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Israel

Israel's 70-year history of ethnic cleansing

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Ethan Ackelsberg makes the case, using historical and contemporary evidence, that Israel is an apartheid society, existing in defiance of international law.

The ethnic cleansing of Palestine's indigenous Arab population is well established, thanks to the work of Palestinian scholars such as Noura Erekat, Rashid Khalidi and the late Naseer Aruri; Israeli historians such as Ilan Pappé; organizations like the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights and Jewish Voice for Peace; and, of course, the memories of Palestinians themselves.

Yet this claim of "ethnic cleansing" remains highly controversial. So it is worth revisiting some of the basic facts from 70 years ago about the founding of Israel in May 1948.

While there is no accepted definition of "ethnic cleansing" under international law, a United Nations report from investigations in the former Yugoslavia defines it as "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area" and later as "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas." [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

The forcible removal and displacement of roughly 750,000 Palestinians during the 1948 war—about 80 percent of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of the land that became Israel—in order to create a Jewish-majority state certainly fits both of these definitions.

The Israeli nonprofit Zochrot has carefully documented the destruction of Palestinian villages from 1948. According to its research, 601 Palestinian villages were destroyed—33 of which had more than 3,000 residents, including Jaffa (76,000) and Haifa (70,000). [\[3\]](#)

One of the most heinous acts of "terror-inspiring" violence occurred on April 9, 1948, when two right-wing Zionist militias banded together to attack the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin, massacring at least 110 of its residents. [\[4\]](#) Other Palestinians were placed in labor camps by Israeli forces between 1948 and 1955.

Even today, Israel continues its policy of "transfer" of Israeli citizens into the West Bank in order to advance its agenda of pushing Palestinians off their land in order to establish ever more Jewish-only settlements. [\[5\]](#)

For all 70 years of its existence, Israel has denied the massive Palestinian refugee population the right to return to their homes—a right required by UN General Assembly Resolution 194, article 11, which reads in part:

Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and...compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible. [\[6\]](#)

Palestinians rightly refer to the combination of events leading up to, and after, 1948 as al-Nakba ("the catastrophe"). Israel, by contrast, celebrates this as the birth of a nation.

To this day, the Israeli state practices apartheid against the Palestinian population in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

This is also a contentious claim, but a careful look at the internationally accepted definition of "apartheid" and the practices of the Israeli state show that this is a fitting description.

Importantly, the definition of apartheid under international law is not specific to the former practices of South Africa, so charging Israel with apartheid is not a direct comparison. Rather, apartheid is defined in the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (ICSPCA) as "inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them." [\[7\]](#)

The ICSPCA goes on to list examples of policies that constitute apartheid, including:

â€” Under (a.iii), "arbitrary arrest and illegal imprisonment of the members of a racial group or groups."

â€” Under (c), "denying to members of a racial group or groups basic human rights and freedoms, including...the right to leave and to return to their country, the right to a nationality, the right to freedom of movement and residence...and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."

â€” Under (d), "Any measures, including legislative measures, designed to divide the population along racial lines by the creation of separate reserves and ghettos for the members of a racial group or groups...the expropriation of landed property belonging to a racial group or groups or to members thereof."

â€” Under (f), "persecution of organizations and persons, by depriving them of fundamental rights and freedoms, because they oppose apartheid."

Every one of these examples is practiced by Israel. Let's consider each in turn:

â€” (a.iii): The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem has thoroughly documented the apartheid practices of the Israeli prison system:

In administrative detention, a person is held without trial without having committed an offense, on the grounds that he or she plans to break the law in the future. As this measure is supposed to be preventive, it has no time limit.

The person is detained without legal proceedings, by order of the regional military commander, based on classified evidence that is not revealed to them. This leaves the detainees helplessâ€”facing unknown allegations with no way to disprove them, not knowing when they will be released, and, without being charged, tried or convicted...

The power to incarcerate people who have not been convicted or even charged with anything for lengthy periods of time, based on secret "evidence" that they cannot challenge, is an extreme power. Israel uses it continuously and

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extensively, routinely holding hundreds of Palestinians at any given moment. [\[8\]](#)

â€” (c): Rather than having an "Israeli" nationality, citizens of Israel have a variety of recognized nationalities. The most common is simply "Jewish," which comes with additional national rights.

Moreover, under the 1952 Israeli Nationality Law, Palestinian citizens of Israel are denationalized, and can only claim "Arab," but not "Palestinian," as their nationality.

