

Amnesty International's Israel Problem—and Mine



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S recent report on Israel is very long—278 pages—and detailed (more than 1,500 footnotes). Its description of Israel, in its title and throughout, as an “apartheid” state has, predictably, elicited immediate outrage and immediate praise. The report defines apartheid as “serious human rights violations . . . committed in the context, and with the specific intent, of maintaining a regime or system of prolonged and cruel discriminatory control of one or more racial groups by another.” This is, alas, pretty accurate in terms of the occupation—though not, as the report insists, as a description of the situation of Israel's Arab citizens, which is fundamentally different. (Amnesty denies this crucial distinction throughout.) The “A-word” is not verboten in Israel. Mainstream Israeli politicians—including Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, and Tzipi Livni—have used the term, at least as a warning. But it is a (deliberately) provocative one—especially in the U.S., where language is synonymous with

virtue and vice—for it immediately conjures the old South Africa, where a small minority of whites dominated a large black majority.

Rather than fighting over nomenclature, which is often a waste of time, let's just say from the start: The occupation is very bad. It is obviously bad for the Palestinians, because it denies them citizenship, statehood, land, and rights. But—of equal concern to me—it is bad for Israelis. It prevents Israel from establishing borders, the *sine qua non* of a normal state. It threatens Israel as a Jewish-majority state, that is, as the one place in the world where the Jewish people can exercise sovereignty and self-determination. It re-creates the conditions of the ghetto by settling a minority of Jews within the land of another people who hate and sometimes harm them. It is leading, in the words of former Mossad official Yossi Alpher, to “an ugly, conflicted binational one-state reality.”

In short, the occupation is anti-Zionist; this cannot be what Ben-Gurion had in mind, or what thousands of young Israelis have fought and died for. But Israel is a very different place from South Africa—with whom it shares no history—and the use of the word “apartheid” creates a kind of Pavlovian equation between the two. So let me suggest a radical idea: Israel is not a photocopy of, a metaphor for, or the symbolic representation of any other country. Israel is Israel.

The Amnesty report is worth parsing because it represents the more general state of leftist thinking on Israel. I agree with some of its prescriptions, such as revocation of the Nation-State Law and a ban on all future settlements. So do many Israelis and liberal Jewish organizations. (The entirely unnecessary Nation-State Law, in particular, was protested by tens of thousands of Israelis and by members of the military-security establishment.) But embedded within Amnesty's report is an assumption that, though never overtly stated, is its bedrock: In this case, subtext is urtext. To wit: Israel not only commits egregious acts; it is an egregious project. Israel not only commits crimes; on the most basic, irredeemable level, it *is* a crime. And this, in the Amnesty view, has been true

since May 1948, when the country was born in sin. Israel's history is simply the inevitable working out of its wicked origin story; the stain can never be erased, except perhaps by national suicide.

The report is also deeply mysterious, because the history it describes offers no explanations of how the present situation came to be. This is not a document about the Israeli–Palestinian, or the Israeli–Arab, conflict. And that might be the most confounding thing about it: Amnesty essentially denies that there is any conflict, which would imply at least two sets of actors, at all.



The genesis of a war is always important, not in order to insist, “You started it!” but as a way to understand its political aims and subsequent ramifications. The Second World War began on September 1, 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland; the Iraq War began on March 19, 2003, when the U.S. invaded that country. But the wars between Israel and its neighbors resulted, if Amnesty is to be believed, from a kind of inscrutable spontaneous combustion. “In the course of establishing Israel as a Jewish state in 1948,” Amnesty writes, “its leaders were responsible for the mass expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.” This is true, but did not simply happen “in the course” of Israel’s independence. The war began, one day after independence was proclaimed, when five Arab armies launched what Azzam Bey, head of the Arab League, frankly called a “war of extermination” against the new state. (Amnesty never mentions the building of the Yishuv, or the reasons for partition.) Extermination remained the aim of virtually all Arab countries, and of the various Palestinian organizations, for decades; it remains the stated aim for some today. From the beginning, Amnesty writes, “Palestinians were perceived as a threat” by Israel. But without understanding the nakedly eliminationist aims of its neighbors, this sounds like irrational ethnocentrism on Israel’s part.

The strangely anodyne non-history continues in the discussion of

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the 1967 war, which is, of course, the origin of the occupation. Again, things just sort of happened: “Palestinians became fragmented even further after the June 1967 War, which resulted in Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank...and the Gaza Strip.” Yes again, but also: No again. The implication is that, on a nice spring day, Israel suddenly decided to invade its neighbors in a kind of unprovoked, ultra-imperialist delirium and then, for no particular reason, decided to stay. The causes of the war—Nasser’s expulsion of the UN peacekeepers and closure of the Gulf of Aqaba, Egypt’s military pact with Jordan and Syria, the mobilization of troops, the cries for blood in the Arab “street”—all absent. The whole tangled, sad history since 1967—the rise of messianic Zionism, the refusal of the Arab states to negotiate, the revanchism of the PLO and then of Hamas, the many reasons for Oslo’s failure—is scarcely to be seen. Hamas is described, in an almost laughably understated way, as “the de facto government of Gaza” that has established a “security and law enforcement apparatus.”

In short: A conflict, often violent, has existed between Israel and its neighbors since 1948 (or, actually, before). Israel has made some terrible decisions. I believe that the current situation is—or at least should be—unsustainable. (An equally terrible thought: Maybe it’s

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not.) But the deadly dialectic between Israel and its neighbors, which is central to any understanding of the current impasse, is utterly absent in the Amnesty report. There is, instead, simply an inexplicable evil at work: Bad things happen to good people.

