

ISRAEL/PALESTINE: APARTHEID OF A SPECIAL TYPE?

Ran Greenstein

(University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

One approach to challenging the ‘apartheid of a special type’ in Israel/Palestine would be to foster bi-nationalism. This, argues Ran Greenstein, would accommodate members of both national groups as equals, and would facilitate negotiation underpinned by the discourse and values of democracy, justice, equality and human rights, rather than those of diplomacy and statehood.

In the last decade, the notion that the Israeli system of political and military control bears strong resemblance to the apartheid system in South Africa has gained ground. It is invoked regularly by movements and activists opposed to the 1967 occupation and to other aspects of Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinian-Arab people. It is denounced regularly by official Israeli spokespersons and unofficial apologists. The more empirical and theoretical discussion of the nature of the respective regimes and their trajectories has become marginalized in the process. Only a few studies pursue such comparison with analytical rigour. (Exceptions are my book *Genealogies of Conflict; Liberation and Democratization* by Mona Younis; and Hilla Dayan’s chapter “Regimes of Separation” in the 2009 volume *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion*).

There are three crucial distinctions we must make in order to avoid the usual conceptual and political muddle that afflict the debate.



Palestine Mandate Stamp
UK Government, Public Domain

First, we need to consider which Israel is our topic of concern: Israel as it exists today, with boundaries extending from the Mediterranean to the river Jordan, or Israel as it existed before 1967, along the Green Line? Is it Israel as a state that encompasses all its citizens, within the Green Line and beyond? Israel as it defines itself, or as it is defined by others? And which definition is legitimate according to international law? Which boundaries (geographical, political, ideological and moral) are most relevant to our discussion? What are their implications for our understanding of the nature of the regime?

Perhaps the central question in this respect is the relationship between three components: ‘Israel

proper’ (within its pre-1967 boundaries), ‘Greater Israel’ (within the post-1967 boundaries), and ‘Greater Palestine’ (a demographic rather than geographic concept, covering all Arabs who trace their origins to pre-1948 Palestine). While discussion of the relationship between the first two components is common, the third component – and its relevance to the apartheid analogy – is usually ignored.

Second, we need to distinguish between historical apartheid (the specific system that prevailed in South Africa between 1948 and 1994), and the generic notion of apartheid that stands for an oppressive system which allocates political and social rights in a differentiated manner based on people’s origins (including but not restricted to race). This is especially the case as some features of apartheid in South Africa changed during the course of its own historical evolution and thus cannot serve as a benchmark in evaluating other political systems.

the generic notion of apartheid that stands for an oppressive system which allocates political and social rights in a differentiated manner based on people’s origins

Third, we need to distinguish between the extent of similarity of South African laws, structures and practices to their Israeli equivalents, and consequent strategies of political change. Even if we conclude that there is a great degree of structural similarity between the two states, it would not tell us much about how we can apply political strategies used successfully in the former case to the latter case. Neither would it tell us much about the direction in which the Israeli system of control is heading. For that we need to undertake a concrete analysis of

Israeli/Palestinian societies, their local and international allegiances, bases of support, vulnerabilities, and so on.

WHAT IS APARTHEID?

The International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 1973, regards apartheid as “a crime against humanity” and a violation of international law. Apartheid means “similar policies and practices of racial segregation and discrimination as practised in southern Africa ... committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them”. A long list of such practices ensues, including “denial to a member or members of a racial group or groups of the right to life and liberty of person ... by the infringement of their freedom or dignity”, and measures “calculated to prevent a racial group or groups from participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country and the deliberate creation of conditions preventing the full development of such a group or groups”. In addition, this includes measures “designed to divide the population along racial lines by the creation of separate reserves and ghettos for the members of a racial group or groups, the prohibition of mixed marriages among members of various racial groups, the expropriation of landed property belonging to a racial group or groups or to members thereof”. (<http://www.anc.org.za/un/un-crime.htm>)

This is not an exhaustive list – and not all practices must be present simultaneously to qualify as



Qalqilya Apartheid Wall / Palestine
Flickr: Freepal

apartheid – but it is based on key elements of South African apartheid. If we focus on the notion of race, the definition clearly is not relevant to the relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Both groups are racially diverse and cannot be distinguished on the basis of physical appearance.

Having said that, we must consider that race – just like apartheid – is a term that can apply beyond its conceptual and geographical origins. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1965, applies the term racial discrimination to “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.” (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cerd.htm>).

