

The litmus test of the west: looking back on 'Resisting Israeli Apartheid'

On 25 March 2022, the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam hosted hybrid event, 'Resisting Israeli Apartheid' to a full Aula of participants at our campus in The Hague. We were joined by keynote speaker Omar Barghouti, a noted scholar, 2017 Ghandi Peace Awardee and co-founder of the Palestinian-led movement Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS). Barghouti is a former ISS research fellow and currently a doctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam.

Discussants who shared different perspectives on his stirring keynote address were Saleh Hijazi (Deputy Director, MENA Region of Amnesty International), Jaap Hamburger (Chairperson of A Different Jewish Voice of European Jews for a Just Peace), Danah Abueida (Law student at Maastricht University and Board Member of Free Palestine Maastricht) and Fatima Faïd (Leader of local political party, Haagse Stads Partij). The event was moderated by Dr Jeff Handmaker, Associate Professor of Legal Sociology at ISS.

Background

On 1 February 2022, Amnesty International, the largest human rights organization in the world with approximately 10 million members, published a comprehensive report that designated Israel as an apartheid state. Their report, which adds to decades of scholarly work and similar reports by NGOs and experts provides a solid basis for understanding the mistreatment, racism, segregation, and rights deprivation of Palestinians, who have been racialised, de-nationalised and dispossessed of their land.

For human rights observers, Amnesty's compelling stance didn't go unnoticed. Despite a substantial and growing list of literature by international scholars, regional experts and non-governmental organizations highlighting the oppression Palestinians face, the claim of apartheid is strongly denied by Israel and its supporters. The facts unequivocally show otherwise. This event was not aimed at debating the decades-old claim that Israel pursues a regime of apartheid, but rather to discuss how to emerge from this predicament. This discussion on one of the most important social justice issues of our time makes no one feel comfortable, which is why it is so important to discuss.

'Feeling uncomfortable is not the same as feeling unsafe.'

Dr. Jeff Handmaker (moderator)

In Omar Barghouti's keynote address, he illustrated the importance of not only Palestinian, but a global resistance against oppression and apartheid by Israel.

The impasse between the State of Israel and the Palestinians, and the ensuing conflicts are both all too familiar, and yet for some remain a taboo topic, especially across the Global North. While the impasse and conflict continue to carve deep wounds in the region, governments, world leaders and international organizations have been slow to condemn and act against Israel's policies of apartheid, the actions of settlers and the acts of Israeli

forces. Palestinians, on the other hand, have persistently experienced consequences for their acts of resistance. Meanwhile, we see a very different reaction in European and North American countries in relation to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The quick action and clear opposition—severe state and individual sanctions, penalties, and widespread public and official support, including hundreds of millions of dollars in military assistance to support Ukrainian resistance—are visible to Palestinians and their supporters and in contrast with the lack of corresponding support for the Palestinian struggle, feel like acts of hypocrisy.

‘The issue of Palestine has become the litmus test for human rights.’

Omar Barghouti (keynote speaker), quoting Professor John Dugard

Despite this lack of corresponding support, many anti-racist movements have expressed solidarity and commonality with the Palestinian struggle. After the attacks on Sheikh Jarrah in 2020, Black Lives Matter and the Sunrise movements were vocal about the issue of settler colonialism and the threat which Israeli’s actions pose to human rights everywhere. Because of this, Barghouti emphasised that movements against racism, patriarchy and neo-liberalism are ‘inextricably linked’.

So, what does the lack of global condemnation of Israel, particularly by countries of the global North mean for Palestinians in the region? Barghouti argued that Palestinian voices and political actions have been continually subjugated. To stifle opposition, the Israeli government is ‘increasing propaganda, surveillance and legal warfare’. Those who are critical of the Israeli government’s policies are accused of antisemitism. Accordingly, Barghouti explained, Israel has continued to shield itself from accountability for war crimes and the crime of apartheid.

For supporters of either side, it’s clear that it remains challenging to hold a critical discussion, let alone a debate about the Israeli-Palestine conflict. This is why ISS provides a critical platform for platform for critical discussion and dialogue on this conflict and other sensitive topics. Emulating this message, Barghouti resonated a thread of humanity throughout his keynote. ‘There is nothing Jewish about Israel’s siege, ethnic cleansing, massacres, land theft and apartheid, and therefore there is nothing anti-Jewish per se in supporting BDS to end these crimes.’

