



OCCUPATION, COLONIALISM, APARTHEID?  
A RE-ASSESSMENT OF ISRAEL'S PRACTICES IN THE OPT  
UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW

PALESTINIAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY, RAMALLAH, 16 AUGUST 2009



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— SYMPOSIUM PROCEEDINGS —

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## The Other Apartheid Regime

*Ronnie Kasrils*

It is a great honour to be invited by **AL-HAQ** to address your conference. Please accept warm brotherly greetings from Cape Town to all distinguished participants. I hope you have managed to arrive safely in Ramallah on the embattled West Bank of Palestine. We may be separated by the length of Africa but you have close friends and allies here at the southern end of the continent.

Your organisation **AL-HAQ** has been serving the cause of Palestinian human rights in a dedicated and active way for 30 years. May I acknowledge the tireless work of **SHAWAN JABARIN**. I wish him the best in overcoming the vindictive travel restrictions placed on him by Israel. I hope we can host him in South Africa soon.

I am delighted to be greeting my friends from **ADALAH**. We had fruitful meetings with **HASSAN JABAREEN** and **RINA ROSENBERG** and their delegation in South Africa. Their contribution to the Human Sciences Research Council Report (HSRC South Africa) which you are considering was invaluable. Ties of solidarity between our people have been strengthening. The visit of bereaved family members of the October 2000 martyrs – the 13 killed during peaceful protests in the north of Israel – has left a lasting impression. I would also like to single out the visit last year of the Members of the Knesset, led by the Chairman of the High Follow-up Committee, **SHAWKI AL-KHATIB**, which was both historic and momentous. They met with government ministers, parliamentarians and civil society.

A special thanks to **JOHN REYNOLDS**, who contributed in very important ways to the HSRC Report. He was central to organising this meeting and to carrying the work of this important Report forward.

I have visited the West Bank several times and have the highest regard for the work of Palestinian lawyers, and other professionals, alongside activists and the populous, under the terrible conditions of Israeli occupation. Like many fellow South Africans I have been deeply moved by such visits because your conditions remind us of what we experienced under apartheid. In fact we never experienced such dehumanisation as the monstrous Apartheid Wall; the prolonged collective punishment and killings you are forced to endure; the ferocity of the bombardment of Gaza early in the year. Archbishop Tutu himself has observed that such things happen in Israel that never happened in apartheid South Africa. (London Guardian, 28 May, 2009).

The system of dispossession of land and birthright, the separation and domination that Israel has imposed on Palestinians, recalls for us the cruel system of apartheid which we were finally able to defeat – despite its formidable power and resources.

The HSRC Report subjects that comparison between Palestine and South Africa to a rigorous moral and legal examination of the highest order. Two of our most eminent South African legal scholars were involved - **JOHN DUGARD** and **MAX DU PLESSIS** – with other notable experts. I will return to the Report in due course.

It is ironic to note that even the architect of apartheid, Dr. Verwoerd, stated as long ago as 1961 (for reasons of his own) that “Israel like South Africa, is an apartheid state” (*Rand Daily Mail*, 23 November 1961).

He understood that both were colonial, settler states created through the dispossession of the land of the indigenous people. This is unblushingly documented in Israel's case from the time of Herzl through Jabotinsky and Ben Gurion to Moshe Dayan and Sharon et al. Both states preached and implemented a policy based on racial ethnicity; the sole claim of Jews in Israel and whites in South Africa to exclusive citizenship; monopolised rights in law regarding the ownership of land, property, business; superior access to education, health, social, sporting and cultural amenities; huge advantages in pensions and municipal services; exclusive membership of military and security forces, and privileged development along racial supremacist lines. The fact that the Palestinian minority within Israel is allowed to vote hardly redresses the injustice in all other matters of basic human rights. In any case those Palestinians allowed to stand for election to the Knesset do so on condition that they dare not question Israel's existence as a Jewish state.

Within a few years of coming to power in 1948, in the same month as Israel's declaration of independence, South Africa's apartheid regime was ruthlessly cleansing cities and towns of so-called “black spots” - where the “non-whites” lived - bulldozing homes, loading families onto military trucks, and forcibly relocating them to distant settlements.

Whilst Verwoerd did not live to see the division of Palestinian territory after the 1967 Six Day War, he would have admired the machinations that have enclosed the Palestinians in their own ghettoised prisons. This after all was the Verwoerdian grand plan, and the reason why Jimmy Carter could so readily identify the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) as being akin to apartheid. In fact the Bantustans consisted of 13% of apartheid South Africa, uncannily comparable to the ever shrinking pieces of ground Israel consigns to the Palestinians - a mere 12% of pre-1948 Palestine.

When I visited Yasser Arafat in his demolished headquarters in Ramallah as part of a South African delegation in 2004, he pointed around him and said “See this is nothing but a Bantustan!” No, we responded, pointing out that no Bantustan had ever been bombed by warplanes or pulverised by tanks. To a wide-eyed Arafat we pointed out that Pretoria pumped in funds, constructed impressive administration buildings, even allowed for Bantustan airlines in order to impress the world that they were serious about so-called “separate development.” The Bantustans were not even fenced-in.