Putting together the two Conventions, we end up with a definition of apartheid as a set of policies and practices of legal discrimination, political exclusion, and social marginalization, based on racial, national or ethnic origins. This definition obviously draws on South African apartheid but cannot be reduced to it. Our attention should be directed to the actual practices of the state, and the extent to which they are exclusionary or discriminatory, rather than to the degree of similarity to the historical case of apartheid South Africa. We should be interested in the substance of political and social arrangements rather than in the labels we can stick on them. How this definition, then, applies to Israel in substantive terms is a key theme addressed here.

The starting point for this discussion is that it is impossible to look at Israel in isolation from the occupied territories. In other words, regardless of legal distinctions, Greater Israel is the effective boundary of control and meaningful unit of political analysis. Recent work by critical Israeli scholars such as Yehouda Shenhav, Meron Benvenisti, Neve Gordon, Oren Yiftachel, Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, makes this point powerfully, even if they do not all agree about details of the analysis. Greater Palestine is another essential part of the picture even though it lies beyond the 1948 and 1967 boundaries. In fact, how Palestinians from the ‘beyond’ came to occupy that position, and remain there against their will, is part of the system of control which is left largely unaddressed. Perhaps uniquely in modern history, the Israeli regime was founded historically – and continues to be based – on the forcible exclusion of a large part of its potential citizens. How to conceptualize this state of affairs remains a challenge.

it is impossible to look at Israel in isolation from the occupied territories Greater Israel is the effective boundary of control and meaningful unit of political analysis

Despite the rise of an integrated system of domination over all of Greater Israel, many critical voices direct attention to the occupied territories and use the apartheid label to describe and condemn Israeli control there. Famous references to the notion of apartheid in Israel/Palestine by former US President Jimmy Carter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and John Dugard, the rapporteur for the UN Commission on Human Rights, are restricted to Israeli practices of occupation and do not deal with Israel 'proper'. This is the case also for the 2009 report by the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), titled "Occupation, Colonialism, Apartheid".

That the conceptual distinction between Israel and the occupied territories is still so entrenched, even though Israel has occupied the territories for 43 years out of its 62 years of existence, is a testimony to the success of its strategy to externalize them from its body politic while retaining effective control over them. It is also a testimony to the spirit of nationalist resistance to the occupation (in the territories) and struggle for equal rights by Palestinian citizens of Israel.

COMPARISON TO SOUTH AFRICA

In a nutshell, when we look at different aspects of Israeli policies in comparison to South African apartheid, Palestinian citizens are granted rights that were denied to the majority of black people, occupied Palestinians are treated in much the same

way as black people were treated (especially residents of the 'homelands'), and Palestinian refugees are excluded to a far greater degree than black South Africans ever were. Considering apartheid in the generic sense, then, Israeli policies and practices meet many – not all – of the criteria identified in the international convention on apartheid, with the qualification that they are based on ethno-national rather than racial grounds.

Israeli policies and practices meet many – not all – of the criteria identified in the international convention on apartheid

This does not mean that Israeli society, state, and system of control are indeed the same as those of historical South African apartheid, although they do bear family resemblances. No case is like any other. While the technologies of rule (coercive, legal and physical) used by Israel have largely converged with their apartheid counterparts, crucial differences between the societies remain. These involve ideological motivations, economic strategies, and political configurations. In all these respects, Israel/Palestine shows greater tendency towards exclusion than was the case for South Africa. To understand why that is the case we need to examine historical trajectories.

Contemporary South Africa is the product of a long history, which saw various colonial forces (the Dutch East India Company and the British Empire, Afrikaner and English settlers, missionaries, farming and mining lords and so on), collaborate and compete over the control of various indigenous groups. Over centuries, during a long period of expansion, this pattern created a multi-layered system of domination, collaboration and resistance. White

supremacy was a means to ensure white prosperity, using black labour as its foundation.

During the same period, the nature of resistance changed as well, from early attempts to retain or regain independence to a struggle for incorporation on an equal basis, prompted by the massive presence of indigenous people in the white-dominated economy. The exploitation of their labour gave black people a crucial strategic lever for change due to their indispensable role in ensuring white prosperity. Since the 1930s at least, radical political movements aimed to transform the state rather than form independent political structures. By the late 1970s, white elites had started to realize that apartheid was becoming counter-productive in ensuring prosperity. It was too costly and cumbersome, and increasingly irrational from an economic point of view: it hampered the creation of an internal market and prevented a shift to a technology-oriented growth strategy. The resistance movement that grew after the 1976 Soweto uprising, combined with international pressure and increasing stress on the state's resources and capacity, gave the final push towards a negotiated settlement. This took the form of a unified political framework, within which numerous social struggles continue to unfold.

