

The Guardian view on Amnesty's Israel report: dominating the discourse

Editorial

The continuing subjugation of Palestinians erodes the country's stature internationally and damages its democracy



Protests last year about the expulsion of Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem snowballed into a clash between Hamas militants and the Israeli army.

Mon 7 Feb 2022

Ehud Barak, Israel's then defence minister and the country's most decorated soldier, warned in 2010 that "as long as in this territory west of the Jordan river there is only one political entity called Israel, it is going to be either non-Jewish or non-democratic. If this bloc of millions of Palestinians cannot vote, that will be an apartheid state." This argument was made again in 2014 by John Kerry as US secretary of state (though he later regretted the language). Three years later, Boris Johnson, when he was UK foreign secretary, said much the same thing. No one seemed in any doubt that were Israel to carry on without making peace with the Palestinians, the country would face credible accusations of apartheid.

After a four-year investigation, Amnesty last week became the latest human rights organisation to level that charge, concluding that Israel operated a "system which amounts to apartheid under international law". It said that the UN security council must "impose targeted sanctions against Israeli officials implicated", and demanded an arms embargo on Israel. Amnesty also called for the perpetrators of apartheid to

be “brought to justice” through the international criminal court. This is the world’s biggest human rights organisation; its conclusion shows the discussion is becoming embedded in international forums.

Such a grave diagnosis of Israel’s situation should be a concern for all those, like this newspaper, who wish for the country to prosper. Amnesty was attacked by the Israeli government, but defended by more than a dozen domestic human rights groups. Its message is no doubt painful to hear for many Jewish Israelis who consider their country to be a beacon of hope and are proud of its democratic traditions. Yet the continuing subjugation of Palestinians erodes the country’s stature internationally and damages its democracy.

There has been an emerging consensus that the term “apartheid” can be applied to Israel in a way distinct from the system seen in the old South Africa. The charge has also been broadened – for some, in a heretical way. It is not just applied to areas under military occupation but used to characterise Israel’s command of the land from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean sea. Palestinians – including those who are Israeli citizens – are, Amnesty says, treated as an inferior non-Jewish racial group and prevented from exercising “fundamental human rights” to varying degrees depending on where they live.

As the number of Palestinians in the Holy Land approaches that of Jews, Israel’s predicament becomes more glaring. Neither the country’s prime minister, Naftali Bennett, nor his designated successor, Yair Lapid, will concede that they cannot hold all the territory, keep Israel’s Jewish identity and be a proper democracy. Perhaps this is because Donald Trump backed a rightwing expansionist vision, and several Arab states have normalised diplomatic relations with Israel. Maybe with an Israeli Arab party in the ruling coalition, the government feels insulated from charges of discrimination.

Yet land grabs and demolitions continue to dispossess and disenfranchise Palestinians on both sides of Israel’s “green line”, alongside the expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories. Last year, protests about the expulsion of Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem snowballed into a clash between Hamas militants and the Israeli army, leaving 250 in Gaza and a dozen Israelis dead. Israel’s leaders may view as victories the continuing de facto annexation of Palestinian land, the laws with constitutional status that enshrine non-Jewish inferiority, and the entrenchment of a system of control. But trends in human and civil rights suggest they will become defeats in the court of international public opinion.