Equating Palestinian support to being anti-Jewish breaks this delicate thread—leading to the justification of Israeli oppression and the dehumanization of Palestinians. The path requires Israelis to dehumanize themselves.

Hence, Barghouti concluded his keynote on a graver note, stating that Palestine today is, ‘a litmus test of sorts for whether the West can be decolonized, ending its duplicity, its complicity, and healing its fractured humanity.’

Responses

The responses from the four discussants responded to the issues raised by Barghouti from their respective vantage points. **Saleh Hijazi**, currently a senior researcher at Amnesty International who joined us through a live Internet connection from the city of Ramallah in Occupied Palestine. Hijazi is a noted scholar who has worked at the European Council for Foreign Relations, Al Quds University and elsewhere, elaborated on the report by Amnesty International that he made a significant contribution to, and which he acknowledged has built on many years of scholarship as well as advocacy by Palestinian, Israeli and international NGOs as well as United Nations experts.

'It all starts with something very important. And that is recognition. Recognition of the situation for what it is; that of a cruel system of domination and a crime against humanity. Apartheid should have no place in our world today.'

Saleh Hijazi (discussant)

Hijazi was followed by commentary from **Jaap Hamburger**, a well-known social and political commentator in the Netherlands who as Chairperson of *A Different Jewish Voice* in Amsterdam has been vocal on this issue. Hamburger expressed his anxiety that 'because South African apartheid in the end failed, people might be seduced into thinking that Israeli apartheid may end in the same way.' Hamburger felt this was not realistic. Instead, he argued that one should focus on the international legal definition of apartheid, which incorporated Israel's version of apartheid that he argued was more sophisticated, and internationally supported than South Africa's was.

'There is no such thing as a state's right to exist. A state exists, or it does not exist. It is a matter of fact. But nowhere is laid down a right of existence. This notion too only serves one end: to safeguard Israel from criticism.'

Jaap Hamburger (discussant)

We then heard from **Danah Abueida**, a resident of Gaza, currently a law student at the University of Maastricht and also a Board Member of *Free Palestine Maastricht*. As a young scholar, she spoke of her joy at building a movement with other students in The Netherlands as well as her frustration at attacks by various institutions. These experiences as both a scholar and activist are felt and understood all the more acutely, her positionality having been formed through having grown up in a situation of military occupation, siege and apartheid, whereby to this day she must pass 16 military checkpoints to travel between the Gaza and the outside world.

'I could speak about the plight of 2.3 million people of Gaza who live on an uninhabitable piece of land, less than 400 kilometers squared, how they persevere, how they resist, how they practice hope despite all else... why we continue to make the case why we should be treated as full humans... tearing down the structures of apartheid is not abstract theory, nor case files behind closed chambers ... it is material, it is violent, it is also psychologically destructive.'

Danah Abueida (discussant)

Finally, to provide a political perspective, we heard from **Fatima Faïd**, a well-known and respected local politician, leader of the progressive and anti-racist party *Haagse Stads Partij*. She remarked, as both an activist and as a politician on ‘what can we do locally’. She affirmed at the outset that people who are suffering themselves, Palestinians, should be the first to join a discussion on this topic.

‘I think it is very important to look at movements like Black Lives Matter. I am also involved in the Black Lives Matter movement in Den Haag and what I see is it is very important that we use the different struggles that people have ... in (expressing solidarity with) the Palestinian situation.’

Fatima Faïd (discussant)

These four perspectives comprised a seldom-heard, critical and multi-faceted examination of Israel’s apartheid regime, how it is experienced by Palestinians, how it resonates globally and above all, how it is resisted by scholars, by international human rights NGOs, by Jewish groups, by student groups and by (some) politicians.

We encourage you to listen to these responses, and to share your own perspectives.

More to come

We invite you to develop your own insights from this event by watching the two-part videos of this event. You can watch the keynote above, or head to the [ISS Youtube channel](#) to view similar events and to share your views in the comments.

A Working Paper based on the presentations at this seminar, a blog series and other academic outputs will be produced to capture the insights learned from this event.

For further updates on this and related topics specific to the theme of racial justice and to social justice and global development more generally, visit [ISS Events](#), [ISS Research](#) and the [Legal Mobilization project page](#) for future events.