The South African trajectory can be contrasted with that of Israel/Palestine, which produced two distinct ethno-national groups. The formation of Israel in 1948 and the unfolding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have deepened the divide between the communities (though they also gave rise to Palestinian citizens as an intermediary group). A major reason for this diversion is that settler Jews and indigenous Arabs had started to consolidate their group identities – linked to broader ethno-national



End US Aid to Israel
Flickr: Freepal

collectives – *before* the initial encounter between them, whereas settlers and indigenous people in South Africa formed their collective identities locally in the course of the colonial encounter itself. As a result, the Zionist project has faced indigenous people as an obstacle to be removed from the land in order to clear the way for Jewish immigration into the country. White settlers in South Africa, in contrast, focused on controlling resources and populations (land and labour) to enhance their wealth. Political domination was a means to an economic goal

in South Africa, whereas it has become a goal in its own right in Israel/Palestine.

Political domination was a means to an economic goal in South Africa, whereas it has become a goal in its own right in Israel/Palestine.

On the basis of this trajectory, the founding act of the State of Israel in 1948 was inextricably linked with the *nakba* – the ethnic cleansing of the majority of the indigenous population living in the areas allocated to the new state. This has had contradictory effects: on the one hand, the removal of most Palestinians and the relegation of the rest to the status of a permanently marginalized minority allowed the state to adopt democratic norms premised on Jewish demographic dominance. On the other hand, the same process ensured a permanent external threat from Palestinians who were dispossessed in 1948. Neither outcome had parallels in South Africa under apartheid. With the 1967 occupation, a new component was added to the picture, moving it closer to historical apartheid: a large number of people were incorporated into the Israeli labour market but remained disenfranchised. The state was unwilling to extend to them political rights enjoyed by Palestinian citizens, and unable to impose on them another round of ethnic cleansing. They remain stuck in the middle, subject to a huge legal-military apparatus aimed to ensure their subordination, without annexation and without ethnic ‘purification’.

APARTHEID OF A SPECIAL TYPE

If we de-link historical South African apartheid from its generic form, we no longer need to retain a focus

on South African racial policies and practices. And yet, it would be useful to keep a focus on comparing apartheid South Africa and Israel to highlight crucial features of both regimes. The point of a comparative analysis is *not* to provide a list of similarities and differences but to use some cases in order to reflect critically on others, and thus learn more about all of them.

Back in the early 1960s, the South African Communist Party coined the term ‘colonialism of a special type’ to refer to a system that combined the colonial legacies of racial discrimination, political exclusion and socio-economic inequalities, with political independence from the British Empire. It used this novel concept to devise a strategy for political change that treated local whites as potential allies rather than as colonial invaders to be removed from the territory. Making analytical sense of apartheid in South Africa was relatively straightforward since it was an integrated system of legal-political control. Making sense of generic apartheid in the case of Israel is more complicated. The degree of legal-political differentiation is greater, as it includes an array of formal and informal military regulations in the occupied territories, and policies delegating powers and resources to non-state institutions (The Jewish Agency, Jewish National Fund) that act on behalf of the state but are not open to public scrutiny. That much of the relevant legal apparatus applies beyond Israeli boundaries (to Jews, all of whom are regarded as potential citizens, and to Palestinians, all of whom are regarded as prohibited persons), adds another dimension to the analysis. For this reason, we may talk about ‘apartheid of a special type’ – a unique system that combines democratic norms, military occupation, and exclusion/inclusion of

extra-territorial populations. There is no easy way of capturing this diversity with a single overarching concept.

[‘apartheid of a special type’ – a unique system that combines democratic norms, military occupation, and exclusion/inclusion of extra-territorial populations](#)

What are some of the characteristics of this special system?

