

Amnesty International and “Apartheid”

February 2022



Introduction

Amnesty International [Amnesty], a once unimpeachable protector of human rights, has fallen to a new low, with its report labelling Israel as “apartheid” inside both pre-1967 Israel and the West Bank. The report, a twisted, one-sided account of a complex conflict, damages local and regional hopes of building peace and advancing a solution between Israel and the Palestinians.

Amnesty’s argument for using the term “apartheid” hinges on alleging that the Jewish State has had an “intention to maintain ... a system of oppression and domination” since its founding moment in 1948. **Israel’s intentions are not “oppression and domination” but rather securing and preserving the national self-determination and freedom of the Jewish people, and protecting the lives of its citizens, Jewish and Arab, from military and terrorist threats.**

1. Repeating the Apartheid Smear

Israel within the 1967 Green Line is a state in which the 21 per cent Arab minority are citizens with voting rights, who play a full role in society. Arab citizens have reached the highest levels in the public sector, serving in the Cabinet, on the Supreme Court, and filling important positions in the civil service. Last week the Israeli Judicial Selection Committee appointed six Arab judges and jurists (out of 19) to prominent positions, half of them women. In 2021, 58,000 students – 17 per cent of all students entering higher education in Israel – were Arab, double the figure from a decade ago.

The Amnesty report decontextualises in order to demonise the State of Israel. It ignores realities inside Israel that do not fit with its anti-Zionist narrative, particularly over the security situation the country faces. For instance, the security barrier is presented as an example of apartheid, yet was a response to waves of suicide bombings of the Second Intifada and saved many lives. In 2002, the year before construction started, 457 Israelis were murdered.

Amnesty’s report excludes all consideration of “violations committed by Palestinian authorities or armed groups” which it writes are “not the focus of this report”. This also ‘decontextualises to demonise’ by making Israeli defensive actions appear motiveless and wanton cruelty against Palestinians rather than legitimate acts of self-defence against a deadly terror threat. The report encases the word “terrorist” in scare quotes, and presents anti-Jewish riots in May 2021 as “peaceful protests,” despite the murder and injury of Jewish civilians and the widespread vandalism of Jewish-owned property and synagogues. While Amnesty decries the Israeli revocation of residency status of four Jerusalemites in 2006, NGO Monitor observes that, the four men in question were all Hamas members - [Muhammad Abu Tir](#), [Ahmad Attoun](#), [Muhammad Totah](#) and [Khaled Abu Arafah](#).

The report erases from historical memory Israeli attempts to achieve peace by negotiations and of the serial Palestinian rejections. As Salo Aizenberg argued in [Fathom](#) in 2021, “This erasure sustains the libel that Israel is an ‘apartheid state’ seeking ‘permanent occupation’ and underpins a ludicrously uncritical attitude to the Palestinian national movement, its leadership, and aspects of its political culture.”

Amnesty’s description of the Gaza blockade ignores the findings of the UN-led 2011 Palmer Commission which stated: “Israel faces a real threat to its security from militant groups in Gaza ... the naval blockade was imposed as a legitimate security measure in order to prevent weapons from entering Gaza by sea and its implementation complied with the requirements of international law.” Israeli self-defence to restore deterrence against the Iran-backed Hamas and

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is anathematised by Amnesty as unjustified Israeli aggression. The report mentions Hamas and the four Israeli-Hamas escalations over the last decade, but inverts the truth by accusing Israel of being the aggressor. Whilst Hamas is given free ride over the impact of its thousands of indiscriminate rockets fired toward Israeli communities and homes.

Amnesty calls for the “right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees”, not to a new Palestinian state but to Israel itself. Thus instead of promoting the internationally accepted paradigm of ‘two states for two peoples’, with Israelis and Palestinians fulfilling their rights of self-determination in separate states, this would result in two majority-Palestinian states – one in Israel and one in the West Bank.

2. Hopeful Developments Ignored

The report ignores a series of positive developments that the international community can build on in the pursuit of peace and equality in 2022 and beyond.

Unprecedented Israeli Coalition Government with Arab participation

The current Israeli government consists of eight parties, including for the first time the Islamist United Arab Party (Ra’am), headed by Mansour Abbas. Amnesty’s charge that a Jewish state is by nature “apartheid” contradicts the view of Abbas, who recently recognised Israel as a Jewish state. Abbas said: “The State of Israel was born as a Jewish state. It is the decision of the people and the question is not what the identity of the state is. It was born this way and will remain that way.” He also noted, “The question is how to integrate Arab society into it ... there is no doubt that we are on the threshold of a new era, and I say this cautiously and hope that the process will succeed, and that the coalition-level partnership will be a trend towards more different partnerships in the industry and more.” The present Israeli Knesset (parliament) also consists of 14 Arab MKs from six different parties.

The government has made progress in reducing the gap between Jewish and Arab communities in Israel. Recently, the government approved a 2022-2026 socioeconomic development programme worth 30bn shekel (over £7bn) for the Arab community. Of that, NIS 9.4bn (£2.2bn) is allocated to improve healthcare, social welfare, and education, as well as £52.8m to encourage Arab citizens of Israel and other minorities to enter the high-tech sector, encourage new tech entrepreneurs, promote innovation and to better incorporate them in the industry. The government is also working to address the rising rate of crime within Arab society. Plans include new police stations in Arab towns, heightened police operations on the street, the drafting of more officers and establishing new units to prosecute gangs.

The Abraham Accords

The report’s purpose of demonising and delegitimising Israel is inconsistent with the progress of peace-making in the region. The Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco has shown the true possibility of tolerance and coexistence. Since their signing in September 2020, Israeli-Arab relations have grown at a considerable pace and expanded into cooperation across several key sectors.

The agreements explicitly acknowledge that the shared heritage of the Abrahamic religions should be the new foundation for the relationship. Specifically, the Abraham Accords state that this shared heritage should be the basis for “a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding, and mutual respect”. In contrast, Amnesty adopts the narrative of extremists and rejectionists that foster a destructive ‘boycott activism’ in the West, and damage the chances of compromise, mutual recognition and further reconciliation efforts in the region.

After several years of stagnation in the peace process, the Bennett-Lapid coalition recognises the benefits of enhancing political and economic stability in the West Bank, as well as building trust and offering confidence building measures (CBMs). Defence Minister Gantz has met twice with PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, most recently hosting him in his home at the end of December. After the meeting, Israel approved a series of CBMs, including approving the status on a humanitarian basis for 6000 West Bank residents, and an additional status approval for 3500 Gaza residents; advancing the transfer of tax payments worth NIS 100 million; and an additional approval of 600 business cards for Palestinian businesspeople, 500 additional permits for businesspeople to enter Israel with their vehicles, and dozens of VIP permits for PA senior officials.

3. The Historical Context of the Apartheid Smear

The “Apartheid” charge originated as an act of political warfare during the ‘anti-Zionist’ campaigns waged by the Communist states during the Cold War. These campaigns frequently descended into antisemitism, with the word ‘Zionist’ understood by all as a fig-leaf for ‘Jew’.

The second key moment came in 1975 when the Soviet Bloc, the authoritarian Arab states, and the so-called ‘Non-Aligned Movement’ used their built-in majority at the UN General Assembly to pass Resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism.

The third moment arrived in 2001 after the failure of the Camp David peace talks. A group of NGOs and anti-Israel activists hijacked the UN’s World Conference against Racism, Racial Intolerance and Xenophobia in Durban, South Africa to launch a global campaign to demonise Israel as an “apartheid state”.

This latest Amnesty report follows others last year by the Human Rights Watch and the Israeli NGO B’Tzelem, that appear to be part of a wider campaign to delegitimise the State of Israel.

Conclusion

In addition to decontextualising Israeli actions and ignoring recent positive events, the “Apartheid” framework is also a poor and counter-productive paradigm for understanding the century-long conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is best understood as an unresolved national dispute between two peoples, both of whom have legitimate claims for national self-determination, but who have failed so far to divide the land between them. As Benjamin Pogrund, former anti-apartheid activist, former deputy editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, and a friend of Nelson Mandela put it: ‘Applying the word “apartheid” to Israelis is both factually wrong and politically naïve.’ The late veteran left wing Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery has argued that, “The mistaken assumption that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resembles the South African experience leads to a mistaken choice of strategy. The Israeli policy is not based on race theories, but on a national conflict.”

Amnesty has a legitimate role in holding all governments and powers to account for human rights violations. It doesn’t have a legitimate role in deciding that the Jewish people are not entitled to national self-determination and a state where they are the majority, when the existence of such a state is the Jewish people’s only guaranteed shield against pogroms and genocide.

For a fuller discussion of the apartheid smear see Alan Johnson ‘[The Apartheid Smear](#)’ (BICOM, 2014), which will be revised and updated in 2022.

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