

## Is Israel is an Apartheid State?

Some critics of Israel erroneously use the word “apartheid” to describe both Israel as a whole and its treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Afrikaans word apartheid refers to the South African National Party’s system of institutionalized racial segregation by which the white minority-dominated the non-white majority until 1994. The word apartheid also invokes South Africa’s pariah status within the international community. By labeling Israel an apartheid state, Israel’s critics are implicitly arguing that Israel is illegitimate and akin to pre-1994 South Africa and therefore should not continue as a Jewish state. This is a more “politically correct” way to say that Zionism is racism, which is a false claim.

Those using the term apartheid often picture Jews of European ancestry oppressing a darker race of people, the Palestinians. In fact, Israel is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-racial state in which all citizens have equal rights protected by the nation’s democratic system of laws. When individuals and segments of Israeli society feel they are being denied their civil liberties, they have full access to the Israeli courts to seek redress. The Israeli courts have frequently sided with minority communities to protect a full range of individual and community rights.

Using the term apartheid in the Israeli-Palestinian context is particularly unhelpful because it confounds two situations with little in common. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a clash of national aspirations by two separate peoples with historical ties to the same land. Even the majority of Palestinians do not espouse the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state, but rather call for peaceful coexistence of two states for two peoples.

Those who call Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza apartheid refer to a policy of segregation and disfranchisement of the Palestinians within these territories, especially relative to the privileges and preference given to Jewish settlers in these areas. We in Ameinu and our counterparts on the Israeli left agree that Israel’s treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories can at times be dehumanizing and degrading. We have long called for withdrawal from the territories and better treatment of the Palestinians. Yet, Israel’s policies in the West Bank and Gaza must be viewed within the context of the ongoing conflict. Identity cards, checkpoints, security roads and the security barrier all separate the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel, increasing the physical security of Israel’s citizens, who live under the constant threat of physical attack. This balance between easing the pressures on the Palestinian residents and ensuring security for Israelis is complicated and is under constant debate within Israel, often resulting in Palestinian submissions to Israel’s High Court. Critics searching for analogies to the Israel-Palestinian conflict should look at other long-term disputes between neighboring peoples such as the Russians in Chechnya, the Chinese in Tibet or the Indians and Pakistanis in Kashmir, rather than at the institutionalized racism of apartheid.