- It is based on an ethno-national distinction between Jewish insiders and Palestinian Arab outsiders. This distinction has a religious dimension – the only way to join the Jewish group is through conversion – but is not affected by degree of religious adherence.
- It uses this distinction to expand citizenship beyond its territory (potentially to all Jews) and to contract citizenship within it (Palestinian residents of the occupied territories have no citizenship, and cannot become citizens). Thus, it is open to all non-resident members of one ethno-national group, wherever they are and regardless of their personal history and actual links to the territory. It is closed to all non-resident members of the other ethno-national group, wherever they are and regardless of their personal history and actual links to the territory.
- It is based on the permanent blurring of physical boundaries. At no point in its existence have the state’s boundaries been fixed by law, nor are they likely to in the foreseeable future. Its boundaries are permanently temporary, as evidenced by continued talk of the occupation as temporary, even though it has already outlived historical apartheid (which

effectively lasted 42 years). These boundaries are asymmetrical: porous in one direction (expansion of military forces and settlers into neighbouring territories) and impermeable in another direction (severe restrictions on entry of Palestinians – from the occupied territories and the Diaspora – into its territories).

- It combines different modes of rule: civilian authority with all the institutions of a formal democracy within the Green Line, and military authority without democratic pretensions beyond the Line. In times of crisis, the military mode of rule tends to spill over into the Green Line to apply to Palestinian citizens. At all times, the civilian mode of rule spills over beyond the Green Line to apply to Jewish citizens residing there. The distinction between the two sides of the Green Line is constantly eroding as a result, and norms and practices developed under the occupation filter back into Israel: as the phrase goes, the ‘Jewish democratic state’ is ‘democratic’ for Jews and ‘Jewish’ for Arabs.
- It is in fact a ‘Jewish demographic state’. Demography – the fear that Jews may become a minority – is the prime concern behind the policies of all mainstream forces. All state structures, policies and proposed solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are geared, in consequence, to meet the concern for a permanent Jewish majority exercising political domination in the State of Israel (in whichever boundaries).

[It is in fact a ‘Jewish demographic state’. Demography – the fear that Jews may become a minority – is the prime concern behind the policies of all mainstream forces.](#)

How do these features compare with historical South African apartheid?

- The foundation of apartheid was a racial distinction between whites and blacks rather than an ethno-national distinction. Racial groups were internally divided on the basis of language, religion and ethnic origins, and externally linked in various ways across the colour line. This can be contrasted with Israel/Palestine in which lines of division usually overlap. Potential bases for cross-cutting affiliations that existed early on – anti-Zionist orthodox Jews, Arabic-speaking Jews – were undermined by the simultaneous rise of the Zionist movement and Arab nationalism to a dominant position in the course of the 20th century. This left no space for those straddling multiple identities.
- In South Africa then, there was a contradiction between the organization of the state around the single axis of race, and social reality which allowed more diversity in practice and multiple lines of division as well as cooperation. This opened up opportunities for change. The apartheid state endeavoured to eliminate this contradiction by entrenching residential, educational, religious and cultural segregation, and by seeking to shift its basis of legitimacy from race to national identity, but to no avail. Its capacity was limited and it was further eroded over time. In Israel/Palestine there is tighter fit between the organization of the state and social reality, with one crucial exception: Palestinian citizens are positioned in between Jewish citizens and Palestinian non-citizens. They are the only segment of the population of Greater Israel/Palestine that is fully bilingual, familiar with political and cultural realities across the ethnic divide, with enough freedom to organize but not enough rights to align themselves

with the oppressive status quo. As a minority group (15-20% of Israeli citizens *and* of Palestinian Arabs) they cannot drive change on their own but may act as crucial catalysts for change.

- Under historical apartheid a key goal of the state was to ensure that black people performed their role as providers of labour, without raising social and political demands. The strategy used for that focused on externalizing them. They were physically present in white homes, factories, farms and service industries, but absent (politically and legally) as rights-bearing citizens. Those who were no longer or not yet functional for the white-dominated economy were prevented from moving into the urban areas or forcibly removed to the 'reserves' (Bantustans or homelands): children, women – especially mothers – and old people. Able-bodied blacks who worked in the cities were supposed to commute – daily or monthly and even annually – between the places where they had jobs (but no political rights) and the places where they had political rights (but no jobs).
- This system of migrant labour opened up a contradiction between political and economic imperatives. To fulfil apartheid ideology, it broke down families and the social order, hampered efforts to create a skilled labour force, reduced productivity, and gave rise to crime and social protest. To control people's movements, it created a bloated and expensive repressive apparatus, which put a constant burden on state resources and capacities. Domestic and industrial employers faced increasing difficulties in meeting their labour needs. From an economic asset (for whites) it became an economic liability. It had to go.
- The economic imperative of the Israeli system, in contrast, has been to create employment for Jewish

