Zionism and Apartheid: a moral comparison

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Abstract

This article subjects to normative-theoretical scrutiny the common claim that Israeli Zionism is ‘like’ South African apartheid. Drawing on a range of historical and sociological evidence, it shows that this claim (or accusation) is substantially justified in two senses. Firstly, Israeli Zionism is, in many areas, morally bad in the same way as apartheid; secondly, where it is different from apartheid in character, it is in some respects anyway as bad — that is, the difference is not invariably morally favourable to Israeli Zionism. ‘Israel proper’ (within its pre-1967 borders) is neither much like nor as bad as apartheid. The justification of the analogy only becomes clear when we view Israel and its occupied territories as a single political entity. The article argues that we are justified in so viewing them.

Keywords: Israel; Palestine; South Africa. Zionism: Apartheid: ethnicity; comparative history; normative political theory.

Many critics of Zionism argue that it is ‘like apartheid’.¹ I consider this (for Israel) unflattering claim of likeness to be substantially justified, though those making it rarely provide sophisticated arguments to back it up. Here I attempt to provide some, albeit qualified. One qualification can be stated at the outset: the Zionism that is compared to apartheid in this article is not the Jewish nationalist ideal (about which no comment is made here), but that expressed in the Jewish colonization of Palestine from the late nineteenth century and more especially in the creation (in 1948) and subsequent territorial expansion of Israel. The system Israeli Zionism resembles is that operative in the Union, later Republic of South Africa between 1948 and (at the latest) 1994. Apartheid built on pre-existing forms of racial domination in South Africa and its constitutive pre-1910 white settler colonies, but the term was coined for the more rigid and ideological system developed by the National Party after it came to power in 1948, and I adhere to this usage.
Israeli Zionism resembles apartheid in a range of ways recognizable to specialists in comparative race relations, and indeed scholars have done interesting historical-sociological work on the similarities and differences between them (e.g. Greenberg 1980, Akenson 1992). My own interest is in moral similarities and differences rather than historical-sociological ones (though, of course, the discussion draws on historical-sociological observation). Systems can be similar or different in ways that are historically noteworthy but morally irrelevant (and vice versa). My claim is that there are important morally relevant similarities between Israeli Zionism and apartheid. The claim is composed of two separable propositions: that Israeli Zionism is as bad as apartheid morally, and that it is as bad in similar ways. These propositions, if true, constitute a drastic challenge to those who still consider Israel morally exemplary.

The apartheid ‘gold standard’ of evil

What is the person saying who says (accusingly) that this or that system is ‘like apartheid’? The point being made is at least partly a moral one: that a given system is as bad as apartheid. Apartheid serves here, like Nazism, as a kind of ‘gold standard’ of evil against which other evils can be measured. Apartheid is not, however, a gold standard of evil as such: there are too many other systems which, historically, have been as bad as it or (as in the case of Nazism) worse for it to have that function. What apartheid does exemplify, morally, is a particular kind of morally bad organization of human affairs, one that violates specific moral precepts. Apartheid does not signify genocide or slavery, for example; the first was absent under apartheid (despite episodes of murderous state-sponsored and popular violence) and the second was present only partially and certainly less spectacularly than in any number of other places (while chattel slavery was practised in the Colonial Cape between the 1650s and 1830s, the closest South African approximation to it between 1948 and 1994 was convict labour). Morally, apartheid does not, therefore, offer a ‘gold standard’ for either the deliberate large-scale killing of non-combatants or the treatment of human beings as property. To get at what apartheid does offer a standard for, morally, we need a definition. Apartheid, I suggest, involved a combination of ethnoracial political domination, compulsory and unequal separation of ethnoracial groups across many spheres and a system of large-scale racial labour exploitation.

In deciding what precepts such a system violated, I assume that moral values are not objectively real substances but subjective constructs. In discussing the badness of apartheid, therefore, we cannot mean its badness in absolute terms but only according to certain (ultimately subjective) value criteria. At the same time, apartheid became a ‘gold standard’ of evil because it violated the moral requirements of quite a range of value systems to which very large numbers give allegiance. The
ordinary 'informal' inequalities of capitalism violate the precepts of those who value substantive social equality; but the numbers of those offended by such inequalities (they include social egalitarians like myself) are much smaller than (though they are a subset of) the numbers offended by institutionalized inequalities - formalized aristocratic privilege as in estate or caste based systems, or statutory racial inequalities that reinforce substantive inequalities, to name two prominent cases.² Apartheid is squarely in the second category. The spectrum of value systems actually or potentially offended by it is very wide, covering all those with an egalitarian aspect, from universalistic religions like Christianity and Islam through to liberalism and socialism. All these belief systems can (to put it no stronger) provide good internal reasons for rejecting apartheid. My concern here is with a somewhat narrower yet still wide spectrum of belief systems violated by apartheid, ranging from conservative-liberal through egalitarian-liberal to democratic-socialist. These (like the larger set) are egalitarian in important ways but (unlike, say, Islam or Stalinist socialism) value democracy and individual liberty. They are offended by apartheid's denial not only of equality but of basic liberties and democratic rights.