The second key to the Amnesty analysis is the demand, repeated almost obsessively, that Israel “recognize the right of Palestinian refugees *and their descendants* to return to homes *where they or their families once lived*” (emphasis added). This has been a — if not *the* — major sticking point in Palestinian–Israeli peace negotiations, and it’s the pet project of many left-wing groups in the West. It is also a demand that virtually no Israelis, and certainly no Israeli government, would ever consider, much less one to which it would accede. Though couched in the language of justice, such a return would mean — and is *meant* to mean — the end of Israel as a state of, and refuge for, the Jewish people. At least theoretically, millions of Palestinians — who, unlike any other people, are defined as refugees *ad infinitum* — would enter Israel and somehow “reclaim” the homes and lands of their long-deceased ancestors. (What would happen to the millions of Israelis already in those homes and lands? Best not to ask.) Many of these new residents (according to Amnesty, potentially 5.6 million) would bring with them a deep hatred of Israel, sometimes for good reason, and an opposition to the state’s laws and customs — and indeed to the state itself. There is no country in the world, from the most liberal to the most

despotic, that would agree to such a plan; nor is there any country that outsources its immigration policies to the international community (or to Amnesty). Rather than a recipe for a “democratic” Israel, the “right” of return would undoubtedly instigate a brutal civil war — one that would make previous Israeli–Arab wars look like child’s play. To pretend otherwise is to play with the lives of Israelis and Palestinians alike and is, therefore, unforgivable.

And yet in today’s Israel, an odd and potentially fatal paradox is at play. The most fervently right-wing Israelis, who would never countenance the “right” of return, continue to support the building of the settlements and the expansion of the occupation — though this is surely leading to the one-state reality that they claim to oppose.

An interesting accompaniment to the Amnesty report is a new book by Sylvain Cypel, *The State of Israel vs. the Jews*. Cypel is a well-respected French journalist who reported on Israel for years; his father was a leading socialist-Zionist in France. Cypel *fits* has good Zionist credentials: He lived in Israel for over a decade, served in a brigade of Israeli paratroopers, and studied at the Hebrew University. But Israel has changed, and these days he defines himself as a dedicated anti-Zionist. More than that: Israel, he argues, now “constitutes less a protection for the Jews of the world than a threat to them.”

I can’t argue with Cypel’s description of Israel’s “bleak new normal,” which echoes that of my Israeli friends who *do* identify as (left-wing) Zionists: the ultra-nationalism, the decline of democratic institutions, the disregard for Palestinian suffering. But Cypel’s critique, like Amnesty’s, goes further. He begins the book with a quote from Tony Judt’s 2003 essay “Israel: The Alternative” and almost gushingly revisits it. Judt had argued that “the very idea of a ‘Jewish state’” is an embarrassingly antediluvian construct that is “incompatible” (in Cypel’s words) “with the evolution of a ‘globalized’ world.”

Judt put it bluntly: Israel is “a dysfunctional anachronism.” Cypel puts it bluntly, too: “Tony Judt’s vision was correct.”

One can, of course, argue that the nation-state stands in the way of open borders, international solidarity, and universalist values. Yet, as I write this in March 2022, I can’t stop thinking of the Ukrainians as they fight for their freedom, their language, their culture, and, yes, their nation; I doubt they would think much of Judt’s vision. As the citizen of a powerful country that has never been existentially threatened or invaded, it is all too easy for Judt to scoff at the “dysfunctional anachronism” of the nation-state. But there is something about this that strikes me as repellent, akin to a plump, well-sated man asking a starving woman why she fixates on cake. And I wonder why it is Israel, of all places, that is asked to give up the concept, and the protections, of sovereignty. Shouldn’t someone else — perhaps Syria or Iran — go first?

Amos Oz — who, shortly after he fought in the Six-Day War, warned that the occupation would corrupt Israel — addressed this question. He wrote:

The idea of the nation-state is, in my eyes, “*goyim naches*” — a gentiles’ delight. I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations . . . all cross-pollinating one another, without any one emerging as a nation-state: no flag, no emblem, no passport, no anthem. . . . But the Jewish people has already staged a long-running one-man show of that sort. The international audience sometimes applauded, sometimes threw stones, and occasionally slaughtered the actor. No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for 2,000 years, the model of a civilization without the “tools of statehood.” For me this drama ended with the murder of Europe’s Jews by Hitler. And I am forced to take it upon myself to play the “game of nations” . . . I accept those rules of the game because existence without the tools of statehood is a matter of mortal danger, but I accept them only up to this point.

The Amnesty report will undoubtedly strengthen attempts to delegitimize Israel, which saddens me. The charge lodged by some Jewish organizations that Amnesty selectively criticizes Israel is true, but it is also, in my view, not germane. The cry of “What about Syria? What about Myanmar? What about China?” is not an attractive one; is that really the company we want to keep? As always, the task — a delicate and difficult one — is to concentrate on the valid criticisms as a way of *strengthening* Israel, not undermining it. It is to refuse to let anti-Zionists make Zionism synonymous with the occupation. It is to remember, as so many Israelis — and not only those on the Left — have warned, that the occupation threatens Israel’s existence as a Jewish and democratic state as much as Hezbollah and Iran (and to a lesser extent Hamas) threaten it physically. Jewish history teaches that we can destroy ourselves. *