

The weekend

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PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Not by
train

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THE NEW APARTHEID

The carnage in Gaza is focusing renewed attention on allegations Israel is operating an apartheid state. **Tom McKinlay** looks at the case.

From Hebron to Ramallah in the West Bank is just 42km. It is the distance between Dunedin and Waikouaiti.

Yet, Dr Mai Tamimi's brother, who lives in Ramallah, has not visited his ageing parents in Hebron in more than a month.

Were he Israeli he might well have. But he is not; he is a Palestinian, and in the West Bank the rules depend.

"The trip is risky and he would risk his life," Dr Tamimi says, explaining her brother's decision.

So, Dr Tamimi's parents, both of whom are older than the state of Israel, must be supported by others through the trauma and trials of what is happening in Gaza.

Others must rally around, now that the elderly couple's pensions have been suspended as part of the collective punishment of the Palestinian community.

Dr Tamimi, a longtime resident of Dunedin, phones them twice a day.

"I am very concerned about their mental wellbeing. I can tell, my father is always silent whenever I call them," she says.

It is clear to Dr Tamimi that things have become worse since October 7, not just for Gaza, but in the West Bank too.

"Every night incursions, every night arresting people, every day you have settlers' harassment on the road... people are killed as a result."

But things were bad before.

"The West Bank cities have turned into cantons, where cities are completely isolated and travelling between the cities has become very risky and very difficult due to the extension of [Israeli] settlements," she says.

For these and other reasons, there are growing calls for Israel to answer the charge that it is now an apartheid state.

We here in New Zealand know all about apartheid, the system established by white South Africa in 1948 to systematically discriminate against the country's black population. Sharpeville, Soweto, Steve Biko; we know the history there.

International criminal law recognises apartheid as a crime against humanity, wherever it manifests.

Those organisations applying the term to Israel include Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organisation.

It is the context that helps to explain the appalling scenes coming out of Gaza, Dr Tamimi says.

Longtime Dunedin activist and supporter of the Palestinian cause Roger Tobin protested South African apartheid and recognises it again now in Israel.

"The difference is that eventually the world looked at apartheid in South Africa and said 'this is no good'," he says. "With respect to apartheid Israel, we are a long way from that happening. And, indeed, the European Union, Great Britain, the United States continue to give Israel all the money, guns and bombs it needs to carry on killing Palestinians," he says.

If you look at a map of the West Bank, the similarities to the maps of the Bantustans in South Africa is inescapable

The difference in attitude can be tracked back to the Holocaust, he says.

"Many in the West feel quite a lot of shame about that — which they should, because up until World War 2 anti-Semitism was commonplace in Western countries and in Western Europe," Tobin says.

It explains why Western countries minimise or turn a blind eye to Israel's actions, for fear of being labelled anti-Semites.

However, the evidence of apartheid is there — including people forcibly displaced and herded together.

"If you look at a map of the West Bank, the similarities to the maps of the Bantustans in South Africa is inescapable."

Another Dunedin resident with first-hand experience of the occupied Palestinian territories, who we will call Sarah Ibrahim, says the Israeli infrastructure used to enforce the system includes some 600 checkpoints across the West Bank.

"Israel controls the power, water supplies, where you can go, which roads you can access. There are different IDs for Palestinians to Israelis, disparity in access to resources, settlers who are violent, armed and protected by the army. So, if you look at this description, what do you call that? That is textbook apartheid of two groups governed by the same power but subjected to two different sets of rules," the woman says.

"What we see unfolding today did not start on the seventh of October," she says.

The Jewish American academic and writer Norman Finkelstein, a child of Holocaust survivors and veteran chronicler of Israel and Palestine, agrees. He likens the Hamas attack of October 7 to Nat Turner's slave



Palestinian women and children driven from their homes by Israeli forces in 1948, part of an event Palestinians refer to as the Nakba. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

revolt in the US South. Others compare it to a jail break. Whatever the most accurate characterisation might be, it was far from the first act in this conflict.

If we were looking for one, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 might be as good as any. Certainly, Sarah Ibrahim thinks so. It's a short and somewhat ambivalent document, but it did finally put in writing the British Government's support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". It qualified this by saying "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine".

At the time, the Jewish community made up about 5% or

6% of Palestine's population, according to American demographer Justin McCarthy, but Zionism and its calls for a homeland were growing in strength in Europe in response to anti-Semitic nationalist movements there.

Following the World War I defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Britain took control of Palestine and Jewish emigration from Europe surged. Inevitably, there were tensions. When in 1947 Britain shrugged and gave up its mandate, the UN-sponsored partition of Palestine into two homelands gave more than half the territory to the relatively recently arrived Jewish population, and the remaining 45% to an Arab state. At the time, Palestinians owned more than 90% of land and made up two-thirds of the population.

"We are talking about a thriving society of Palestinians," Ibrahim says, one that had always incorporated small communities of Christians and Jews. "There are olive trees, we call them the Roman trees, that go back to the time when Jesus Christ walked that earth."

What came next is known to Palestinians as the Nakba, the Catastrophe, which doubled as the 1948 founding of modern Israel. There were massacres in Palestinian villages and more than half the Palestinian population were permanently displaced — to Gaza, the West Bank and neighbouring countries.

Dr Tamimi's grandmother told stories of the time.

"One day they were told that some Israeli troops would enter the cities. They thought they would be similar to the Jewish



An Israeli soldier checks Palestinians at a checkpoint in Hebron in the Israeli-occupied West Bank in August. PHOTO: REUTERS



A man rushes a young girl through Nasser Medical Hospital following an air raid in Khan Yunis, Gaza. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Trying to study elsewhere is no easier.