From the standpoint of this narrower but still wide spectrum of value systems, apartheid represented an acute case of the violation of three values in particular. The first is that of individual liberty, especially as expressed in freedoms of movement and association. Apartheid placed large restrictions on the freedom of people to mix across officially defined racial lines: at the height of apartheid, people of different races were not permitted to live or own property in the same areas, or (with some exceptions) to attend the same schools, or to use the same facilities; they were not allowed to marry or have sexual relations. Politically races were prevented from joining the same parties, voters' rolls were segregated and races voted for representatives to separate bodies. Apartheid also restricted and channelled the movement of blacks across space (Lipton 1986, pp. 14-48).

The second value apartheid violated was equality. On to the substantive inequalities associated with the operation of capitalism and the historical advantages enjoyed by those of European ancestry, apartheid piled an array of formalized inequalities whose effect was to reinforce those substantive inequalities. Blacks received inferior education and meagler state benefits, were barred from certain jobs and from union rights, and were prevented from doing business in dynamic economic centres. The public amenities provided for black areas were poorer. Races were not only separate but institutionally unequal (Lipton 1986, pp. 14-48).

On top of being a system of unequal compulsory segregation, apartheid was a gigantic machine of racial labour exploitation (Johnstone 1976; Hindson 1987; Posel 1991). The South African economy depended
on the employment of vast numbers of blacks, and Africans in particular, the latter mostly in unskilled jobs. Blacks received lower wages than whites, and suffered worse working conditions. Beyond the inegalitarian character that the system shared with many capitalist and other social orders, several features made its operation objectionable even to those willing to tolerate informal inequalities. As already noted, blacks were disadvantaged in the labour market by low-quality educational provision, job colour bars and a lack of union rights. A vast bureaucratic apparatus determined where Africans could move in search of work and where they could settle. Migrants from the 'homelands' needed permission to be in 'white' areas, could not settle there with their families, and could be removed when unemployed. The employment of black labour was accompanied by many of the worst features of master-servant relationships, including the bossing around, beating and humiliation of employees. Perhaps most offensive of all was the fact that blacks contributed enormously to the prosperity of whites while being formally barred from so many of the system's rewards.

The third value violated by apartheid was democracy. Apartheid granted Africans, coloureds and Indians the vote; but they could vote only for bodies that were subordinated to a white-controlled central state and which commanded few resources. By the 1980s these black bodies included urban local authorities, African 'homelands'/'national states' and coloured and Indian chambers of parliament. South Africa was, in short, a system of white (and minority) political domination. White rule was bolstered by repression: opposition organizations were periodically banned and their activists detained, often tortured, sometimes killed. South Africa was not, however, a totalitarian state, and multi-party competition was permitted in elections to the various segregated and unequal political bodies. A circumscribed free press functioned, as did a range of (embattled) autonomous civil institutions (Glaser 2001, pp. 85–90).

The claim that a system is morally like apartheid can mean that a system is different from apartheid in character but, by one or another yardstick, morally as bad. It can also mean that a system is bad in roughly the same ways that apartheid is bad: by practising an institutionally racialized system of unequal segregation (including political-territorial segregation) and oligarchic domination. I will proceed here conscious of both meanings, exploring whether Israeli Zionism is bad in the same ways as apartheid but also, where it is clearly different in some respect, whether or not that difference counts morally in Israeli Zionism's (or apartheid's) favour. The yardstick for comparing apartheid and Israeli Zionism morally even where they differ in institutional or policy terms will be supplied by the same (liberal through democratic-socialist) set of value systems by which I earlier found apartheid wanting: those which prize equality of rights, individual liberty and democratic self-government. Put differently: these rights
can be observed, violated in an apartheid-like fashion, or violated in some other way (in each case, to differing degrees). The article will seek to locate the various aspects of Israeli Zionism in one of these three categories.

Judgements on such matters are made difficult by the way both Israeli Zionism and apartheid changed over time. Israel subjected its domestic Arab population to military government until 1966, but not thereafter; while discrimination against Arab citizens persisted after that date, it eased in certain areas in the 1990s (Peled 1992, p. 436; Yiftachel 1997, p. 518; Hasisi and Pedahzur 2000, pp. 73, 78–81). Meanwhile the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, initiated a new phase of ethnic domination by bringing millions of Arabs into the Israeli sphere of control without granting them citizenship. For its part apartheid peaked and unravelled in different policy areas at different times between 1948 and 1994. Its high-water mark was probably attained somewhere between the early 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. By the mid-1980s it was in terminal decline (Lipton 1986, pp. 14–83; Hindson 1987; Posel 1991; Bonner, Delius and Posel (eds) 1993; Glaser 2001, pp. 92–106).

These discontinuities pose a problem. Are comparisons to be made between ideal or classical versions of each system (understood either as lists of their typical features or as particular 'high' periods in their operation) or between historical systems (understood as encompassing all the different forms they took over time)? Alertness to historical shifts in each system enables the observer to spot comparative differences and similarities that might otherwise escape attention. For example, apartheid vacillated between seeking to exclude all blacks from political and economic rights and welfare goods in 'white' South Africa and seeking to incorporate insider groups (typically coloureds, Indians, sometimes urban Africans) at the expense of outsider groups (typically Africans, or those Africans living in the 'homelands' and 'white' rural areas). Apartheid resembled Israeli Zionism more obviously in the latter mode than in the former. At the same time the comparativist must guard against a definition of either South African apartheid or Israeli Zionism that spans too many policies and institutional designs; a catch-all definition would render the demonstration of resemblances between them easy but unilluminating. The following discussion places both the classical/ideal and evolving systems in the field of comparison while remaining self-conscious about the distinction between these two ways of apprehending historical phenomena.