The freedom of residence is also flatly denied to Palestinians. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) holds half of the seats on the Israel Land Administration (ILA), which controls 93 percent of public land in Israel. The JNF itself controls 13 percent of all the land in Israel, and rents and sells its properties only to Jews.

According to Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, 43 percent of residential areas in Israel have selection committees that can legally reject applicants they determine to be "unsuitable to the social life of the community...or the social and cultural fabric of the town." [\[9\]](#)

In practice, according to Human Rights Watch, these committees "have notoriously been used to exclude Arabs from living in rural Jewish communities." [\[10\]](#)

The recent massacres of protesters in Gaza, followed by the remark by Israel Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman that "there are no innocents in Gaza," flies in the face of the right to peaceably assemble. [\[11\]](#) And in the West Bank, the IDF regularly issues closed military zone orders under martial law in order to declare rallies unlawful at will. [\[12\]](#)

â€” (d): In addition to segregation enforced by "selection committees," Israel constructed a wallâ€”deemed illegal under international lawâ€”through the occupied West Bank to physically enforce its segregation. [\[13\]](#)

At the same time, it routinely expropriates land from Palestinians in the West Bank for the construction of Jewish-only settlements beyond the 1967 borders, which is then followed by increased militarization and checkpoints to keep Palestinians away from the settlements. [\[14\]](#)

â€” (f): In response to the growing popularity of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli apartheid, the Knesset passed the Law for Prevention of Damage to State of Israel through Boycott in July 2011 to criminalize anti-apartheid measures within Israel, allowing institutions to sue for claimed damages due to boycott. [\[15\]](#)

Israel has also banned members of 20 anti-apartheid organizations from entering the country. [\[16\]](#)

Every single one of these practices is consistent with the UN definition of "the crime of apartheid," and a plethora of other practicesâ€”from segregated schooling to the very definition of Israel as "the nation state of one people onlyâ€”the Jewish peopleâ€”and no other people" in the words of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahuâ€”make "apartheid" merely a descriptive term for the reality of present-day Israel. [\[17\]](#) [\[18\]](#)

Conditions are even worse in the Gaza Strip. It has been under military occupationâ€”along with the West Bankâ€”since 1967. And since 2007, Israel has imposed a blockade on Gaza with the assistance of Egypt,

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controlling the land border, access to the Mediterranean Sea, and the airspace above Gaza.

This has been condemned as collective punishment in violation of international law by the International Committee of the Red Cross. [19] The state of utilities in Gaza is horrific: more than 90 percent of the water is undrinkable, and it has severe electricity shortages, receiving as little as four hours of electricity per day. [20]

A UN report from 2015 concluded that Gaza, home to a predominantly refugee population of nearly 2 million Palestinians, could be uninhabitable as soon as 2020. [21] In addition, the blockade has contributed to driving unemployment in Gaza up to 43 percent overall and 60 percent for youth. [22]

Israeli official Dov Weisglass summarized the strategy of the blockade by saying, "The idea is put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger." [23] This has earned Gaza the title of "the world's largest open air prison." [24]

In order to end Israel's multifaceted system of oppression against Palestinians, it is the task of people of conscience everywhere to take up the international BDS call [25] until Israel meets the three demands that are essential for any just peace agreement:

â€” Ending the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the separation wall.

â€” Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality.

â€” Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

This means campaigning for institutions to: withdraw all financial holding in Israeli companies and other companies operating within Israel and the Occupied Territories; sever all ties with Israeli universities and other government institutions; and end all research activity funded by the Israeli government or intended for developing technology for surveillance and "security" purposes in the West Bank and Gaza. [26] [<https://socialistworker.org/2014/02/27/who-is-afraid-of-bds>]]

Apartheid in South Africa crumbled under the weight of mass struggle divestment campaigns by supporters internationally. We can now help bring Israeli apartheid to an end.

May 15, 2018

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- [2] http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/1994/674
- [3] <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-destruction-of-palestinian-villages-is-not-a-matter-of-perspective-1.5381430>
- [4] <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/MAGAZINE-testimonies-from-the-censored-massacre-at-deir-yassin-1.5494094>
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- [21] <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/09/507762-gaza-could-become-uninhabitable-less-five-years-due-ongoing-development-un>
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- [24] <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/12635-noam-chomsky-my-visit-to-gaza-the-worlds-largest-open-air-prison>

[25] <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>

[26] <http://bdslit.org/full-list/>