immigrants. Palestinian labour was used by certain groups at times because it was available and convenient, but it was never central to Jewish prosperity in Israel. After the outbreak of the first Intifada in the late 1980s, and under conditions of globalization, it could easily be replaced by politically unproblematic Chinese, Turkish, Thai and Romanian workers. In addition, a massive wave of Russian Jewish immigration in the 1990s helped this process. The externalization of Palestinians, through denial of rights, ethnic cleansing and 'disengagement', has presented no economic problems for Israeli Jews. There is little evidence of the contradiction between economic and political imperatives that undermined apartheid South Africa.

- Apartheid was the latest in a long list of regimes in which white settlers dominated indigenous black people in South Africa. For most of the colonial period, people of European origins were in the minority, relying on military power, technological superiority, and 'divide and rule' strategies, to entrench their rule. Demography was never an overriding concern. As long as security of person, property and investment could be guaranteed, there was no need for numerical dominance. When repression proved increasingly counter-productive, a deal exchanging political power for ongoing prosperity became an option acceptable to the majority of whites. Can such a deal be offered to Israeli Jews, for whom a demographic majority is the key to domination and the guarantee of political survival on their own terms? Most likely, not.

In summary then, apartheid of a special type in Israel is different from historical apartheid in South Africa in three major respects:

- At its foundation are consolidated and relatively impermeable ethno-national identities, with few cross-cutting affiliations across the principal ethnic divide in society.
- It is relatively free of economic imperatives that run counter to its overall exclusionary thrust, because it is not dependent on the exploitation of indigenous labour, and;
- Its main quest is for demographic majority as the basis for legal, military and political domination.

In all these respects it is a system that is less prone to an integrative solution along the lines of post-apartheid South Africa. At the same time, it is subject to contradictions of its own, which are crucial to its dynamics and present potential opportunities for change:

- Its foundational act of ethnic cleansing left behind a weak and disorganized minority Arab group. With Palestinians no longer a demographic threat, the rump community could be incorporated into the political system which displayed many of the characteristics of a 'normal' democracy. Its members used this to re-organize and build a foundation for resistance politics, combining parliamentary and protest activities that have challenged Israel's exclusionary structures from within. This strategic location has given them a vantage point from which to play a vanguard role in the struggle to transform the system.
- The geographically expansionist drive of the Zionist project clashes with the demographic imperative to ensure a Jewish majority. Ethnic cleansing along the lines of 1948 might provide a way to reconcile these thrusts, but it is not feasible under the glare of international media and public opinion.



Confrontation – Jabalia Camp, Gaza Strip, Palestine
Flickr: cromacom

Although no immediate change is likely, it is clear that the status quo is becoming increasingly unstable and is not going to last.

- The changing international scene is beginning to show signs of eroding support for some aspects of the Israeli regime. For two decades Israel benefited from an international context that saw the collapse of the Soviet block and its policies of isolating Israel in alliance with ‘progressive’ third world regimes. The turn of the USA and its western allies against major Arab and Islamic forces also benefited the Israeli regime, which positioned itself as the frontline in the ‘war on terror’. This period was used to entrench its hold on the occupied territories, divide the Palestinian people and its leadership, crush resistance to the occupation, and silence critical voices. In the last few years though, both Israel’s capacity to dominate its region, and the west’s support for its campaigns, have declined. It is not facing serious military or political challenges yet, but expressions of weakness abound. Among them, growing international solidarity with the Palestinian struggle plays

an important role. The rise of civil society movements and alternative media is increasingly counteracting the unconditional support given by western governments and traditional media to the Israeli state, though not necessarily all its policies. The Internet has not quite killed Israeli PR yet, but has definitely wounded it. There is thus room for cautious optimism that the tide of is beginning to turn.

The changing international scene is beginning to show signs of eroding support for some aspects of the Israeli regime.

PROSPECTS, SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Where does all this leave us? Avoiding the temptation for easy labels and name calling, we must examine the actual consequences of the analysis.

