

Nelson Mandela Virtual lecture, Parliament of South Africa

17 July 2020

By Ran Greenstein

University of the Witwatersrand

[\(\[ran.greenstein@wits.ac.za\]\(mailto:ran.greenstein@wits.ac.za\)\)](mailto:ran.greenstein@wits.ac.za)

Thank you for inviting me. It is a great honour to be here, especially on this day.

Let me start by taking us to the point of origin of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict: 1948

In 1948 Palestine was destroyed and Israel came into being. The two developments were part of the same process: the creation of Israel came at the expense of the indigenous Palestinian community, whose members sought independence for the country as a whole. Instead, their society was violently broken up. Many – up to 60% of the population – were forced to flee their homes and became refugees, to this day. Parts of the country were transformed into Israel, and other parts were occupied by Arab military forces, those of Jordan and Egypt. Today we call this process “ethnic cleansing”. Palestinians use the term Nakba, which means disaster or catastrophe to refer to it.

The outcome of 1948 was a unified state of Israel, with a majority Jewish population, controlling 77% of the territory, with the rest of the country divided between Jordan (ruling over what became known as the West Bank) and Egypt (controlling the Gaza Strip). The capital Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan.

Palestinians were left with no political independence and with a fragmented society, divided into three main parts: A minority of 15% stayed put in their homes and communities and became citizens of Israel. They suffer marginalization as lower-status citizens but also enjoying real political rights relative to the rest of the Palestinian people. Another 35% remained in the territory of Palestine under Arab rule, and 50% found themselves as stateless refugees in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

Twenty years later, in 1967, Israel completed the takeover of Palestine by force, and the residents of the West Bank and Gaza became subject to military occupation, which continues

to this day, 53 years later. The 1967 occupation has become the epicenter of the conflict, but we must put it in the context of the overall conquest and dispersal of Palestinian society that started in 1948.

Of course, 1948 was also an important date in South African history, with the rise of Apartheid, and that is no coincidence. In both countries Apartheid and Nakba were responses to the conditions created after the end of the World War, the collapse of empires, and the beginning of Decolonization of the third world.

When we talk about apartheid in the context of Israel/Palestine we need to take all aspects of the situation into account. Israel is an apartheid state in the sense this concept is defined in international law: an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one group over another. It does not have to be identical to the historical regime in South Africa to qualify as a form of apartheid.

Israel practices apartheid of a special type: it combines formal democracy within its original 1948 boundaries, with military rule over millions of subjects who have no access to any political rights in the 1967 occupied territories, and with total exclusion of the 1948 refugees and their descendants from any claim to rights in their ancestral homeland, not even the right to visit or set foot in it.

Israel claims to be a democracy within its own boundaries, but these boundaries are no longer valid. In practice, it controls the entire territory of historical Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, and it rules the entire population with only half of them (Jewish citizens and a minority of Palestinians) as right-bearing citizens. The rest, a population of 5 million people under occupation enjoy no political or civil rights.

They live alongside hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers that enjoy full access to all the rights and resources of full citizens.

The Palestinian authority has nominal power over Palestinian residents but no power at all over settlers. All the essential aspects of politics, economics, trade, services are effectively dominated by the Israeli regime, which gives them no say in the way it is run.

How do we deal with situation?

First, we must recognize that Palestinians have been organizing for decades and fighting for their rights. There are three main forces that operate among them: The PA dominates the West Bank, Hamas is a major force in Gaza, and the Joint List – a parliamentary front – is the dominant force among Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Alongside these forces there are hundreds of civil society organizations that operate independently, and also movements representing progressive Israeli Jews who believe in equality and justice and work alongside their Palestinian colleagues.

A strategy of solidarity must take all of them into consideration

Second, we need to combine external pressure on the Israeli government with support for those fighting it from within. What kind of external pressure would be most effective?

I suggest two avenues in particular:

1. transform the existing SA policy of labelling products from the occupied territories into a ban on all products from illegal settlements. This would require a process of identification of such products, that could be undertaken in coordination with the UN HRC.
2. Severing all security cooperation, trade, training and arms purchases between South Africa and Israel. Any participation in such activities is a direct benefit to the regime of occupation, and it must be restricted or banned altogether, whether undertaken by state or private agencies.

Beyond that, I would call on the SA government, parliament, and civil society organizations, to act positively to enhance the capacity of Palestinian and progressive Israeli groups to unify their efforts, to learn from the SA experience, to engage in joint educational and political initiatives, and to work together on the global scene.

Every political struggle must find its own way, and develop its own strategy, but to the extent that the successful SA anti-apartheid campaign can help inspire others, we must aim to do that.

This is what we can do to give substance to President Mandela famous saying that the freedom of South Africa will not be complete without the freedom of Palestinians.

Thank you.