



RETHINKING OUR DEFINITION OF APARTHEID: NOT JUST A POLITICAL REGIME

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As Israel intensifies its settler-colonial project, apartheid has become an increasingly important framework for understanding and challenging Israeli rule in historic Palestine. Under international law, apartheid is a crime against humanity and states can be held accountable for their actions. However, international law has its limitations. To bring about true justice and equality for Palestinians, apartheid must be recognized as a system not only of legal racial discrimination, but also of racial capitalism.

- By focusing only on the *political* regime, the definition of apartheid under international law does not provide a strong basis for critiquing the *economic* aspects of apartheid and paves the way for a [post-apartheid future](#) that is rife with economic discrimination.
- During the 1970s and 80s, Black South Africans debated how to understand the apartheid system they were fighting. The African National Congress and its allies argued that apartheid was a system of racial domination and that the struggle should focus on eliminating racist policies and demanding equality under the law. Black radicals rejected this analysis, generating an alternative definition of apartheid as a system of “[racial capitalism](#).”
- In 1994, apartheid was abolished and Black South Africans gained equality under the law. However, the transition did not address the structures of racial capitalism. Neoliberal restructuring has led to the emergence of a small Black elite and a growing Black middle class. But the old white elite still controls the vast majority of land and wealth in South Africa. Post-apartheid South Africa is one of the [most unequal countries in the world](#).
- Critiques of Israeli apartheid have largely ignored the limits of transformation in South Africa. Instead of treating apartheid as a system of racial capitalism, most rely on the international legal definition.
- All of historic Palestine remains subject to Israeli rule, which operates by fragmenting the Palestinian population. Neoliberal restructuring has enabled Israel to carry out its new colonial strategy by significantly reducing its reliance on Palestinian labor and to engineer the disposability of the Palestinian population.
- Since 2007, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has followed a strictly neoliberal economic program that calls for cuts to public employment and an expansion of private sector investment. Despite these plans, the private sector remains weak and fragmented.

Policy recommendations:

- Understand Israeli apartheid as a form of racial capitalism. This could [enhance movements working together against global, neoliberal apartheid](#).
- Continue conversations about the [practical dynamics of Palestinian return](#). This will draw attention not only to political rights but also to difficult questions about land redistribution and economic structure.
- Shift the political discourse in Palestine from independence to decolonization. This prevents a liberation movement that ends with an independent state governed by a nationalist elite that mimics the colonial power.