**Lesser Israel and apartheid**

The central line of defence against attempts to link apartheid and Israeli Zionism runs like this: Arabs, unlike blacks in apartheid South Africa,
enjoy full citizenship and voting rights in Israel. And Israel, unlike the former apartheid regime, is a democracy.

There is some truth in this defence, but only if the field of analytic vision is confined to what I here call ‘Lesser Israel’ – the internationally recognized state whose boundaries were determined in the 1949 armistice agreements between Israel and various Arab states. Within Lesser Israel, Palestinian Arabs vote with Jews on a common voters’ roll, and can choose representatives to the national parliament (the Knesset). As a result of the recent fragmentation of the party-political scene, their votes have moreover come to be valued by centre-left parties. Arabs possess formally equal civic rights in most areas, and the promise of equality for Arab citizens is enshrined in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. In all these respects they are differently incorporated and better off than Africans under apartheid, who could not vote for representatives to the central legislature and were subject to statutory discrimination in virtually all spheres. It is the approximate official equality of its Jewish and Arab citizens that enabled Israel to claim legitimacy within the same post-Second World War, post-colonial international order from which apartheid South Africa increasingly found itself isolated.

Even so, there are significant limitations to the rights and formal equality of Israeli Arab citizens. Israel is legally the ‘state of the Jewish people’ and the primacy of Jews is, in Ghanem’s words, ‘both tangible and indisputable’ (Ghanem 1998, p. 432). It is symbolized most clearly in Israel’s Jewish flag, anthem and state holidays.

In addition, the Law of Return (1950) formally entitles Jews from distant lands and without recent Middle Eastern ancestry to instant Israeli citizenship while denying an equivalent right to Arabs enjoying personal or recent ancestral links to the area.

Third, Hebrew is much more widely recognized and used than Arabic. Of course, most liberal democracies impose a lingua franca. The imposition of Hebrew is problematic because Arabs constituted a majority in present-day Israel before they were expelled or fled in 1947–48. Relatively little concession is made to the fact that Arabic is an indigenous language of the area of Lesser Israel.

Finally, Arabs have been excluded from the armed forces since 1954. While some might consider exemption from military duty a privilege of sorts, it adds to the sense that the state does not belong to its Arab citizens and, indeed, that they are its potential enemies. Arab military exemption also results in the exclusion of Arab citizens from a range of monetary and other benefits available to military personnel after their discharge, and employer demands for military experience provide a basis for covert discrimination against Arabs in the civilian labour market (Peled 1992, p. 436; Ghanem 1998, p. 433; Hasisi and Pedahzur 2000, p. 75–6).

Beyond these formal discriminations lie a number of what might be
called semi-formal ones. Israeli settlement patterns are highly ethno-
racially segregated, partly due to the spontaneous ethnic clustering and
market forces evident in other capitalist societies, but due also to the way
Israeli governments have channelled Jews into existing and new settle-
ments from which Arabs are effectively barred (Davis 1987, p. 55;
16). It is a notorious fact that, despite greater attention to their needs
since the 1990s, Arab towns and villages continue to receive housing,
education and infrastructural services inferior to Jewish ones (Ghanem
Moreover, until very recently the Israeli state held 92 per cent of Lesser
Israel's land (much of it expropriated from Arabs) on behalf of the
Jewish people and, through an arrangement with the Jewish Agency and
the Jewish National Fund, effectively prevented Israel's Palestinian
citizens from purchasing, leasing, or using land in over 75 per cent of
Lesser Israel (Yiftachel 1998). The regime of semi-formal land discrimi-
nation is now under challenge, both from land privatization measures
motivated by fashionable pro-market thinking and by a recent Supreme
Court of Justice decision prohibiting religious or national discrimination
in land allocation (Hasisi and Pedahzur 2000, pp. 79–80). The legacy of
land-related injustice and inequality that needs to be overcome is,
however, large, and the current hard-line government of Prime Minister
Ariel Sharon appears intent on reversing moves towards land desegrega-
tion.

There is legitimate debate about whether states can ever be ethno-
culturally neutral; even so, there are degrees of ethnocentricity in the
definition of states. Jewishness is not comparable to, say, Frenchness; it
involves more than learning Hebrew as a medium of citizenship. Jewish-
ness is difficult to acquire by conversion (even non-orthodox Jews battle
for recognition by the state-linked orthodox religious establishment) nor
(quite properly) is its acquisition demanded by the state. The officially
Jewish character of the Israeli state amounts to the privileging of a
simultaneously ancestral and religious group for which there is no direct
equivalent in the North American or Western European democracies in
whose company Israel likes to see itself. Lesser Israel belongs to the
camp of ethnic democracies, and within that camp it constitutes some-
thing of an extreme case.