In Israel/Palestine there are two ethno-national groups. Israeli Jews are unified by their legal status as full citizens. Palestinian Arabs are divided by their legal status into citizens in ‘Israel proper’, resident non-citizens in ‘Greater Israel’, and non-resident non-citizens in ‘Greater Palestine’. The two groups are distinct by virtue of their language, political identity, religion and ethnic origins. Only about 10% of them (Palestinian Israeli citizens) are fully bilingual. Many Jews have Arab cultural origins, but their legacy has been erased through three generations of political and cultural assimilation. The delusion that these ‘Arab Jews’ actually or potentially share any political consciousness – even if in a dormant form – with Palestinians must be laid to rest. On the face of it, this would seem an ideal argument for a two-state solution, but things are a bit more complicated than that.

The South African rainbow nation, which was based on the multiplicity of identities and the absence of a single axis of division to align them all – unity in diversity – is clearly unlikely to be replicated in Israel/Palestine. Elements in South Africa such as the use of English as the medium of political communication, shared by all groups, or Christianity as a religious umbrella for the majority of people from all groups, do not exist in Greater Israel/Palestine. At the same time, if we look at ‘Israel proper’ *in isolation*, the situation may be similar to South Africa. People of all backgrounds – veteran Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, new Russian and Ethiopian immigrants, and Palestinian citizens – use Hebrew in their daily interaction and share similar social and cultural tastes. In mixed towns, such as Haifa, Jaffa, Acre, there are neighbourhoods in which Jews and Arabs live together with little to distinguish between their life styles except for their home language and religious practices. Without idealizing the situation, they have much more in common with one another than white suburbanites have with rural black South Africans, during apartheid or now.

Of course, we *cannot* look at them in isolation, just as we cannot look at the relatively benign white-coloured interaction in apartheid Cape Town in isolation from the broader racial scene in the country. What we *can* do is use these emerging realities to build a foundation for a new political perspective, that of bi-nationalism. Bi-nationalism is not a ‘solution’, and does not compete with the endlessly discussed but vacuous one-state or two-state solutions. It is an approach based on the recognition that two ethno-national groups live together in the same country, separately within homogenous villages and towns in some areas, but also mixed to varying

degrees in other areas. Historical patterns of demographic engineering including forced population movement and dispersal (most notably the 1948 *nakba* and the post-1967 settlement project) have created a patchwork quilt of mono-ethnic and bi-ethnic regions, separated by political intent rather than by geographical logic.

Acknowledging this bi-national reality is not an argument for a particular form of state. Rather it is a call to base any future political arrangement on the need to accommodate members of both national groups as equals, at both individual and collective levels. In the words of radical Jewish activists who put together the 2004 Olga Document, “this country belongs to all its sons and daughters – citizens and residents, both present and absentees (the uprooted Palestinian citizens of Israel in ‘48) – with no discrimination on personal or communal grounds, irrespective of citizenship or nationality, religion, culture, ethnicity or gender.” (http://www.nimn.org/Perspectives/israeli_voices/000233.php?section) This statement of principles must not be confused with a call to establish a one state or a bi-national state. It is the essential condition for the success of *any* arrangement. The alternative would be an imposition by one side on the other, which would render a solution unviable.

[Acknowledging this bi-national reality ... is a call to base any future political arrangement on the need to accommodate members of both national groups as equals](#)

It is interesting to note that the formulation above seems to draw on the 1955 Freedom Charter, which asserted, “South Africa belongs to all who live in it,

black and white”. The simple elegance of the South African original was transformed here into a comprehensive but very cumbersome language, a testimony to the difficulty of conveying unity in the face of rigid fragmentation. But it is far less difficult to convey unity – *as a first step* – among all Israeli citizens. Making Israel a state of and for all its citizens is both logical (just as France is a French state, the home of all French people, and South Africa is the state of all South Africans, so should Israel become an Israeli state, the home of all Israeli people) and just. In the same way that Nicolas Sarkozy of Hungarian (partly-Jewish) origins and Zinedine Zidane of Algerian-Muslim origins can be citizens equal to the descendants of the Gauls, all Israeli citizens are entitled to an equal status regardless of their links to the ancient Hebrews.

