

Apartheid Israel

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Interview with Uri Davis on the Jewish National Fund

by Uri Davis and Jon Elmer;

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Jon Elmer: Your autobiography subtitle describes you as an "anti-Zionist Palestinian Jew." By way of introduction, can you explain that designation?

Uri Davis: Well, that particular designation is informed by a commitment to a rather conventional principle: the separation of religion from the state. I very much adhere to this principle, which I think is a hugely important contribution of the American and French revolutions, and a great advance toward humanism worldwide.

I attempt to subscribe to this principle, and possibly even expand it further in suggesting that it would be well-applied not only to religion – to synagogues, churches and mosques – but also to one's ethnic identity. The state should not intervene in people's choice of ethnicity, nationality, religion or tribal affiliation. That applies universally, including to the situation in Palestine and Israel.

In this context, the idea of a Jewish state is not, to my mind, such a brilliant or positive idea; rather than separating religion, ethnicity, nationality or tribal affiliation from the state, Israel weds all of these to the state.

Elmer: Can you describe the meaning of citizenship in this context?

Davis: In a democratic context, citizenship is a legal relationship between the individual and the state whereby the state recognizes the fundamental rights of the citizen and undertakes to guarantee him/her equal access to the civil, political, economic and welfare resources. Citizens in a democratic state would have equal standing in the course of law, equal access to the political process - such as the right to vote and be elected – they would have equal access to land and water resources, and so on.

When there isn't universal citizenship that is equitable to all, democratic values are compromised in a serious way. A quintessential illustration of this is Apartheid South Africa, where 87% of the territory of South Africa was reserved under law for white citizens only, and denied from non-white citizens.

I fear that the situation in Israel is comparable, and I'm not talking about popular xenophobia, but rather a situation regulated by an act of parliament where 93% of the territory of the State of Israel - and I am not referring to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip - is reserved under law for Jewish citizens only. If the apartheid distinction in South Africa was between white and non-white, the apartheid distinction in Israel is between Jew and non-Jew.

So, one cannot talk of Israeli citizenship in the same sense that one could talk of Canadian citizenship, because - racist practices and popular xenophobia in Canada notwithstanding - all citizens are equal before the law. This is not so in Israel: Jewish citizens are citizens of class A, and non-Jews are second, third and fourth class citizens.

Elmer: A classic apartheid construction -

Davis: A classic apartheid construction when it refers to the essential attributes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is essentially a conflict between a settler-colonial state and an

indigenous population dispossessed by the colonial project.

But the situation in Israel is significantly different when compared to South Africa in one or more important senses. First, visitors to South Africa would have been hit in the face by apartheid immediately: benches for whites, benches for non-whites; toilets for whites, toilets for non-whites; parks for whites, parks for non-whites; transport for whites and transport for non-whites.

However, the first impression of Israel to a lay-visitor would possibly be the impression of a standard liberal Western democracy: there are no buses for Jews, buses for non-Jews; parks for Jews and parks for non-Jews; beaches for Jews and beaches for non-Jews. The core apartheid is veiled, and the Jewish National Fund plays an important part in the construction of this veil.

The [Jewish National Fund](#), including the Jewish National Fund of Canada, projects itself as an environmentally friendly organization concerned with ecology and sustainable development. It plants forests and establishes recreation facilities open to all. Well, it is the case that JNF forests and facilities are open to all, but it is equally the case that that most - almost without exception all - of these forests are planted on the ruins of Palestinian Arab villages ethnically cleansed in the 1948-49 war.

To ethnically cleanse indigenous localities and reduce their population into the misery of statelessness and refugee existence is a war crime. It is not charitable, as the JNF would have you believe, it is a war crime. The forests of the Jewish National Fund are there to veil this criminality and, to my reading, the Jewish National Fund afforestation activity is an accomplice to the cover-up of war crimes.

The apartheid is revealed when one visits [Canada Park](#) and realizes that Canada Park is planted over the ruins of three Palestinian-Arab localities - Amwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba. It is revealed when one realizes that the cemetery of Amwas is desecrated by Jewish National Fund activity, and that the trees are planted among the surviving tombstones.

Elmer: To create a Jewish state in a land with a Jewish minority - which historically Palestine has had - one of two things must happen to the indigenous population: apartheid or expulsion. Although half of the Palestinian population now lives in exile, the mass expulsion option has failed to "cleanse" Palestine of its indigenous population, leaving apartheid as the only remaining option. Can you discuss the role of the wall that is being built through the West Bank in terms of Israel's apartheid plan?

Davis: Well, I first want to express some disagreement with the dichotomy you suggested. Expulsion is not an alternative to apartheid; expulsion is an extreme form of apartheid - a particularly venomous and criminal form of apartheid. Bantustanization should in no way be considered as a slightly better alternative to expulsion.

What the wall today represents is an attempt by the government of the State of Israel to cap the expulsion - the ethnic cleansing - perpetrated in the course of the 1948-49 war with a Bantustan solution for the rest of the country.

In this, they believe they have succeeded; but they are totally misguided in sealing the fate of the 1948 refugees. If anybody believes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be resolved without addressing the 1948 refugee problem in humanitarian and politically-relevant terms, they are seriously misguided.

The Palestine refugees - the four or five million refugees and their descendants - quite rightly organize and lobby in defence of their right to return and the right to the titles to their properties inside Israel.

