Israel is an Apartheid State, says Amnesty International

The human rights organization, Amnesty International, published a report detailing the “true extent of Israel’s apartheid regime” and strongly called for an arms embargo on Israel and for Israel “to recognize the right of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to homes where they or their families once lived.” In this landmark report, the influential organization said, “the Israeli authorities must be held accountable for committing the crime of apartheid against the Palestinians.” A multi-year investigation details how Israel applies a system of oppression and domination against the Palestinian people. This includes Palestinians living in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), as well as displaced refugees in other countries.

The 280-page report, “Israel’s Apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime against Humanity,” outlines how mass seizures of Palestinian land and property, illegal killings, forced displacement, severe restrictions on movement and denial of citizenship to Palestinians are “all components of a system which amounts to apartheid under international law.” This system is supported by violations that, according to the organization, “constitute apartheid as a crime against humanity, as defined in the Rome Statute and Apartheid Convention.” The Human Rights Organization is “calling on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to consider the crime of apartheid in its current investigation in the OPT and calls on all states to exercise universal jurisdiction to bring perpetrators of apartheid crimes to justice.” Amnesty International’s findings are based on a huge body of work by Palestinian, Israeli and international NGOs, which are increasingly applying the definition of apartheid to the situation in Israel and/or the OPT.

The term “apartheid” was originally used to refer to a political system in South Africa that explicitly encouraged racial segregation, as well as the domination and oppression of one racial group by another. Since then, the
international community has decided to condemn and criminalize any such system or practice, wherever they occur in the world. The report documents how the Israeli authorities take numerous measures to deliberately deny Palestinians their basic rights and freedoms, as well as commit forced displacement, administrative detention, torture and unlawful killings, both in Israel and in the OPT. It refers to the illegal killing of Palestinian protestors to illustrate how the Israeli authorities use prohibited actions to maintain the status quo. In 2018, Palestinians in Gaza began holding weekly protests along the border with Israel, calling for the right of refugees to return and an end to the 15-year blockade of the enclave. Even before the protests began, senior Israeli officials warned that Palestinians approaching the wall would be shot. By the end of 2019, according to Amnesty International, Israeli forces had killed 214 civilians, including 46 children.

In light of the systematic illegal killings of Palestinians documented in the report, Amnesty International called on the UN Security Council to “impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Israel,” as well as “targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes, against Israeli officials most implicated in the crime of apartheid.” The report highlights how successive Israeli Governments have viewed the Palestinians as a demographic threat, introducing measures to control and reduce their presence and access to land in Israel and the OPT. These demographic goals are well illustrated by official plans to “Judaize” areas of Israel and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which continue to put thousands of Palestinians at risk of forcible transfer.

In addition to the division of Palestinian communities and their separation from Jewish Israelis, the report states numerous facts that the Israeli authorities treat the Palestinians as an inferior racial group determined by their non-Jewish, Arab status. For example, Palestinian citizens of Israel are denied citizenship, thus establishing a legal differentiation from Jewish Israelis. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, where Israel has controlled the population register since 1967, Palestinians have no citizenship, and most of them are considered stateless requiring an identity card from the Israeli military just to live and get a low-skilled job. Palestinian refugees and their descendants who were displaced during the 1947-1949 and 1967 wars continue to be denied the right to return to their former places of residence. Although the report does not contain any position on the right of the Palestinians to return six million refugees, its wording supports this in clear terms. Israel’s exclusion of refugees is “a flagrant violation of international law which has left millions in a perpetual limbo of forced displacement,” the report says.

Amnesty International’s documentation of the dispossession of Palestinians is consistent with numerous Palestinian accounts. The report states that in 1948, Palestinians made up about 70% of the population of Palestine (at that time the territory under the British mandate) and owned about 90% of private land. Jews, many of whom emigrated from Europe, made up about 30% of the population, and they, as well as Jewish institutions, owned about 6.5% of the land. According to the report, “The Israeli authorities have taken measures to turn this situation upside down.”

Today, Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up about 19% of the population, face many forms of “institutionalized discrimination.” In 2018, discrimination against Palestinians was put into a constitutional law that for the first time enshrined Israel exclusively as the “nation state of the Jewish people.” The law also promotes the construction of Jewish settlements and reduces the status of Arabic as an official language. The report documents how Palestinians are effectively blocked from leasing 80% of Israel’s (formerly Palestinian) public lands as a result of “racist land seizures and a web of discriminatory laws on land allocation, planning and zoning.”

Since 1948, the Israeli authorities have been pursuing various policies to Judaize the Negev/Naqab area in southern Israel, including allocating large territories as nature reserves or military training areas and setting goals to increase the Jewish population. This has had devastating consequences for tens of thousands of Palestinian Bedouins living in the region. Thirty-five Bedouin villages, home to about 68,000 people, are currently “unrecognized” by Israel, which means that they are cut off from the national electricity and water supply, and targeted for repeated demolitions. Since villages have no official status, their residents also face restrictions on political participation and are excluded from the healthcare and education systems. These conditions have forced many to leave their homes and villages, “in what amounts to forcible transfer,” the report says.

Decades of deliberately unequal treatment of Palestinian citizens of Israel have left them at a permanent economic disadvantage compared to Israeli Jews. This is compounded by the discriminatory allocation of public resources. A recent example is the Government’s COVID-19 package, of which only 1.7% was provided to Palestinian local authorities.

Since its creation, the Israeli State has carried out massive and brutal land grabs against Palestinians and continues to implement many laws and strategies aimed at driving Palestinians into small enclaves. Since 1948, Israel has destroyed hundreds of thousands of Palestinian homes and other property in all areas under its jurisdiction and
effective control. “The dispossession and displacement of Palestinians from their homes is a crucial pillar of Israel’s apartheid system,” Amnesty International said in the report.

As in Negev/Naqab, the Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the OPT area live under full Israeli control. The authorities are denying Palestinians permission to build in these areas, forcing them to build illegal structures that are being demolished again and again. In the OPT, the continued expansion of illegal Israeli settlements has been a state policy since 1967. Today, settlements occupy 10% of the land in the West bank, and 38% of the Palestinian land in East Jerusalem was expropriated between 1967 and 2017. Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem are often targeted by settler organizations that, with the full support of the Israeli Government, are working to relocate Palestinian families and transfer their homes to settlers.

Since the mid-1990s, the Israeli authorities have imposed increasingly stringent restrictions on the movement of Palestinians in the OPT. The 700-kilometer fence, which Israel is still expanding, isolates Palestinian communities inside “military zones,” and they must obtain several special permits whenever they enter or leave their homes. “The permit system in the OPT is emblematic of Israel’s brazen discrimination against Palestinians,” the report says. “While Palestinians are locked in a blockade, stuck for hours at checkpoints, or waiting for yet another permit to come through, Israeli citizens and settlers can move around as they please.”

Amnesty International said it has examined each of the security justifications that Israel cites as the basis for its treatment of the Palestinians. The report shows that “while some of Israel’s policies may have been designed to fulfil legitimate security objectives, they have been implemented in a grossly disproportionate and discriminatory way which fails to comply with international law.” “Other policies have absolutely no reasonable basis in security, and are clearly shaped by the intent to oppress and dominate.”

_Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._