"I have at least three friends from the Gaza Strip who received a scholarship or at least their enrolment here at the University of Otago," Dr Tamimi says. "They obtained their visa but unfortunately they were not allowed to leave Gaza to travel."

But that is perhaps the least of the concerns for the citizens of Gaza.

Israel removed its settlements from the area in 2005, but imposed a blockade — air, land and sea — and controls everything that goes in and out. Food supplies are based on a calculation of calories per individual just above starvation rations.

And military actions have continued, notably in 2014 when 2200 Palestinians were killed during 50 days of air strikes, more than 500 of whom were children.

The restrictions on materials into Gaza, including cement, means the territory has not been able to rebuild the many homes destroyed.

Now there is a new war on Gaza, one some are calling the second Nakba.

It doesn't have to be like this, Ibrahim says.

"Because we look all across the globe, [and] Muslims and Jews live in harmony. We have it here in New Zealand, you have it in the States."

In fact, in the US growing numbers of Jews are rallying for Palestine, rallying for a ceasefire, and calling what is happening in Gaza a genocide, she says.

It should focus minds on the solution needed, she says: self-determination, the right to live in freedom, with justice and civil rights.

"Again, to explain that chant 'from the river to the sea', it means Palestinians free from the river to the sea. Whether they are in the West Bank, they are in Gaza."

It means an end to living as second-class citizens.

There is no reason why New Zealand should not be among those calling for both a ceasefire and a just peace for the region, she says.

New Zealand has a long history of standing up in the face of injustice, she says, including against apartheid.

"We lived, Jews, Christians and Muslim, side by side, a thriving society," she says. "It can be that way again."

Roger Tobin also has a view on the argument that unqualified support for Israel is somehow in the West's strategic interests.

"Many of them felt the same way about South Africa, but it proved to be much more in everybody's interests to have a free, democratic South Africa. And the same is true for Israel. Long term it is in everyone's interests for the Palestinians to be able to return home and have a free and democratic Palestine-Israel, whatever they decide they want to call it."

Dr Tamimi says it is not in the nature of Palestinians to give up. "Sometimes we feel hopeless, sometimes we feel helpless, because of the magnitude of what has been happening, but we never lose hope."

"In those areas, for example, you cannot build any structure that is above 1.5m above the ground. So, you cannot build a new house or extend a bathroom, or extend a school, or a clinic. Nothing."

Her job involved trying to get permits — usually without success. Meanwhile, the effective cribbing of Palestinian land continued, for Israeli military or settler use.

Opposition commonly earns time in prison.

According to B'Tselem, the Israel Prison Service was, at the end of June, holding 4499 Palestinians in detention or in prison on "security" grounds. Of these, 147 were minors.

Ibrahim says the numbers, people effectively held hostage, have increased to 8000 during October.

"Human rights organisations have lost track of how many children have been kidnapped by the Israeli army, especially in the West Bank."

Under "administrative detention" you can be held for three months without charges, with the possibility of that period being extended, she says.

"I have a friend who stayed in administrative detention for two years without charges."

Again, it all reads like textbook apartheid.

"In the past there were waves of catching students in their final years, in universities in the West Bank, and just sending them back to Gaza — in their final year before graduation."

Often this would be on the pretext that they were not carrying the right IDs or permits.

neighbours they used to live with and know," she recalls.

They thought it was going to be all right; the Jewish people they knew were their friends.

"They didn't imagine that is what we call the start of occupation and establishment of the state of Israel."

The loss of land, culture and self-determination have gone hand-in-hand since, Ibrahim says.

Palestinians have watched as other countries' liberation struggles have drawn a line under colonial rule. Britain and France eventually relinquished their colonial territories in the Middle East and North Africa. Now European colonisation endures in Palestine alone, she says.

But the Nakba was not the end of it.

After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the West Bank and Gaza fell under Israeli control, and with them the lives of the Palestinians that lived in each. Since then, only the 1993 Oslo Accords, outlining a two-state solution, have offered any real hope of progress.

"However, none of the illegal building of [Israeli] settlements in the West Bank stopped, the stealing of the land, the burning of olives trees as sources of livelihood," Ibrahim says.

Human rights organisations have been urging the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, to investigate what appear to be "many new violations, allegedly amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity" in the occupied territories. They include the killing of civilians and human rights and media workers; arbitrary arrest and detention; and forced displacements — among them the forced displacement of more than 1000 residents from Masafer Yatta to

make way for an Israeli Defence Force firing range.

In a widely reported incident late last month that Ibrahim says is in no way out of the ordinary, a 40-year-old Palestinian man, Bilal Saleh, was shot by Israeli settlers while harvesting olives on his West Bank land south of Nablus.

"That is the day-to-day — it is documented, especially by Israeli human rights organisations like B'Tselem."

Dr Tamimi returned to Palestine for four years from 2013 to work for the UN and development organisations in the West Bank, daily negotiating the restrictions placed on Palestinians. The mundane business of travelling to a meeting was routinely frustrated by the endless checkpoints and searches.

At other times, access to basic resources became opportunities to show who was in charge.

"Most of the underground water is controlled by Israel," she explains. "So, Palestinians have no control over their own water resources."

At one time, when she was working for aid agency Oxfam, her job involved helping Palestinian communities access water.

"Unfortunately, the filling point used to be in the nearby settlements, so we had to get the water from the settlements. It is our water but we used to get it from settlements and pay for it." Ibrahim's experience was similar.

Administration of the West Bank is divided in various ways between the Palestinian Authority and Israeli agencies, military and civilian. Area C, the largest part, which includes most rural land, is under military control.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses the UN General Assembly in September, using a map that provoked controversy for omitting the Palestinian territories. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES