

Taking Apartheid Apart

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IS ISRAEL AN apartheid state? This question is not going away. It raises its head every few months.

The term “apartheid” is often used purely for propaganda purposes. Apartheid, like racism and fascism, is a rhetorical term one uses to denigrate one’s opponent.

But apartheid is also a term with a precise content. It applies to a specific regime. Equating another regime to it may be accurate, partly correct or just wrong. So, necessarily, will be the conclusions drawn from the comparison.

RECENTLY I had the opportunity to discuss this subject with an expert, who had lived in South Africa throughout the apartheid era. I learned a lot from this.

Is Israel an apartheid state? Well, first one must settle the question: which Israel? Israel proper, within the Green Line, or the Israeli occupation regime in the occupied Palestinian territories, or both together?

Let’s come back to that later.

THE DIFFERENCES between the two cases are obvious.

First, the South Africa regime was based, as with their Nazi mentors, on the theory of racial superiority. Racism was its official creed. The Zionist ideology of Israel is not racist, in this sense, but rather based on a mixture of nationalism and religion, though the early Zionists were mostly atheists.

The founders of Zionism always rejected accusations of racism as absurd. It’s the anti-Semites who are racist. Zionists were liberal, socialist, progressive.¹

Then there are the numbers. In South Africa there was a huge black majority. Whites were about a fifth of the population.

In Israel proper, the Arab citizens constitute a minority of about 20%. In the total territory under Israeli rule between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, the numbers of Jews and Arabs are roughly equal. The Arabs may by now constitute a small majority—precise numbers are hard to come by. This Arab majority is bound to grow slowly larger as time passes.

Furthermore, the white economy in South Africa was totally dependent on black labor. At the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip in

1967, the Zionist insistence on “Jewish Labor” came to an end and cheap Arab labor from the “territories” flooded Israel. However, with the beginning of the first intifada this development was stopped with surprising speed. Large numbers of foreign workers were imported: Eastern Europeans and Chinese for the building trade, Thais for agriculture, Philipinos for personal care, etc.

It is now one of the main jobs of the Israeli army to prevent Palestinians from illegally crossing the “de facto border” into Israel to seek work.

This is a fundamental difference between the two cases, one that has a profound impact on the possible solutions.

Sadly, in the West Bank, the Palestinians are widely employed in the building of the settlements and work in the enterprises there, which my friends and I have called to boycott. The economic misery of the population drives them to this perverse situation.

In Israel proper, Arab citizens complain about discrimination, which limits their employment in Jewish enterprises and government offices. The authorities regularly promise to do something about this kind of discrimination.

On the whole, the situation of the Arab minority inside Israel proper is much like that of many national minorities in Europe and elsewhere. They enjoy equality under the law, vote for parliament, are represented by very lively parties of their own, but in practice suffer discrimination in many areas. To call this apartheid would be grossly misleading.

I ALWAYS thought that one of the major differences was that the Israeli regime in the occupied territories expropriates Palestinian lands for Jewish settlements. This includes private property and so-called “government lands”.

In Ottoman times, the land reserves of the towns and villages were registered in the name of the Sultan. Under the British, these lands became government property, and they remained so under the Jordanian regime. When Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, these lands were taken over by the occupation regime and turned over to the settlers, depriving the Palestinian towns and villages of the land reserves they need for natural increase.

By the way, after the 1948 war, huge stretches of Arab land in Israel were expropriated and a wide array of laws

¹As far as I know, only one Zionist leader had openly endorsed racism: Arthur Ruppin, the German Jew who was the father of the Zionist settlements in the early 20th century.

enacted for this purpose—not only the “absentee” property of the refugees, but also lands of Arabs who were declared “present absentees”—an absurd term meaning people who had not left Israel during the war but had left their villages. And the “government lands” in the part of Palestine that had become Israel also served to settle the masses of new Jewish immigrants who streamed into the country.

I always thought that in this respect we were worse than South Africa. Not so, said my friend, the apartheid government did exactly the same, deporting Blacks to certain areas and grabbing their land for Whites Only.

I ALWAYS thought that in South Africa all the Whites were engaged in the fight against all the Blacks. However, it appears that both sides were profoundly divided.

On the white side, there were the Afrikaners, the descendants of Dutch settlers, speaking a Dutch dialect called Afrikaans, and the British who spoke English. These were two communities of roughly equal size who disliked each other intensely. The British despised the unsophisticated Afrikaners, the Afrikaners hated the effete British. Indeed, the apartheid party called itself “nationalist” mainly because it considered itself a nation born in the country, while the British were attached to their homeland.²

The black population was also divided into many communities and tribes who did not like each other, making it difficult for them to unite for the liberation struggle.

THE SITUATION in the West Bank is in many ways similar to the apartheid regime.

Since Oslo, the West Bank is divided into areas A, B and C, in which Israeli rule is exercised in different ways. In South Africa, there were many different Bantustans (“homelands”) with different regimes. Some were officially fully autonomous, others were partly so. All were enclaves surrounded by white territories.

In certain respects, the situation in South Africa was at least officially better than in the West Bank. Under South Africa law, the Blacks were at least officially “separate but equal”. The general law applied to all. This is not the case in our occupied territories, where the local population is subject to military law, which is quite arbitrary, while their settler neighbors are subject to Israeli civil law.

ONE CONTENTIOUS question: how far—if at all—did the international boycott contribute to the downfall of the apartheid regime?

When I asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu, he answered that the effect was mainly moral. It raised the morale of the black community. My new friend said the same—but applied it to the Whites. Their morale was undermined.

How much did this contribute to the victory? My friend estimated: about 30%.

The economic effect was minor. The psychological effect was far more important. The Whites considered themselves the vanguard of the West in the fight against communism. The ungratefulness of the West stunned them. (They would have wholeheartedly subscribed to the promise of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, that the future Jewish state would be the vanguard of Europe and a wall against Asiatic—viz. Arab—barbarism.)

It was no accident that apartheid broke down a few years after the collapse of the Soviet empire. The US lost interest. Can this happen in our relations with the US, too?³

THE AREA where the boycott hit the apartheid people the most was sports. Cricket is a national obsession in South Africa. When they could no longer take part in international competitions, they felt the blow. Their self-confidence was broken.

Their international isolation forced them to think more deeply about the morality of apartheid. There was more and more self-questioning. In the final elections after the agreement, many Whites, including many Afrikaners, voted for the end of apartheid.

Will a boycott of Israel have the same effect? I doubt it. Jews are used to being isolated. “The whole world against us” is, for them, a natural situation. Indeed, I sometimes have the feeling that many Jews feel uncomfortable when the situation is different.

One huge difference between the two cases is that all South Africans—black, white, “coloured” or Indian—wanted one state. There were no takers for partition.⁴

In our case, a large majority on each side wants to live in a state of their own. The idea of a unified country, in which Hebrew-speaking Jewish Israelis and Arabic-speaking Palestinians will live side-by-side as equals, serving in the same army and paying the same taxes does not appeal to them at all.

APARTHEID WAS brought down by the Blacks themselves. No crypto-colonialist condescension can obscure this fact.

The mass strikes of African workers, on whom the white economy depended, made the position of the ruling Whites impossible. The mass uprising of the Blacks, who displayed immense physical courage, was decisive. In the end, the Blacks liberated themselves.

And another difference: in South Africa there was a Nelson Mandela and a Frederik de Klerk.

²I am told that the Afrikaners called the British “salty penis”, because they stood with one foot in South Africa and with the other in Britain, so that their sexual organ dipped into the ocean.

³By the way, young South African blacks who were sent by the African National Congress to the Soviet Union to study were shocked by the racism they met there. “They are worse than our Whites,” they commented.

⁴David Ben-Gurion, a great advocate of Palestine-style partition, once proposed concentrating all the Whites in South Africa in the Cape region and establishing there an Israel-style white state. No one was interested. A similar proposal by Ben-Gurion for Algeria met the same fate.