How do these discriminations match up to apartheid ones? The most
obvious difference of fact seems the less morally relevant one: in
South Africa such discrimination was built into law and explicit. In
Israel the bulk of it is semi-formal or non-explicit. Yet Israeli law has
permitted these discriminations and the Israeli state practised them,
largely through the subterfuge of delegating functions to 'national
institutions' that represent Jewish interests exclusively (Davis 1987,
pp. 55–60; Kretzmer 1990, pp. 90–98) and of establishing separate (and
underfunded) bureaucracies to deal with Arab affairs in *de facto* exclusively Arab areas (Al-Haj 1995, p. 219; Ghanem 1998, pp. 433–4). The semi-formal/formal distinction looks, in these terms, to be rather legalistic: the result in both cases is unfair state-backed discrimination on an ethnic and/or racial basis.

The moral differences that count more obviously in Israel’s favour are that its racial segregation (however widespread) is less rigid or comprehensive than was South Africa’s, at least under ‘high apartheid’, and that its socio-economic impact on the subordinate population is less devastating than was apartheid’s. Undoubtedly, Israeli Arabs are materially worse-off than all categories of Israeli Jews, and Arabs have suffered disproportionately from economic downturns in the mid-1990s and in 2001–2. Even so, Israeli Arabs are (by various measures) much better off socio-economically than black Africans were under apartheid. This difference is not only down to Israel being a ‘high income’ country whereas South Africa was (and is) ‘upper-middle income’. Lesser Israel’s income distribution is also less unequal than was South Africa’s before 1994 (or now). Of course, a range of factors other than official discrimination can influence countries’ relative degrees of internal (in)equality. These include development stage, levels of urbanization and geography. Thus (for example) small and urbanized Israel has no direct equivalent of the migrant-peasant households located in remote South African rural areas far from places of wage employment, links to the electricity and transport infrastructure or sources of potable water. Yet whatever the explanation for the difference, it must remain a fact admissible in Israel’s defence that its discriminatory regime is implicated in less severe absolute and relative impoverishment of the subordinate population than was apartheid South Africa’s.

The matter of Israel’s democratic-ness is complex. The Israeli polity is a competitive multi-party democracy with a lively political culture. All citizens have the right to vote and to stand for office, and Arabs began acquiring citizenship soon after the state was founded. Democratic practice has, however, been subjected to a range of constraints. Israel possesses no written constitution entrenching citizen rights, and these have periodically been curtailed by emergency regulations (with Arabs the main victims of repressive measures). Arabs have traditionally been subject to the centralized control of a Jewish-dominated state and are heavily under-represented in the main political decision-making centres (as well as in centres of economic power). Courts have been shown to be less than impartial in their dealing with Arab citizens. On the other hand, some of the more egregious limitations on democratic freedoms have fallen away in recent times. Although a 1985 Knesset Basic Law prohibited political parties questioning the Jewish character of the state from participating in Knesset elections, these measures have not been enforced. The new Government Basic Law (the Law of Direct Elections)
has limited the power of the state to impose repressive security measures and affords greater protection to civil liberties. Arab political organizations of national scope have begun to achieve some official recognition (Smooha 1982; Peled 1992; Scharfman 1993; Ghanem 1998; Rattner and Fishman 1998; Hasisi and Pedahzur 2000, pp. 79–80). That problems remain is indicated by the current prosecution of Arab Knesset member Azmi Bishara for verbally ‘supporting a terrorist organization’ in two speeches.

It is important to recall that South Africa too was democratic in a certain sense under apartheid. As in Israel, the governing party was determined by competitive election. The biggest difference is, of course, that Africans lacked the vote (or a vote that counted) while Israeli Arabs today enjoy it. While Israel is undoubtedly an ‘ethnocracy’, to use Yiftachel’s expression (Yiftachel 1997, 1998), the Arab franchise means that Lesser Israel is in an important respect quite unlike apartheid, at least as regard the latter’s treatment of Africans (coloureds and Indians did acquire many political rights at the centre from 1984).

Even so, this difference must be placed in a larger genealogical context. Israeli and apartheid democracy emerged as alternative solutions to a common dilemma: how to run a settler state democratically in lands where non-settlers constitute a majority. Both democratic systems were made possible by the exclusion from the franchise of potential majorities of the ethnic other. In South Africa, where whites were greatly outnumbered, ‘democratic’ white rule depended on the open disenfranchisement of blacks. In Israel it was made possible by the expulsion/flight and subsequent physical exclusion of Arabs from the area of pre-1967 Israel. Through a combination of territorial partition and what is today called ‘ethnic cleansing’, Israel engineered the Jewish majority that is the precondition of its democratic life. In South Africa a demographically engineered settler majority proved impossible to secure though not, it should be said, for want of trying (or ingenuity) on the part of apartheid rulers. The entire homeland policy amounted to an attempt to partition South Africa, with Africans permitted to exercise political rights only in their ethnically defined territories. The problem for whites was that Africans remained a majority in ‘white’ South Africa too, and whites depended economically on their presence there. Moreover the international community refused to recognize South Africa’s four ‘independent black states’. A white-majority South Africa proved an unsustainable fiction. It was this failure that left apartheid exposed as a formalized racial oligarchy whereas Israeli Jews, secure in their majority, could claim to run an inclusive democracy. It is difficult to see how achieving a majority by expulsion and flight is morally superior to obtaining one by the simple disenfranchisement of people in situ.

