

Israeli

Apartheid
An Introduction



**IRELAND PALESTINE
SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN**



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“Yesterday’s South African township dwellers can tell you about today’s life in the Occupied Territories. To travel only blocks in his own homeland, a grandfather waits on the whim of a teenage soldier. More than an emergency is needed to get to a hospital; less than a crime earns a trip to jail. The lucky ones have a permit to leave their squalor to work in Israel’s cities, but their luck runs out when security closes all checkpoints, paralyzing an entire people. The indignities, dependence and anger are all too familiar. Many South Africans are beginning to recognize the parallels to what we went through.”

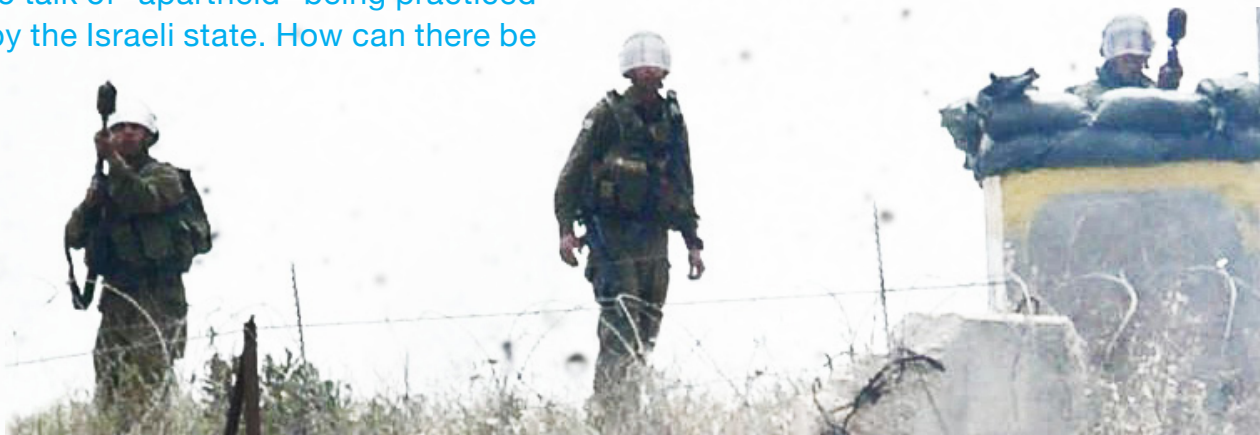
Archbishop Desmond Tutu - Nobel Peace Laureate

Few things enrage Israel and its supporters more than the comparison often drawn between the treatment of Palestinians by the Zionist state and the racist policies of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Yet the analogy has been used more and more often in recent years – especially by advocates of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign who recall the international economic boycott of South Africa that helped bring about the defeat of apartheid. While no two situations are ever identical, there are sound reasons for speaking of “Israeli apartheid”, as it gives an accurate sense of the racist oppression endured by the Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

By now, there’s a standard response to talk of “apartheid” being practiced by the Israeli state. How can there be

apartheid, it is said, when Arabs are allowed to vote in Israeli elections and can be elected to parliament? If there is a block of Arab MPs in the Knesset, then clearly we are not talking about a racist state like the old South Africa.

However, this argument ignores one simple fact: there are two sections of the Palestinian people living under Israeli rule. The first comprises the Arab minority inside Israel’s pre-1967 territory, who make up roughly one-fifth of the population. The other comprises the Palestinians of the occupied territories in Gaza and the West Bank, where they are the overwhelming majority of the population (despite decades of illegal settlement construction). We have to take account of how both sections of the Palestinian people are treated.



“From our own experience, we know how painful and dehumanising is the system of segregation, otherwise known as apartheid. Apartheid is a system based on the assumption that one group or race is superior to others and therefore has a right to all the privileges and virtues associated with that particular status. It has a right to run and determine the lives of others, excluding them from certain privileges, merely because they do not belong to the “chosen” group. What other definition would so fittingly define a system based on different rights and privileges for Jews and Arabs in the Middle East? The bantustanisation of Palestine into pieces or strips – West Bank, Ramallah, Gaza Strip and so on – run by Israel and with no rights whatsoever for the Palestinians, is definitely an apartheid system.”

Zwelinzima Vavi – leader, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)

Palestinian Citizens of Israel

The 1.2m Palestinian Citizens of Israel (sometimes called ‘Israeli Arabs’) are allowed to vote because they are a minority and pose no threat to the status quo. If black people in South Africa had been a minority of the population, it would not have been essential to ban them from voting in elections. The Arab political parties in the Knesset have never formed part of a ruling coalition and have no influence over government policy. Even when they are permanently confined to the opposition benches, the Arab MPs have to face intolerance and harassment for expressing their views.

After the Arab parties organised demonstrations against the bombardment of Gaza in 2009, the majority of Jewish Israeli MPs voted to ban them from standing in the upcoming parliamentary elections (the ban was later overturned by the Supreme Court). The initiative to ban the Arab parties came from the party of Avigdor Lieberman, now Israel’s foreign minister. Lieberman has said that Arab politicians who met with representatives of Hamas should be executed.

The fact that Palestinians Citizens of Israel are allowed to vote does not mean they are treated as equal citizens. Even the US state department has noted the existence of “institutionalised legal and societal discrimination”. According to its report: “The government does not provide Israeli Arabs, who constitute 20% of the population, with the same quality of education, housing, employment and social services as Jews.” This discrimination is compounded by the growing racism of Israeli society. A 2007 survey found that 60% of Israeli Jews would not allow an Arab to visit their home; 75% disapproved of apartment buildings being shared between Arabs and Jews. According to another opinion survey conducted in 2009, 53% of Israeli Jews support “encouraging” Arabs to leave Israel.

The current Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu has encouraged this racist sentiment, presenting the Arab minority as a threat to the existence of the state: “If the Arabs in Israel form 40 per cent of the population, this is the end of the Jewish state. But 20 per cent is also a problem. If the relationship with these 20 per cent is problematic, the state is entitled to employ extreme measures.”



The Occupied Territories

When we shift our attention to the treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories, the parallels with South Africa become crystal-clear. If anything, the racial segregation and discrimination is more extreme: there are no “Jewish-only” parks or water fountains in the settlements, because there are “Jewish-only” towns and roads to prevent any Arab from coming near. The Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank are not allowed to vote in Israeli elections, although the Israeli state has claimed the right to rule over them for more than forty years. Their freedom of movement is severely restricted by the occupation forces: short journeys inside the West Bank can take hours because of army checkpoints, while longer trips are often impossible.

Palestinian land is confiscated to provide space for illegal settlements, while the land that remains under Palestinian ownership is divided into isolated fragments.

The violence used to enforce the Israeli occupation has exceeded even the levels of repression in apartheid South Africa. The assault on Gaza by the Israeli army had no parallel in the history of apartheid: the South African army and air force never pounded Soweto with rockets and shells for weeks on end, killing hundreds of people in the space of a few weeks. This violence is not arbitrary or randomly directed. Its purpose is to crush all resistance to the colonial settlement project in the occupied territories. Israeli governments have stated clearly that they have no intention of ever withdrawing from the whole of the West Bank.

“This is much worse than apartheid. The Israeli measures, the brutality, make apartheid look like a picnic. We never had jets attacking our townships. We never had sieges that lasted month after month. We never had tanks destroying houses. We had armoured vehicles and police using small arms to shoot people but not on this scale.”

Ronnie Kasrils – ANC leader and South African government minister