But it was not only the racial doctrine of Israel that excited apartheid leaders. It was the use of the biblical narrative as the ideological rationale to justify its aims and methods. The early Dutch pioneers, the Afrikaners, had used Bible and gun as colonisers elsewhere, to carve out their exclusive fortress bastion. Like the biblical Israelites they claimed to be “God's chosen people” with a mission to tame and civilise the wilderness. They invoked a covenant with God to deliver their enemies into their hands and to bless their deeds. Until the advent of South Africa's democracy, the racial history books generally taught that the white man arrived in South Africa more or less as the so-called “Bantu tribes” were migrating from the north. They fashioned this myth to claim, like the Zionists, that they were pioneer settlers in a land devoid of people.

It is for such reasons as these that we South Africans understand the reality of your situation. It is important, however, that our observations and experiences are reinforced by rigorous research and analysis.

## THE HSRC REPORT'S FINDINGS

The HSRC Report confirms that what Israel is imposing in the occupied Palestinian territories is indeed a regime of apartheid.

It is also a regime of settler colonialism, similar to the one that shaped our lives in South Africa.

So clearly, what Israel is doing to you is very similar to what the apartheid government imposed in South Africa.

I agree entirely with the final conclusion of the Report, that the two cases share three pillars of similarities. These are

- (1) the separation of Jews and Palestinians on essentially racial grounds,
- (2) division of the populations into geographic zones, confining the Palestinians into special reserves, which we called Bantustans, and
- (3) draconian security laws to enforce this separation.

The HSRC Report indicates that this policy is not driven by a few religious extremists but is part and parcel of an official state doctrine of Jewish statehood and Jewish domination over Palestinians and your land. It clearly runs as deeply in Israeli government policy and ideology as the same doctrine ran through apartheid South African government policy. The HSRC Report especially confirms what we have suspected, namely that Israel intends to create and confine the remaining Palestinian population into Bantustan statelets in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We learned in South Africa that the Bantustans were not stages or steps to eventual equality, but were clearly meant as dead-end traps. They pretended to provide African people with self-determination and independence in the so-called Homelands. But they actually relegated black South Africans to a life of dictatorship and poverty, denying their fundamental rights and freedoms in their own country. They also trapped white people in a state of permanent conflict and war.

## LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa, we defeated that formula by rejecting the premise of separation itself:

- By challenging the racism at the heart of apartheid, we gained internal unity and the moral high ground.
- By adopting a clear public platform to reject racial discrimination at its root, we gained the support of the world.
- And by making our struggle a universal one, based on universal values, we defeated apartheid.

This was by no means a clear-cut or easy process. It took long and hard debate within our national movement, in its early decades, to gain unity on the mission of creating one non-racial democracy in South Africa — a state for all its citizens in which indigenous Africans, and those of Asian and European descent, could share as equals. It took years of difficult struggle to overcome countless attempts at fermenting disunity amongst us. These included the promise of material reward and bribery, promotion of rivalry, phoney independence in the Bantustans, encouragement of ethnic violence and racism, sinister work of state agents and spies etc.

The unity we achieved was not the work of one man. Nelson Mandela was our most famous leader, but many dedicated people — professionals and workers, women and men like you - were involved in building the movement into a united and invincible force for change. One obvious question that arises from this comparison is the one-state/two-state debate. I will not take a position on that question because that is an internal Palestinian matter. It remains for Palestinians to decide how to determine what this Report means for your own struggle. But

clearly the HSRC Report has come out at a time when many people are questioning the possibilities of the two-state programme. Some believe it is leading you directly toward a Bantustan future. New thinking on the conflict and the future of Palestinian national rights is urgently needed.

I do not need to tell you that current divisions in Palestinian politics are clearly blocking such new thinking. These bitter divisions are largely a product of Israeli intervention and external factors. But it will obviously be difficult to restore Palestinian unity as long as the USA and Israel are intervening to create and sustain division. And I need not tell you that there is no hope for a Palestinian state if all that President Obama can demand of Netanyahu is the freezing of existing settlement construction.

So clearly, deeper questions must be addressed, including what this finding of apartheid means for Palestinians, for your choices, and for your leadership. This conference can be an important opening for that project. Understanding the character of the state of Israel – as a racist, colonial, apartheid state – has important consequences from which so many things flow such as:

- a renewal of the unity Palestinians enjoyed in the past;
- how you identify your adversary and your prospective allies;
- strategy, tactics and methods of struggle;
- the way you mobilise on your home-ground and internationally;
- the prospects for isolating and weakening the present illegitimate Israeli apartheid state;
- the kind of society you aspire to.

It is a truism to say that in the first place you must build your own unity. What must be essential is the combining of your forces wherever Palestinians find themselves: West Bank, Gaza, within Israel and in your Diaspora. If you succeed in bringing those four contingents together, you have the potential to become an irresistible force. Once you achieve such unity, behind a common programme of action, millions of decent people around the world will be galvanised into action behind the growing campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). Progressive Jews within Israel, and those beyond, will rally to your just cause as whites within South Africa came to support the liberation of Africans. Pressure on governments presently supporting Israel will mount. Reactionary forces within Israel will become isolated. This process will help to force change.

Having quoted Dr. Verwoerd may I conclude with the words of Nelson Mandela who famously stated in 1997: “The UN took a strong stand against apartheid; and over the years an international consensus was built, which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system. But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.”

*Ronnie Kasrils was a leading figure in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. He is a former Deputy Defence Minister (1994-99), Water Affairs and Forestry Minister (1999-2004) and Intelligence Minister (2004-2008) in the South African government.*