On matters of genealogy pro-Zionist Israeli Jews can, of course, make a point in their own defence. If the Jewish settlers displaced the
Palestinians, they were themselves drawn from a historically persecuted ethnic group. A fair number came to Israel in direct response to Russian anti-Jewish pogroms (in the later nineteenth, early twentieth centuries) and the murderous assault on Jews in Germany, later in Nazi-occupied Europe, between 1933 and 1945. For many Jews, and not only these victims of extreme brutality, Palestine, later Israel, offered a refuge from anti-Semitism. Of course, many settler groups and/or ethnoracial oligarchies have justified their repressive rule by reference to their own past suffering. The ranks of those who have done so include the white Afrikaners of South Africa (whose cast of alleged persecutors included Catholic opponents of the French Huguenots, the Dutch East India Company, British Imperialists, English-speakers and Anglo-Jewish capitalists). Yet however self-serving such defences, Jews do corporately have a stronger claim to victimhood than most, especially given the enormity of the Holocaust, which unfolded just a few years before the founding of Israel. Moreover, the Jews were not (unlike nineteenth century Boers or mid-twentieth century Afrikaners) seeking a state of their own, or state power, in order that they might dominate other groups; they came to dominate another group in the course of seeking freedom from their own oppression by others.

In the overall moral calculus, this resort to history as a way of justifying Jewish Israeli domination fails. It faces familiar and persuasive counter-arguments: two wrongs do not make a right; the Arabs, who were not responsible for European anti-Semitism, did not deserve to pay a price for it; and many settlers issued from societies largely free of serious anti-Semitism or had the option of moving to such societies (or would have had that option had they not been blocked by Israeli and Western governments). On top of that, the Zionist enterprise has inflamed Arab and Muslim opinion against Jews, threatening the very security Israel was supposed to afford them. But if the historical persecution of Jews cannot justify a coercive Jewish colonialism, it does, up to a point, mitigate the historical guilt of its theorists and practitioners. While not wishing to deny the nastiness sometimes meted out to Afrikaners (think of the South African War 1899–1902 and its concentration camps) or to fuel the game of competitive victimhood-claiming, it is difficult to see the Afrikaners’ own experience of oppression as grounding a comparably strong argument in mitigation.

One definite difference between Israel (Lesser and Greater) and South Africa 1948–1994 is that whites under apartheid exploited non-European labour on a far grander scale than their Jewish Israeli counterparts. While, as Akenson observes (1992, pp. 237, 242), the Israeli and South African apartheid labour regimes are internally similar, they have played quite different roles within their respective political-economic orders. The Palestine Yishuv settlers and later Jewish Israelis were long divided between those who valued Arab labour (and usually lorded it
over their Arab employees) and those who, in a spirit of socialist idealism and/or Jewish chauvinism, preferred to employ Jewish labour. The long period of Labour Zionism dominance in the Yishuv and Israel was one factor among others ensuring that dependence on Arab labour never ran too deep (Shalev 1989). While Arab citizens and (since 1967) occupied-territory Arabs have contributed importantly to the provision of agricultural and construction labour, they constitute a relatively small proportion of the Israeli workforce (Semyonov and Lewis-Epstein 1987, p. 48). The Jewish Israeli population has been able to meet its cheap labour needs from a mixture of Arabs, new waves of Jewish immigrants, Asian-African Jews, mainly Jewish overseas volunteers and (latterly) migrant workers from beyond the Middle East. By contrast black South Africans supplied the overwhelming majority of unskilled and semi-skilled labour during the apartheid period.

On balance, this difference counts morally in Israel’s favour. On balance, but not wholly: reliance on Jewish labour was, after all, a product often of racial contempt for Arabs. The exclusion of Arabs from employment by Jews resembled the outcome sought by the pro-segregationist white labour movement in South Africa. The ‘civilized labour policy’ in South Africa ultimately fell victim to the cheap labour hunger of white capitalists. In Israel Jewish labour was powerful enough to marginalize non-Jewish labour. If this difference from apartheid is (overall) morally advantageous to Israel it is because it enables Israelis to escape the charge (to which whites under apartheid were wide open) that their relative prosperity is intimately bound up with the coerced and underpaid labour of a subordinate ethnoracial group. Ironically, it is doubtful whether this difference has worked to the historical advantage of Arabs. Sometimes it is better to be exploited than not to be exploited at all. The relative economic dispensability of Arabs has undermined their political bargaining power and made it more difficult for them to secure a livelihood in a Jewish-dominated economy. It also made it easier for Jews to expel or exclude Arabs from Israel.

To summarize. Israel proper practises a less formalized and less egregious form of negative racial discrimination than did apartheid South Africa, but it does practise a considerable amount. Lesser Israel’s formal democracy is more racially inclusive than was apartheid South Africa’s, but was facilitated by the displacement of Arabs in a manner not obviously morally superior to the simple disenfranchisement of South African blacks. Jewish Israelis exploit Israeli Arab labour on a much smaller scale than whites exploited black labour under apartheid, but have taken advantage of their stronger economic bargaining position to marginalize Arabs politically and economically. ‘Israel proper’ more closely resembles Northern Ireland during the Protestant ascendancy, with Jews in the role of the Protestant majority and Arabs in the position of the Catholic minority, than it does apartheid South Africa. (Northern
Ireland’s Protestant majority too was secured artificially, in its case by partition.) While not all differences between Lesser Israel and South African apartheid count morally in Israel’s favour, Israel within its pre-1967 borders also seems to be less morally bad than apartheid. That is to say, it violates less brazenly the principles of equality, liberty and democracy animating the liberal through democratic-socialist value systems that supply this article’s evaluative criteria. To see the Zionism-apartheid likeness more clearly we must extend our field of vision to Israel’s occupied territories.

