheid to the newly conquered territories.

Israel employs both its military and settlements to dominate the Palestinians, Amnesty

argued, adding,

“All Israeli settlements in the [occupied Palestinian territories] are illegal under international law, regardless of their status under Israeli law.”

Amnesty summed up by saying that, while Palestinians “overwhelmingly regard themselves as Palestinian and have deep and shared political, ethnic, social and cultural ties” wherever they reside, Israel “considers and treats Palestinians as an inferior non-Jewish racial group.”

During the four years Amnesty was assembling its well documented case, the Israeli human rights organisation, B’Tselem reported that Israel has imposed “Jewish supremacy” through apartheid in “all the territory it controls” from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. B’Tselem wrote on January 12, 2021, “The key tool Israel uses to implement the principle of Jewish supremacy is engineering space geographically, demographically and politically. Jews go about their lives in a single, contiguous space where they enjoy full rights and self-determination. In contrast, Palestinians live in a space that is fragmented into several units, each with a different set of rights — given or denied by Israel, but always inferior to the rights accorded to Jews.”

Human Rights Watch followed B’Tselem with a report, “A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution”, which contended that in the land inhabited by 6.8 million Jewish Israelis and 6.8 million Palestinians, “Israeli authorities methodically privilege Jewish Israelis and discriminate against Palestinians. Laws, policies and statements by leading

Israeli officials make plain that the objective of maintaining Jewish Israeli control over demographics, political power, and land has long guided government policy. In pursuit of this goal, authorities have dispossessed, confined, forcibly separated and subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity to varying degrees of intensity. In certain areas, as described in this report, these deprivations are so severe that they amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution.” This conclusion is a bit less forthright than that reached by B’Tselem and Amnesty.

All three reports have been roundly condemned by Israel and its loyal friends in high places and the organisations which published them stand accused of anti-Jewish racism. But, this does not deflect from the gravamen of the charge of apartheid, which the state of Israel adopted at its founding in 1948, the same year it was enforced in South Africa to formally separate whites and blacks.

It is significant that due to these three reports the word “apartheid” has finally gained respectable currency among organisations and individuals characterising the situation in Israel and the occupied territories although it has applied for nearly 74 years to the state of Israel.

While the Hebrew word, “*hafrada*”, meaning “separation”, is used to describe the policy adopted by the Israeli government towards the Palestinians, Israel objects to the application of the word “apartheid” which means “aparthood” because of its South African origin. The cruel policy towards black Africans was designated as a crime under the 1973 Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid adopted by the UN General Assembly.

Apartheid has been applied to Israel but ignored for decades. Asa Winstanley, writing in Middle East Monitor on February 6th, revealed this designation was put forward as early as 1965 by Palestinian diplomat Fayez Sayegh who represented Kuwait at the UN. He wrote, “Whereas the Afrikaner apostles of apartheid in South Africa... brazenly proclaim their sin, the Zionist practitioners of apartheid in Palestine beguilingly protest their innocence.” Sayegh’s reference to “Zionists” is appropriate because their colonists practiced apartheid long before the state emerged.

In a 2007 report, UN Special Rapporteur for Palestine **John Dugard**, a South African, stated, “elements of the Israeli occupation constitute forms of colonialism and of apartheid, which are contrary to international law”. His successor **Richard Falk** also used apartheid to describe the situation in a 2014 document.

Rima Khalaf, executive director of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and under secretary general said a 2017 report drawn up by the Commission “clearly and frankly concludes that Israel is a racist state that has established an apartheid system that persecutes the Palestinian people.”

In 2020, Yesh Din, another Israeli human rights organisation, said that Israeli treatment of the West Bank Palestinian population amounts to apartheid as defined by international statutes.

More timid organisations and personalities dared to use this characterisation in 2021 after the Human Rights Watch report appeared. An opinion poll released in August 2021 found that 65 per cent of academic experts on the Middle East described Israel as a “one-state reality akin to apartheid”. Seven months earlier, the figure was 59 per cent.

At the launch of this month’s Amnesty report, **Secretary General Agnes Callamard** stated,

“Governments who continue to supply Israel with arms and shield it from accountability at the UN are supporting a system of apartheid, undermining the international legal order and exacerbating the suffering of the Palestinian people. The international community must face up to the reality of Israel’s apartheid, and pursue the many avenues to justice which remain shamefully unexplored.”

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Articles by: **Michael Jansen**

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