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Israel as an Apartheid State, Not a Democracy

The characterization of Israel as a democracy has long been a cornerstone of its international image, rooted in its parliamentary system, elections, and legal framework. However, a closer examination of its policies, particularly toward Palestinians, reveals a systemic structure of discrimination and segregation that aligns more closely with apartheid than with democratic principles. This essay argues that Israel functions as an apartheid state rather than a true democracy, drawing on evidence of systemic discrimination, the suppression of dissent, and the stark disparities in rights between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, as highlighted by human rights organizations, legal frameworks, and recent political developments.

Systemic Discrimination and Apartheid

Apartheid, as defined by the 1973 Apartheid Convention, is a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination designed to maintain the domination of one racial group over another. Amnesty International's 2024 report, *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians*, provides a detailed case for this label, arguing that Israel's treatment of Palestinians—through discrimination, dispossession, and repression—constitutes a system designed to privilege Jewish Israelis at the expense of Palestinians. The report highlights policies such as land expropriation, home demolitions, and restricted access to resources like water and electricity, which disproportionately affect Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. For instance, in the West Bank, Jewish settlers enjoy full citizenship rights, while Palestinians live under military law, lacking basic freedoms such as movement and political participation. This dual legal system—civil law for Jews and military law for Palestinians—mirrors the racial segregation of apartheid South Africa, where rights were allocated based on race.

Moreover, the 2018 Nation-State Law, which declares Israel as the “nation-state of the Jewish people,” explicitly prioritizes Jewish identity over equal rights for all citizens. This law downgrades Arabic as an official language and promotes Jewish settlement as a national value, effectively marginalizing the 20% of Israel's population that is Arab. Such policies undermine the democratic principle of equal citizenship, as they enshrine Jewish supremacy in law, a hallmark of apartheid systems where one group's rights supersede another's based on ethnicity or race.

Suppression of Dissent and Political Representation

A functioning democracy guarantees freedom of expression and equal political participation, yet Israel's treatment of Palestinian citizens and their representatives reveals a stark contradiction. Amnesty International's 2022 briefing, *Elected but Restricted: Shrinking Space for Palestinian Parliamentarians in Israel's Knesset*, documents how Palestinian Knesset members (MKs) face discriminatory regulations that limit their ability to represent their constituents. For example, bills proposed by Palestinian MKs addressing their community's

rights have been disqualified before discussion, and the 2016 Expulsion Law allows the Knesset to remove MKs for “incitement to racism” or “support for armed struggle,” a provision often used to target Arab MKs. The case of MK Ofer Cassif, who faced an expulsion attempt in 2024 for supporting South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the ICJ, exemplifies this suppression. Although the expulsion failed, Cassif was suspended for six months, a move that critics argue was politically motivated to silence dissent.

Suspensions of Arab MKs have been a recurring pattern, disproportionately affecting Arab parties like Hadash-Ta’al and Ra’am. In 2023, Aida Touma-Sliman and Iman Khatib-Yassin were suspended for criticizing Israeli military actions in Gaza, with durations of two months and one month, respectively. Historical cases, such as Haneen Zoabi’s multiple suspensions (e.g., six months in 2014 for statements supporting Palestinian resistance), further illustrate this trend. These actions contrast sharply with the lack of accountability for Jewish MKs who engage in incitement, such as during the 2023 Jerusalem Flag March, where participants chanted “Death to Arabs” without facing similar repercussions. This double standard—punishing Arab MKs for speech while tolerating incitement by Jewish nationalists—undermines the democratic principle of equal treatment under the law and suggests a system designed to suppress minority voices, a hallmark of apartheid rather than democracy.

Disparities in Rights and Living Conditions

The lived experiences of Palestinians under Israeli control further erode the claim of democracy. In Gaza, as highlighted by the UNRWA post on May 25, 2025, the blockade and repeated military operations have created a humanitarian crisis, with the UN calling for 500-600 aid trucks daily to prevent further disaster. The UN Commission’s report on Gaza health facilities documents attacks on medical infrastructure, particularly pediatric and neonatal care, as violations of the right to life and health, potentially amounting to crimes against humanity. These conditions, coupled with the deliberate destruction of reproductive healthcare, disproportionately affect Palestinians, creating a stark contrast with the rights and services available to Jewish Israelis.

Within Israel, Palestinian citizens face systemic discrimination in housing, education, and employment. The practice of home demolitions, as noted by Amnesty, is a key mechanism of displacement, with Palestinian families denied building permits while Jewish settlements expand. In East Jerusalem, Palestinians are often denied residency rights, while Jewish settlers are granted preferential treatment. These disparities are not incidental but are embedded in a legal and political framework that prioritizes Jewish dominance, mirroring apartheid’s goal of maintaining racial control through segregation and inequality.

Counterarguments and Rebuttal

Proponents of Israel’s democratic status often point to its elections, independent judiciary, and the presence of Arab MKs in the Knesset as evidence of democracy. However, these elements are undermined by the systemic inequalities and suppression outlined above. Elections, while held regularly, do not translate into equal political power when Arab MKs face restrictions and their communities are marginalized. The judiciary, despite occasional

rulings in favor of Palestinian rights, has upheld laws like the Nation-State Law and the Expulsion Law, which entrench Jewish supremacy. Moreover, the presence of Arab MKs does not equate to meaningful representation when they are routinely targeted for their political views, as seen in the suspensions and expulsion attempts.

Another argument is that Israel's actions are a response to security threats, such as Palestinian terrorism. While security concerns are real, they do not justify the blanket discrimination and collective punishment inflicted on Palestinians. The blockade of Gaza, the military occupation of the West Bank, and the suppression of dissent within Israel go beyond targeted security measures, creating a system of control that privileges one group over another based on ethnicity—a defining feature of apartheid, not a democratic response to threats.

Conclusion

Israel's policies and practices—systemic discrimination, suppression of dissent, and stark disparities in rights—align more closely with apartheid than with democracy. The legal framework, as seen in the Nation-State Law and the Expulsion Law, prioritizes Jewish identity over equal citizenship, while the treatment of Palestinian MKs and citizens reveals a pattern of exclusion and repression. The lived reality of Palestinians, whether in Gaza, the West Bank, or within Israel, is one of segregation and deprivation, contrasting sharply with the rights afforded to Jewish Israelis. These elements, documented by human rights organizations and evidenced by recent events, challenge the narrative of Israel as a democracy and instead paint a picture of an apartheid state, where systemic inequality and domination define the political and social order. True democracy requires equality, freedom, and justice for all, principles that Israel's current system fails to uphold for Palestinians.