The occupied territories and apartheid

Those charging that Israel is like apartheid usually, and quite properly, have in mind its military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The plausibility of the Zionism-apartheid comparison therefore depends largely on whether it is appropriate to include under the heading of ‘Israel’ or ‘Israeli Zionism’ territories that are not internationally recognized as part of Israel and which, with the exception of East Jerusalem, Israel has never annexed. Rightwing Zionists claim the West Bank for their envisaged ‘Greater Israel’, but less zealous Zionists confine themselves to arguing that Israel had no choice but to seize the territories in its self-defence during the 1967 War. Some who hold this view claim to be willing to trade the territories for a secure peace between Israel and its neighbours. If this ‘semi-detached’ view of the territories is correct, the manner in which Israel governs them cannot be said to reflect on the character of Israeli democracy itself. Viewed through this lens, the territories are morally not very different from the Mandates Britain acquired after World War I: they are the reluctantly assumed, temporary and external responsibility of an essentially democratic state.

This line of defence fails. The occupied territories are simply too integral to what Israel has become for it to hold. Their connectedness to Israel can be shown in three ways. Firstly, in terms of the length of occupation: as of the time of writing, Israel has controlled the territories for thirty-five out of the fifty-four years of its existence. For most of its history, Israel has (in other words) ruled over millions of voteless Arabs. These 3.2 million disenfranchised Arab subjects greatly outnumber the 1.2 million enfranchised Arab citizens of Israel. Secondly, in terms of contiguity and economic integration: the territories abut Lesser Israel and there is (when Israel permits it) a daily traffic of people (peaking at over 100,000) between the areas. The occupied territories are highly dependent on Israel both for imports and as a destination for exports. The West Bank and Gaza are thus not distant colonies. Thirdly, in terms of penetration and entrenchment: Israel has sponsored the settlement of the occupied territories by more than 400,000 Jews who live there under domestic Israeli law and vote for representatives in the Knesset. Much of
the West Bank is held by Israeli Jews privately or by the Israeli state, and Israel has, as indicated, annexed East Jerusalem. Only very recently have sections of the Israeli establishment shown a theoretical willingness to give up most of the West Bank and Gaza; many Zionists hope to hold on to large chunks of them. While the territories may be surrendered in the future, they must for now be viewed as part of a single complex that includes Lesser Israel and extends across the whole of Mandatory Palestine. Though Israel and its territories do not form a coherent state, they constitute, to use Kimmerling's term, a single 'control system' (Kimmerling 1989, pp. 266–7).

The obvious comparison to be made, once this is allowed, is between Israel's occupied territories and South Africa's apartheid-era 'bantustans' (the pejorative term for African ethnic reserves or 'homelands'). Both the occupied territories and the lands of the African reserves were subordinated by armed force. The territories are, and the reserves were, inhabited by large numbers of a racially subordinate population who make up a majority within their boundaries. In both cases the central state (controlled by the dominant racial group) seeks/sought physically and politically to confine the majority of the racially subordinate population to these territories, permitting a degree of self-government within but denying their inhabitants rights outside them. Members of both subordinate populations are/were permitted to travel into the domains of the dominant groups to provide labour service, subject to tight bureaucratic controls (Semyonov and Lewis-Epstein 1987, pp. 12–15; Shalev 1989, pp. 115–17). Members of both subordinate groups seek/sought such work to offset the impoverishment of their own assigned areas. In both cases these areas are/were earmarked for greater autonomy, possibly statehood, but have seemed unviably small and ludicrously contiguous. And in both cases the central state has expected the subordinate elites entrusted with governing these areas to suppress radical groups, and has been prepared to intervene where these responsibilities have been insufficiently zealously discharged.

These features shared by the occupied territories and bantustans cumulatively constitute a powerful case for the comparability of apartheid and Greater (post-1967) Israel. And the similarities between them are morally relevant: both Israeli occupation and the bantustan policy involve the violation of similar kinds of rights in similar ways. In particular, both deny, by means of a regime of racial-territorial confinement and control of mobility, the human right to freedom of movement and to democratic self-government in viable areas.

The resemblance is fullest between the South African homeland policy set in motion in 1959 and the situation of the West Bank and Gaza since the Oslo accord between Israel and the Palestinians in 1993. These dates marked the point where in each case the dominant group conceded in principle a substantial degree of political autonomy to the subordinate
group in designated territories, with that autonomy understood as potentially culminating in formal independence. (In 1981 the Israeli government proposed Palestinian local self-government in the occupied territories but via a scheme too minimalistic to stand comparison with South African homeland policy – though it did resemble Pretoria’s policy of strengthening black municipal self-government from the later 1970s.)

