

### Why call Israel an Apartheid State? – by Sharmini Brookes

'Is Israel the New Apartheid?' was the topic of debate at the 21<sup>st</sup> Wednesday Seminar of the Departments of Sociology, Anthropology and Development at the University Of Johannesburg (UJ). In March of this year the UJ senate of 72 members voted 60-40% to allow their formal institutional arrangement with Israel's Ben Gurion University to lapse after a debate that referred to Israel as an Apartheid State and justified boycotts on the same grounds as those imposed by anti-Apartheid activists on South Africa. While the vice-chancellor, Professor Ihron Rensburg denies this is a [boycott](#) (as individual academics are allowed to continue relationships) but it is a very public censure of an institution and will inhibit full and free dialogue amongst individual academics as those who wish to do so will court the opprobrium of their peers for voluntarily maintaining links with what is now viewed as a pariah state.

'It is wrong to refer to Israel as an Apartheid State' said the speaker against the motion, Benjamin Pogrund, author, journalist and campaigner with the Israeli [Centre for Dialogue](#). He accepted that there were problems of discrimination in housing, education, land ownership and citizenship but that these were the consequence of the 1948 war for the survival of the Jewish State and not of any consciously articulated government policy of racial discrimination and separate development as instituted by Hendrik Verwoerd and his predecessors in South Africa. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the creation of the State of Israel, then supported by the UN, did violate the right of self-determination for Palestine and has been the source of continuing conflict ever since.

The speaker for the motion, Naeem Jeenah, Executive Director of the [Afro-Middle East Centre](#) and formerly lecturer at Wits University, insisted that it was legitimate to call Israel an Apartheid State based on

[article 2 of the UN Convention on Apartheid](#)

. However, as Benjamin Pogrund noted, this is an expanded description of situations some of which resemble those experienced under Apartheid and which could equally apply to a number of existing countries where human rights are regularly breached. What it fails to recognize is the conscious and deliberate policy that made South Africa unique.

In addition, the assumption that the Apartheid regime was brought down by the success of the international boycott campaign is false. Governments and companies continued their relations with South Africa while paying lip service to anti-apartheid rhetoric and the Sullivan principles until the mass uprisings in the 1980's by the indigenous black population made continued investment unprofitable. The final death blow to Apartheid was delivered with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1996 and the end of a communist threat to capitalism. It was the convergence of black unrest with the death of communism that brought De Klerk to the negotiating table and not the self-regarding boycott campaign.

The attempt of so-called liberals and pro-Palestinian groups to label Israel as Apartheid is a lazy attempt to win support by piggy-backing on this popular international revulsion against Apartheid in the 80's rather than to consider the more complicated reality of the situation in the Middle East.

It is a tragic and revealing irony that Zionism, presented as the salvation of persecuted Jews throughout the world, but in reality a desperate resort resulting from the failure to progressively transform the societies in which the Jews resided, has not led to security for Jewish Israelis nor has it challenged anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, whatever the rights and wrongs of the original creation of the Zionist state, Israel and Israelis exist and cannot be wiped off the earth. That Arabs and Israelis do live and work together in Israel is a fact and it is not inconceivable that a negotiated settlement can be achieved where both can live in peace if only external forces kept their noses out and allowed the locals to work towards their own solution. Unfortunately, the use of the loaded term 'Apartheid' with the Israeli state is not only wrong but tragically serves to isolate progressive Israelis from all contact with enlightened individuals in the rest of the world and hinders any chance of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis.

**Sharmini Brookes** 15/09/11