At the same time, unlike France, in Israel people seek incorporation as individuals *and* as groups. In the Vision Documents, a series of proposals and statements written by academics, intellectuals and activists representing the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel, the quest for equality is combined with the quest for recognition as a national collective. For example, in the Haifa Declaration they call for a “change in the definition of the State of Israel from a Jewish state to a democratic state established on national and civil equality between the two national groups, and enshrining the principles of banning discrimination and of equality between all of its citizens and residents” (www.mada-research.org/User-Files/file/haifaenglish.pdf) There is an unresolved tension here between the call for a democratic state with no ethnic character, and the notion of equality between ethnically-defined groups. A similar though milder tension is found in the post-apartheid

South African constitution, which establishes non-racialism as an overarching principle but recognizes racially-based affirmative action policies. This is an explicit attempt to redress historical legacies of racial discrimination, particularly regarding access to land and employment, without recognizing the permanent existence of racial groups.

[There is an unresolved tension here between the call for a democratic state with no ethnic character, and the notion of equality between ethnically-defined groups.](#)

The bi-national approach is compatible with either option: a non-ethnic state, and a state that enshrines equality between individual citizens and provides structured representation for groups in fields such as education and culture. Both must lead to the removal of “all forms of ethnic superiority, be that executive, structural, legal or symbolic”, and the adoption of “policies of corrective justice in all aspects of life in order to compensate for the damage inflicted on the Palestinian Arabs due to the ethnic favoritism policies of the Jews.” (<http://www.adalah.org/newsletter/eng/deco6/tasawor-mostaqbali.pdf>) Democratizing Israel in this way is important in its own right and also as a way to reinforce other campaigns. If Palestinian citizens are no longer ostracized as illegitimate actors, the struggle against the occupation would receive a big boost by escaping the confines of the progressive Jewish left.

Making Israel a state of all its citizens would not change the boundaries of political sovereignty, would have no demographic implications, and would require no negotiation with external forces. It would not challenge ‘the right of Israel to exist’ but rather



Jews For Justice
Flickr: James Stewart

seek to modify the internal basis for its self-legitimation. In other words, it would be a process carried out entirely by its own citizens, probably undertaken over a period of time. Making Greater Israel a state of all its residents, and establishing common citizenship, is different in all these respects, however. It would mean a fundamental change in the boundaries of citizenship and the allocation of power, requiring a radical re-alignment of the political scene. It is not feasible in the short term as there are no serious political forces advocating it at present, and it cannot be seen as a substitute for the ongoing struggle against the 1967 occupation.

The occupation is the biggest festering sore in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Futile negotiations over the last two decades have led to its intensification rather than mitigation. The only way forward is an ongoing campaign to put an end to occupation, without having anything to do with the diplomatic process or with the one-state, two-states, debate. The occupation manifests itself in the daily life of the population in numerous ways (both in Gaza and the

West Bank, though differently). Wherever it operates it gives rise to localized resistance. Resistance to restrictions – on free movement, access to land, economic activity, water use, study, construction, and so on – must be supported, with the use of all means excluding armed attacks on civilians – demonstrations, sanctions, boycotts, mass defiance campaigns, legal challenges in Israeli and international courts, appeals to global public opinion, and the like. I am in no position to provide tactical advice – local activists are the authority on the matter – but strategically it is important to de-link the struggle against the occupation from the state of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (or Hamas). A crucial lesson of the South African transition is that subordinating local struggles to the requirements of grand diplomacy helped the ANC gain power, but it also frequently led – after the transition – to the neglect of the concerns that gave rise to the struggle in the first place.

The third dimension of Greater Palestine – refugees and their rights – is the most challenging to the boundaries of Israeli citizenship and control. It can be resolved only in a staggered manner. First, the present absentees – about 25% of the Palestinian population in Israel itself who were removed from their original homes in 1948 but have become citizens – must be allowed access to their property and confiscated land. This would have no demographic implications and would not involve changes in citizenship status. Second, the original 1948 refugees could be invited back: only about 50 - 75,000 of them are still alive, a small number that could be accommodated demographically and logistically with ease (an addition of 1% to the population). Such steps obviously would create a precedent. And, indeed, the

fear of the majority of the Israeli-Jewish population is that any recognition – even symbolic and limited in its practical implications – of the right of return would lead to an uncontrolled influx of millions of refugees. This is highly unlikely – research indicates that only about 10% of eligible people are likely to exercise the right of return – but the matter would require ongoing educational, political and legal campaigns. (The work of the Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights stands out in this respect: www.badil.org.) Again, it is strategically important that the struggle have nothing to do with the one-state, two-states, debate or with diplomacy. The right of return is vested in individuals and they are the only ones who can negotiate on their own behalf.

