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More than 1,500 academics denounce Israel for imposing apartheid-style regime on Palestinians

Academics and other public figures in Israel and the United States have signed an open letter that is a devastating indictment of the brutal regime imposed on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Israel.

The letter marks a turning point in the ongoing mass protests against the efforts of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of ultra-nationalists and religious Zionists to neuter the judiciary and grant itself unfettered powers.



Tens of thousands Israelis protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's judicial overhaul plan outside the parliament in Jerusalem, Monday, March 27, 2023. [AP Photo/AP]

Drafted by Jews for Justice, it calls out the failure of the protest leaders to acknowledge “The Elephant in the Room.” They insist that “There cannot be democracy for Jews in

Israel as long as Palestinians live under a regime of apartheid, as Israeli legal experts have described it.”

More than 1,500, predominantly Jewish, public intellectuals have signed the letter. It offers a concise but devastating account of the situation in Israel and the tasks posed before any genuine struggle against its fascistic government.

The open letter begins by calling attention to “the direct link between Israel’s recent attack on the judiciary and its illegal occupation of millions of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Palestinian people lack almost all basic rights, including the right to vote and protest. They face constant violence: this year alone, Israeli forces have killed over 190 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and demolished over 590 structures. Settler vigilantes burn, loot, and kill with impunity.”

It draws the essential conclusion, “Without equal rights for all, whether in one state, two states, or in some other political framework, there is always a danger of dictatorship. There cannot be democracy for Jews in Israel as long as Palestinians live under a regime of apartheid, as Israeli legal experts have described it. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of the judicial overhaul is to tighten restrictions on Gaza, deprive Palestinians of equal rights both beyond the Green Line and within it, annex more land, and ethnically cleanse all territories under Israeli rule of their Palestinian population.”

The letter then makes clear, “The problems did not start with the current radical government: Jewish supremacism has been growing for years and was enshrined in law by the 2018 Nation State Law.”

Of great significance, the letter notes a growing political divide among Jews in the United States over Israel, depicted partly in generational terms but also rooted in an opposed class response.

“As Israel has grown more right-wing and come under the spell of the current government’s messianic, homophobic, and misogynistic agenda, young American Jews have grown more and more alienated from it. Meanwhile, American Jewish billionaire funders help support the Israeli far right.”

The letter closes with an appeal to the “leaders of North American Jewry” to support Israel’s protest movement “yet call on it to embrace equality for Jews and Palestinians alike”, “support human rights organization that defend Palestinians”, “overhaul educational norms and curricula for Jewish children and youth” and demand US leaders “help end the occupation, restrict American military aid from being used in the Occupied

Palestinian Territories, and end Israeli impunity in the UN and other international organizations.”



Israeli security forces take positions during clashes with Palestinians following a demonstration against Israel's annual nationalist march through Jerusalem, near the West Bank city of Ramallah, Sunday, May 29, 2022. (AP Photo/Majdi Mohammed)

The letter was written and organized by Omer Bartov, professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University, and Lior Sternfeld, an associate professor of History and Jewish studies at Penn State University.

Bartov has compared the rise to power of extremist members of Netanyahu’s Cabinet like National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to the emergence of fascism in Germany, when “once-fringe political movements managed entry into ruling governments and got their hands on the levers of power”, as summarized by the *Washington Post*. “I am a historian of the 20th century and don’t make analogies lightly,” Bartov said, “This is the current moment in Israel. It’s terrifying to see it happening.”

That the letter has achieved so many signatures in such a short time, among them acclaimed historian Benny Morris, professor emeritus at Ben-Gurion University, Peter Beinart from the City University of New York, Nancy Hollander, the lawyer defending two Guantanamo Bay detainees and Chelsea Manning, and Osvaldo Golijov, the well-known Argentinian-Jewish contemporary composer, indicates that the thinking of a significant layer of public intellectuals has been impacted by the daily violence meted out by Israel’s security forces against the Palestinians and the escalating protest movement against the Netanyahu government.

The letter is a devastating indictment, not only of Netanyahu's government, but of its international backers in Washington, London, Berlin and other capitals who have spent years denouncing criticisms of Israel's brutal repression of the Palestinians as a form of "left anti-Semitism" and mounted witch-hunts such as that in Britain's Labour Party against Jeremy Corbyn that led to mass expulsions of his supporters with no resistance offered by their leader.

