

B'Tselem: We are the largest human rights group in Israel and we call this apartheid

You cannot live a single day in Israel-Palestine without the feeling that this place is constantly manipulated in order to privilege one people, and one people only: the Jewish people. But half of those who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea are Palestinians. That gap between these lived realities fills the air, it bleeds, it is everywhere in this land.

I am not simply referring to the official pronouncements that are formulated in detail, and there are plenty of them, such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 2019 assertion that "Israel is not a state of all its citizens," or the fundamental law of the "nation state" that enshrines "the development of Jewish settlements as a national value." What I am trying to get at a deeper sense of people as desirable or undesirable, and an understanding of my country that I have been exposed to since the day I was born in Haifa. Today, it is an awareness that can no longer be avoided.

While there is demographic parity between the two peoples living here, life is managed in such a way that only one half manages the vast majority of political power, land resources, rights, freedoms, forms of protection. It is quite a feat to maintain this dispossession. To make matters worse, it is to successfully sell it as a democracy (within the "green line", the 1949 armistice line), to which a temporary occupation is attached. In fact, it is a government that dominates everything and everyone between the river and the sea, following the same organizing principle everywhere under its control, working to advance and perpetuate the supremacy of one group of people – the Jews – over another: the

Palestinians. This is apartheid.

There is not a single inch of land in the territory Israel controls where a Palestinian and a Jew are equal. Here the only first-class people are Jewish citizens like me, and we enjoy this status both within the 1967 lines and beyond, in the West Bank. Separated by the different statuses assigned to them, and by the many variations of inferiority to which Israel subjects them, Palestinians living under Israeli rule are united by the fact that they are all unequal.

Unlike South African apartheid, the application of our version of it – apartheid 2.0, if you will – avoids certain kinds of ugliness. We're not going to find "Whites Only" signs on the benches to sit on. Here "protecting the Jewish character" of a community – or of the state itself – is one of the thinly veiled euphemisms deployed to try to obscure the truth. But the essence is the same. That definitions of Israel do not depend on skin color makes no material difference: it is the supremacist reality that is the crux of the matter, and that which must be defeated.

Until the passage of the nation-state law, the key lesson Israel seemed to have learned from South African apartheid was to avoid overly explicit statements and laws. These run the risk of provoking moral judgments, and ultimately, heaven forbid, real consequences. On the contrary, the patient, quiet and gradual accumulation of discriminatory practices tends to prevent repercussions from the international community, especially if one is willing to pay a lot of service to its norms and expectations.

This is how Jewish supremacy is achieved and enforced on both sides of the green line.

We demographically manipulate the composition of the population by striving to increase the number of Jews and limit the number of Palestinians. We allow Jewish migration –

with automatic citizenship – anywhere Israel controls. For Palestinians, the opposite is true: they cannot acquire personal status anywhere outside the controls, even if their family is from here.

We manipulate power through the assignment – or denial – of political rights. All Jewish citizens (and all Jews can become citizens), but less than a quarter of Palestinians under Israeli rule, enjoy citizenship and can therefore vote. On March 23, when Israelis go to vote for the fourth time in two years, it will not be a “celebration of democracy,” as elections are often called. Rather, it will be another day when Palestinians, excluded, watch others determine their future.

We manipulate control of land by expropriating huge portions of Palestinian land, keeping it out of reach for Palestinian development, or using it to build Jewish cities, neighborhoods and settlements. Inside the green line, we have been doing this since the state was established in 1948. In East Jerusalem and the West Bank, this is what we have been doing since the occupation began in 1967. The result is that Palestinian communities – anywhere between the river and the sea – face a reality of demolitions, displacement, impoverishment and agglomeration, while the very resources of the land are awarded to new Jewish developments.

And we manipulate – or rather, restrict – the movement of Palestinians. The majority, who are neither citizens nor residents, depend on Israeli permits and checkpoints to travel between one area and another, as well as to travel internationally. For the two million in the Gaza Strip, travel restrictions are most severe: it is not just a Bantustan, for Israel has turned it into one of the largest open-air prisons on earth.

Haifa, my hometown, was a binational reality of demographic parity until 1948. Of some 70,000 Palestinians living in Haifa

before the Nakba, less than a tenth remained. Almost 73 years have passed since then and today Israel-Palestine is a binational reality of demographic parity. I was born here. I want – and intend – to stay. But I want – I demand – to live in a very different future.

The past represents traumas and injustices. In the present, even more injustices are reproduced. The future must be radically different: a rejection of supremacy, built on a commitment to justice and our shared humanity. Calling a spade a spade – “apartheid” – is not a moment of despair: rather, it is a moment of moral clarity, a step on a long journey inspired by hope. To see reality for what it is, to name it without shrinking from it, and to help it bring about the materialization of a just future.