A number of factors complicate the comparison between homeland and occupation policies. The bantustans were crucially important as labour reservoirs for the white capitalist economy in apartheid South Africa, supplying vast numbers of long-distance migrants and short-distance commuters. The occupied territories have supplied unskilled commuter labour to Israel since the late 1960s, but they are less central to its economy than the ‘homelands’ were to South Africa’s (Semyonov and Lewis-Epstein 1987; cf. Akenson 1992, pp. 237–9). When Israel closes off the West Bank and Gaza or places Palestinian-governed territories under military siege, the Arab economy suffers far more than the Israeli. As with the earlier point about labour exploitation within Lesser Israel, the moral implications of this are unclear. Though not indispensable to the Israeli economy, noncitizen Arabs are nevertheless employed as unskilled cheap labour in significant numbers, occupying a position in the labour market much more precarious even than that of Israeli Arabs. At the same time, their relative dispensability leaves them vulnerable to arbitrary, politically-motivated border closures. This difference between Israel and apartheid South Africa seems morally relevant, but it is difficult to say which side it casts in the better light.

In addition, there are the clearly differentiated statuses of territory-based and Israeli Arabs. While the position of the former seems comparable to South African blacks, that of Arab citizens is much less so. Some might therefore argue that the Israeli ‘control system’ taken as a whole, i.e. including both Lesser and Greater Israel, is unlike apartheid. It is a bifurcated system, with at most an apartheid-like component. This counterargument is not, however, convincing. It is true that apartheid disenfranchised all blacks at one point or another, while Israel enfranchised its substantial Arab citizen minority. But this difference should not be overstated, because there is a partial analogy in the differential incorporation of South African blacks (i.e. nonwhites) under apartheid. Coloureds (a mixed-race group descended from whites, Africans, imported slaves and Khoisan indigenes) and Indians resided in ‘white’ South Africa rather than in the bantustans, and were both materially better off and much less oppressed than Africans. By the mid-1980s they had acquired something close to full political rights. Even among Africans, the state distinguished, over much of the apartheid period, between insiders entitled to permanent residence in ‘white’ urban areas and those who it considered belonged in the bantustans. From the mid-1970s the insider Africans too began to acquire steadily more rights in terms of
property ownership, municipal self-government and freedom of movement. It could be argued, therefore, that both Israel and apartheid South Africa divided their subordinate racial populations into insider and outsider groups and, indeed, that both have tried to divide and rule them in the classic colonial fashion. (It can be added that both have shown an inordinate interest in playing up minute ethnic divisions within subordinate racial groups [Smooha 1982, p. 79]).

One major difference between the South African and Israeli situations is that Pretoria laid no claim to the bantustan territories on behalf of whites and was only too eager to set them off down the road to formal statehood (or, in one case, to hand chunks of them over to neighbouring Swaziland). The South African government wanted rid of its black subjects, knowing that its white constituents could call upon their labour if they needed to, just as they employed hundreds of thousands of blacks from a swathe of independent African states. It was Pretoria, more than its black subjects, that looked forward to the gradual decolonization of the African territories and which sought to burnish its new statelets with such trappings of independence as flags and anthems. Far from fearing the day bantustan leaders might proclaim their independence, it found itself frustrated by the reluctance of some to do so. This is the reverse of the Israel/Palestine pattern, where the mainstream Palestinian leadership endorses a separate independence while Israel has conceded control of land to Arabs only grudgingly. Israel has actively settled Jews on Arab land and laid armed siege to Arab areas in ways that find no twentieth-century South African bantustan parallel.

The reasons for this contrast are twofold. Many Jewish Israelis covet the Palestinian territories, both for ideological reasons (‘Judea’ and ‘Samaria’ constitute Jews’ biblical homeland) and as a means of acquiring ‘strategic depth’ for a small country. South African whites felt no special attachment to any of the bantustan areas and, given South Africa’s size (and relative regional might), did not need the reserves as strategic land buffers.

A second factor is the historic defeat of the Palestinian aspiration for political control over the whole territory of Israel and Palestine. South African blacks rejected independence within non-viable statelets because they could realistically hope to inherit a political kingdom that covered the entirety of South Africa (as indeed they did in 1994). Palestinians cannot realistically hope to do more than recover the tranche of territory they lost in June 1967. Lacking the outside support, numbers or economic bargaining power to pursue a grander claim, they are compelled to seek their political kingdom in the West Bank and Gaza. Unfortunately for them the powerful Israeli right would rather they sought it not even there.

In this respect the plight of the Palestinians is worse than was that of black South Africans under apartheid, and Tel Aviv’s behaviour is more
harshly expansionist than was Pretoria's. Israel's current expansionism is analogous to that of the white settlers (and British imperialists) whose aggressive land conquests in nineteenth-century southern Africa established the rough outlines of what later became the African reserves. It is not, however, analogous to twentieth-century segregation and apartheid in South Africa, where successive governments from 1913 through to the 1980s sought (with variable enthusiasm and effectiveness) to expand the African territories the better to render segregation viable.

None of these differences of detail weaken the moral force of the claim of likeness between apartheid and Zionism in its Israeli incarnation. They leave intact and defensible the charge that Israel's rule over Arabs resembles morally apartheid South Africa's subjection of its black population. The essence of the charge is that both Israeli Zionism and apartheid involve(d) the political domination of one ethnoracial group over another secured in part through coercive macro-territorial segregation. The Israeli system of domination mimics less what South Africans used to call 'petty apartheid' – segregated localities and services within an otherwise shared space – than what they termed 'grand apartheid' – the unequal division of land and partition of the polity on terms dictated by the dominant group. The detailed differences between the two systems are either too small or qualified to weaken this analogy (where they favour Israeli Zionism) or (where the difference morally favours apartheid) they are not of the sort that weakens its moral force.