[only about 10% of eligible people are likely to exercise the right of return](#)

It is this issue, above all, that makes the Israeli apartheid of a special type different from historical South African apartheid, and more difficult to overcome. As a result, Palestinians have been deprived of the key weapon of struggle used by black South Africans: their strategic location in the economy and their ability to strike and disrupt the daily lives of white citizens, as a crucial political lever. Due to the historical trajectory of excluding indigenous people in Israel/Palestine, compared to their incorporation in a subordinate role in South Africa, they operate largely outside the boundaries of the Israeli-dominated economic system. This exclusion is not complete – it does not apply to Palestinian citizens and to a minority among West Bank residents – but it applies in Gaza and fully in Greater Palestine. Those

excluded in this way can apply pressure from the outside – using protest, diplomacy and violence – but lack a meaningful strategy of change from within. In this respect, they are dependent on the work of forces internal to Israel (Palestinian citizens together with progressive Israeli Jews), and on pressure applied by forces in the Middle East region and internationally. Solidarity and educational efforts are crucial here, as well as the evolving sanctions and boycotts campaigns.

CONCLUSION

By way of broad conclusion, a political strategy that might work would anchor the concerns above in the language of democracy, justice, equality and human rights, instead of that of diplomacy and statehood. The advantage of this approach is that it can associate itself with the global justice movement and struggles of diverse independent forces, civil society organizations, media activists, and so on.

What possible form could such strategy take? A thorough discussion deserves a study on its own, and only a brief outline – focusing on campaigns within ‘Israel proper’ – is possible here. First, we must recognize that progressive forces can neither ignore nationalism (risking total marginalization) nor surrender to it (risking losing their voice). Second, in a society historically shaped by sharp ethno-national conflict most social and political issues are affected by the conflict, but should not be reduced to it. Third, the conflict can be seen as an overall framework, but its many dimensions may be better tackled as multiple political fronts that call for different local approaches and contingent alliances. This requires

charting a course that would go *beyond nationalism* without seeking to write it off.

Concretely, a series of campaigns that position Palestinian national demands within a broader framework of rights is one way of establishing a link between particular and universal discourses and opening the way for cooperation between Palestinians and – at least some – Israeli Jews on specific issues. Examples may include questions of access to land (affecting Palestinians as well as ethnically and socially marginalized Jewish groups); questions of citizenship and immigration policies (affecting Palestinians as well as many Jews with ambiguous legal status such as recent Russian and Ethiopian immigrants); questions of labour organization, jobs and access to services (affecting Palestinians, working class Jews, and migrant workers from Eastern Europe and South-East Asia); questions of culture, education and social exclusion (affecting Palestinians, Oriental Jews and orthodox Jews); questions of gender and sexuality (affecting everyone), and so on.

Each of these campaigns would involve alliances between different groups working for different causes, but they all share, in their specific domains, a quest for greater equality and democracy for all, regardless of origins. They all fall under the ‘radical democracy’ approach as advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, though with no necessary overarching ‘hegemonic articulation’ to unify them. Unlike the traditional approach of the radical left, this strategy is not based on expectations that Jews would renounce Zionist ideology, confront state power directly, and opt for a common socialist future. Rather, it assumes that they would show some willingness to address some of the concerns

of Palestinians, working jointly with them, if these were in line with their own concerns.

This approach does not tackle directly all of the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, some of which pit Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs against each other as mutually exclusive groups fighting over resources and rights. In the short to medium term there is no prospect of weakening the boundaries between these groups or constructing an identity that would transcend ethno-nationalist loyalties. No easy formulas to deal with this situation exist, and current debates over one or two-state solutions miss the point: the Palestinian population was fragmented in 1948 and further in 1967. A holistic political solution would address all its components (the 1948 dispersal of refugees, the 1967 occupation, and the fate of Palestinian citizens), but is very unlikely ever to be implemented simultaneously. Hence, forces seeking to change the status quo need to work on each component on its own, instead of seeking in vain to solve all issues in one big bang, with some magic formula.

Progress on one front should not be impeded by the lack of progress on another, and the final outcome cannot be predicted in advance. The key guiding principle for a solution is common to all components, however: the need for a bi-national approach, which would treat members of each ethno-national group equally, as individuals as well as collectives. The combination of a political approach operating on many different but related fronts, with a new mode of activism focused on direct action and creative media, educational, and legal strategies, may be the way forward. There are no obvious answers here, but posing the right questions is a crucial step towards a solution.