Just last month, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution reaffirming that Israel is not a "racist or apartheid state" and condemning such remarks as antisemitism. Last week, Germany's antisemitism Czar, Dr. Felix Klein, speaking in an interview with *Die Welt* in a response to Middle East scholar, Muriel Assenburg—who said that Israel is "prima facie committing the crime of apartheid in the occupied territories"—declared that using the apartheid framework to discuss Israel's treatment of Palestinians is "an antisemitic narrative".

The academics have joined Israel's legal advocacy group Yesh Din and human rights organization B'Tselem, the New York-based Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in making clear the legitimacy of such comparisons regarding a state founded on religious exclusivity, ethnic cleansing and the ongoing repression of the Palestinians, pursuing an expansionist "Greater Israel" policy and lurching towards dictatorship.

Last Sunday, retired Israeli Major General Amiram Levi told Kan Radio that the Israel Defense Forces were "beginning" to be "complicit in war crimes", committing actions "reminiscent of processes that happened in Nazi Germany... "Walk around Hebron and you will see streets that Arabs cannot walk there. It is painful and unpleasant but it is the reality."

The political impact of the letter is well understood by the supposedly liberal defenders of Zionism in the world's media. Neither the *New York Times*, nor the *Guardian*, has so much as reported on the letter. Indeed, the *Washington Post* is the only major US or British publication to do so.

The stand taken by these academics is a major public rebuttal of the protest leaders in Israel. Made up of former ministers, generals and security and intelligence chiefs who are no less committed to the expansion of Israel's borders at the expense of the Palestinians than Netanyahu, their fear is that the turn to open dictatorship has aroused mass opposition in Israel and internationally that jeopardises the interests of Israel's corporate and financial elite. They have spent the past three months seeking to wall off the protests against Netanyahu's judicial coup from any criticism of the Occupation. They have flooded

protests with Israeli flags and torn down the few Palestinian flags brought by demonstrators, even as protesters shouted slogans comparing their brutal treatment by riot police to recent pogrom style actions on the West Bank.

The letter blows apart the argument advanced by a host of pseudo-left critics of Israel and Zionism to write off the mass protest movement as an essentially inconsequential faction fight between two wings of the Zionist movement. They have consistently and vehemently argued that Jewish workers can never be won to united struggle with the Palestinians because they are loyal to the “settler colonial state”, which provides them with a supposedly privileged existence. Obscuring the existence of different and opposing classes in such a state, it is a variant of the argument used by such political forces to dismiss the possibility of winning the working class in the advanced capitalist countries to socialism, above all in the United States, because they too supposedly share in the spoils of imperialist domination.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has from the start maintained that the mass protests have been animated by a growing concern of workers and professional middle-class layers over the far right and extremist settlers’ efforts to provoke an all-out war against the Palestinians, amid Netanyahu’s upping of the covert war against Iran and its allies in Syria and Lebanon. This takes place under conditions where Israel is a social and political powder keg and the entire Middle East has been destabilised by the deepening global economic crisis, the pandemic, climate change and US-led plans to escalate the war against Russia in Ukraine and its regional allies, Iran and Syria, with Tel Aviv as its chief attack dog.

These are fundamentally class issues, rooted in a mounting crisis of world imperialism that is driving the working class internationally into struggle. In the process the central myth of Zionism—of national unity with all Jews sharing the same interests—is being torn apart.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained:

There are complex problems in developing a genuine socialist opposition to Netanyahu’s fascistic agenda. But the working class—Israeli and Palestinian, Jewish, secular, Muslim and Christian—is being objectively driven into struggle against the ruling class and its state apparatus.

The conditions are ripening for a successful struggle to win the entire working class, Jewish and Palestinian, to a unified socialist struggle against their common oppressor.

The escalating class struggle throughout the world must become a conscious political movement for socialism through the building of independent revolutionary parties,

sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, including an Israeli-Palestinian section, to provide the political leadership to overthrow the Zionist state and the Arab bourgeois regimes and build a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

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