The coming redundancy of the analogy?

Should Israel be persuaded by some combination of pressures to disgorge the occupied territories, it will not thereby cease to be open to moral criticism. The refugees in Lebanon and elsewhere might still be without a home; Israeli Arabs may continue to be denied full civil rights. Israeli Zionism will not, however, continue to be analogous to apartheid. The cardinal basis of the analogy, macro-territorial segregation and partition, will have been lost. Since Palestinians cannot realistically hope to secure a binational state encompassing the whole of Israel/Palestine, the 'national question' will have been largely settled (refugees apart). The task confronting Israeli Arabs will then be to wage not a national but a civil rights struggle; and rightwing Israelis will be fighting to defend, not the extension or security of Israel's boundaries, but the domestic Jewish ascendancy. The better analogy in such a situation would (as noted earlier) be with Ireland. Since Northern Ireland's secession, Irish nationalists and republicans have faced two options: to treat their struggle as a civil rights struggle within the North or as a national struggle for a unified Ireland. They have now generally accepted a two-state solution for Ireland or, to be more precise, disavowed any intention to create a united Ireland by force. They have chosen instead to see through to its
conclusion the civil rights battle that began at the end of the 1960s, now focusing on such goals as power-sharing and the reorganization of the police force. Arabs have also, in the main, accepted a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. But they have made relatively little progress so far in their civil rights struggle within Israel. Once the Palestinian national question is resolved, the spotlight is very likely to shift to the rights of Israeli Arabs. (If the refugee plight is left unresolved by the Palestinian national struggle, it will inevitably be addressed by the Israeli Arab civil rights struggle. In the longer run the Law of Return is incompatible with the full civil rights of Arabs, whose status it symbolically lowers. Israel will eventually face a choice: either allow all the Palestinian refugees back, threatening Israel's Jewish majority, or adopt a non-racial immigration policy that restricts the further influx, beyond an agreed additional tranche, of both Jews and Arabs.)

It is a curiosity that Israel is likely to resolve its Arab national struggle in the same way that apartheid rulers failed to settle the African national one: through in effect decolonizing a portion of the territory under its control. Whereas apartheid rulers dearly wanted such a partitionist outcome, they could not secure it. Israelis, who by contrast are reluctant to cede a Palestinian state, might well dispose of their 'native' problem in exactly this fashion. A Palestinian state will then arise with the reluctant support of Arabs but the blessing of Jewish liberals, who are analogous to those early twentieth-century South African counterparts who saw effective partition as the genuinely best solution for both sides – except that the partition Jewish liberals have in mind for Israel/Palestine is not accompanied by any paternalistic notion of transitional trusteeship. Arab leaders who accept a two-state solution are analogous to those African leaders in South Africa, still influential before the 1940s, who were prepared to accept that they too might have to fulfil their political aspirations in designated reserves. Whereas these leaders lost ground to those who sought majority rule in South Africa as a whole, the Palestinians have travelled in reverse: they have had to accept the idea of a glorified bantustan. If anything is destined to assuage this humiliation and address this injustice, it will not be the completion of the national struggle but the initiation of a new civil rights struggle in Israel itself. Arabs have to escape their equivalent of the apartheid regime, but they also, thereafter, have to overcome the Jewish equivalent of the Ulster Protestant Ascendancy.

Notes

1. Among the countless examples that could be given of politicians, writers and activists making this connection, see United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379, 1975, Davis (1987) and Akenson (1992).
2. Although the inegalitarian effects of the 'free market' can be more pervasive than those of systems of institutional hierarchy (their effects are often difficult to disentangle),
the terms in which market effects are justified – that they are the consequence of differential merit, or of forces beyond human control, or that they maximize the benefits accruing to the least well off – appear to find more widespread acceptance than the justifications of formalized inequality, at least in the court of world public opinion.

3. Although Israeli racial segregation does extend into the sphere of marital relations in a way comparable to Apartheid South Africa’s and not often remarked upon: the delegation of the legal power to marry Jews to the Orthodox religious establishment effectively precludes intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, at least where the marriage takes place inside Israel (Akenson 1992, p. 252).

4. Israel’s Gini coefficient (inequality measure) was 38.1 in 1997 compared to 59.3 for South Africa in 1993–4. My source for this information, and for the upper/lower middle-income classifications, is the data presented by The World Bank Group at its official website (www.worldbank.org/data/). The gap between the life expectancy of Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs has gradually narrowed. In 1996 it stood at 76.6 for the former, 74.9 for the latter. However the gap remained high in terms of infant mortality: 5 per 1,000 live births for Jewish Israelis, 9.3 for Israeli Arabs (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Indicators of Mortality, 1998 [www.cbs.gov.il/statistical/mortality.html]). Gaps between whites and blacks in respect of life expectancy, infant mortality and other human development indicators were (by contrast) vast under South African apartheid, and remain so in its aftermath.

5. As Akenson showed, both Zionist Jews and Afrikaner nationalists understood their territorial-political claims partly in Old Testament biblical terms (Akenson 1992); but whereas the notion that Jews and Afrikaners were redeeming their promised lands from latter-day ‘Canaanites’ carried little resonance outside the ranks of these ‘chosen peoples’, the claim that territorial statehood delivered them from latter-day Egyptian enslavement played better with post-1945 international public opinion.

References


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