The attempts to Bantustanize the West Bank and Gaza Strip occupied in 1967 will fail in

Palestine just as it has failed in South Africa. One simply mourns the bloodshed that this entails and the suffering in the first instance inflicted against the indigenous people.

The question of terrorism and the casualties inflicted by terrorism on an innocent civilian population is a very serious question, but the wall is not there to alleviate this crisis of terrorism - the wall is there in the first instance as an attempt to Bantustanize Palestine and to isolate the indigenous population in what are effectively huge concentration camps.

Terrorism and targeting civilian population is a serious crisis, but anyone approaching the crisis in decent terms ought to recognize that the first terrorist actor in this awful equation is not the Palestinian suicide bomber, but the Israeli army and the government of the State of Israel.

Any statement of condemnation of terrorism in the region should encompass all terrorist actors. I personally would refuse to sign any statement of condemnation of terrorism that doesn't list Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz as first on a long list, and a Palestinian suicide bomber as last.

Elmer: I want to ask you if you believe that the construction of the wall has effectively killed the prospects of a two-state solution, and if that then gives an opportunity - or political space - to the notion of [one democratic state](#) in Palestine.

Davis: You are right that the question of one democratic state comes progressively to the centre of the debate on Palestine in the context of the construction of the wall.

I'll speak for myself now: I belong to those who have consistently argued that an important defense of Palestinian rights is all of the UN resolutions on the question of Palestine. The emphasis is on the term "all" - not just [resolution 181](#) recommending the partition of Palestine into two states with Jerusalem as an international zone; not only [resolution 194](#) underpinning the rights of 1948 Palestinian refugees to return and be entitled to their property; not only Security Council resolutions nullifying and condemning the illegal annexation of Jerusalem to Israel, but all UN resolutions bound together.

Elmer: The subtitle of your most recent work, *Apartheid Israel* (Zed Books, 2004), is "Possibilities for the struggle within". I want to ask you about the peace movement within Israel. Just the other day that there was a [massive demonstration of tens of thousands of right wing Israelis](#) demonstrating against the so-called unilateral disengagement from Gaza. [Why are we not seeing demonstrations](#) like that against the apartheid situation in the West Bank and Gaza, and within Israel itself? What are the possibilities for struggle within Israel?

Davis: The important divide inside Israel and beyond is between the political Zionist camp and the organizations and NGOs that are not Zionist. The reason why the Zionist peace movement, such as Peace Now, cannot consistently mobilize against apartheid is because in a fundamental way, they share the value of an apartheid Jewish state, and their debate with the mainstream refers only to the extent of the territory of this apartheid state.

So, the argument is held on a so-called pragmatic narrative. They say it is not practical to extend Israeli apartheid sovereignty over the territories occupied in 1967 - it is actually dangerous. If we want to secure the long-term existence of a Jewish state, then we have to limit the territorial boundaries of this state to the Green Line.

Over the years, a [substantial body of settlers](#) have settled in the territories occupied since 1967, and they claim they have the same right to live in illegal settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as the peace movement have the right to live in Kibbutzim built over destroyed Palestinian Arab villages inside Israel.

But there is, inside Israel, a principled and consistent constituency within the peace camp that

opposes discrimination and apartheid in principle. But it cannot, at present, mobilize massive protests counted in hundreds of thousands.

Elmer: Let me ask you about the Palestinian movement in resistance to apartheid. I wonder if you could discuss the [possibilities of a Palestinian non-violent movement](#) in the face of the overwhelming military superiority and constant violence of the Israeli occupation.

Davis: I don't feel that I am able to discuss the question responsibly. How shall I put it... I am not at the receiving end of the equation. I am classified as a Jew in the State of Israel. It is absolutely correct to suggest that I have spent the better part of my adult life involved in the defense of human and civil rights in Israel as a dissident - I refused to serve in the Israeli army. But still, in an apartheid state, if the distinction is white versus, non-white, and one is registered as white, then by force of that registration, one is guaranteed privilege and protection that is denied from the non-white residents, and in Israel, if one is classified as a Jew, a similar privilege is accrued which is denied to non-Jews.

I am not in the frying pan and I'm not in the fire in the sense that I haven't been sentenced to life imprisonment for membership in an illegal organization. I haven't had tanks under my windows terrorizing my children. I haven't seen a relative suffering from cancer die because he was denied access to hospital treatment, or a [birth aborted at a checkpoint](#) because a pregnant mother was not allowed to cross the checkpoint into a clinic. I therefore hesitate to express an opinion about violent or non-violent struggle. I am not a part of the Palestinian decision-making framework or authority.

What I would say, however, would echo previous comments regarding international law. International law legitimizes and allows, quite properly, an occupied and dispossessed people resistance to occupation and colonization, including armed resistance. The choice between the armed route and the unarmed route is a sensitive and complex strategic decision which I hesitate to express a firm opinion from the outside.

Elmer: Well, Dr. Davis, I appreciate you acknowledging that privilege, and I think that your answer speaks volumes. We appreciate you making the [trip to Canada](#), and thank you for speaking with us.

[Tarek Loubani and Valerie Zink contributed to the editing and transcription of this interview]

URI DAVIS is an Israeli scholar and author of numerous books focusing particularly on citizenship, apartheid and democracy in Israel and the Middle East. His newest book is *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for the struggle within* (Zed, 2004). Dr Davis is an honorary research fellow at the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Durham and at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter in the UK. He was born in Jerusalem in 1943 and currently lives in Sakhnin, in northern Israel.

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