

**“Isn’t Israel just defending itself?”**

Israel attempts to use the rhetoric of [self-defence](#) to justify its military actions against Palestinians. The Israeli military has dubbed itself the “Israel *Defense* Forces,” much in the way the Apartheid South African forces dubbed themselves the “South African Defence Forces.” Israel has taken an offensive position in the past, starting regional conflicts and invading neighbours in 1956, 1967, 1978, 1982, and 2006. Nevertheless, Israel insists that those military actions were “pre-emptive,” so as to legitimize their actions as self-defence.

Perhaps one of the most popular contexts for Israel’s “self-defence” rhetoric is Gaza. Israel’s military incursions on the Gaza Strip are disproportionately violent and destructive. Israel is [one of the world’s largest military powers](#), with the monetary and military backing of most Western superpowers, yet they continue to claim that their high-grade military attacks on Gaza are for the sake of self-defence against rockets that Palestinians fire into Israel – rockets that for the most part land in uninhabited areas. Even if one claims to argue self-defence is justified, killing thousands of civilians - including hundreds upon hundreds of children in air strikes in Gaza – is not. The bombing of civilians, protestors, journalists, medical personnel, UN buildings, schools, and mosques is disproportionate and illegal under international law.

Indeed, the UN has repeatedly admonished Israel for its actions in Gaza. For example, after Israel’s assault on Gaza in 2014, the [UN Human Rights Council](#) issued a report citing possible Israeli war crimes. By the end of this [51-day conflict](#), 1,922 Palestinians died – 1,407 of whom were civilians (448 children and 235 women) – and 67 Israelis died, only 2 of whom were civilians. Since March 2018, thousands of Palestinians have been injured and even killed for protesting at Great March of Return. The [UN](#) has repeatedly expressed concern with Israel’s “excessive use of force” against Palestinian protesters, claiming there are “reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli snipers shot at journalists, health workers, children and persons with disabilities, knowing they were clearly recognisable as such.” The panel also stated, “these serious human rights and humanitarian law violations may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.”

By definition, Israel as the occupying power exercises control over Palestinians, is responsible for their well-being, and therefore cannot claim self-defence. An occupying power does not have the right to defend itself against the people they are occupying. [Under international law](#), occupied people have the right to resist, which includes armed resistance against military forces. As the occupying power, Israel has an obligation to withdraw from occupied territories stipulated in [UNSC Resolution 242](#), which calls for the withdraw of Israeli forces in the occupied territories. Indeed, under the 1990s [Oslo Accords](#), Israel was required to withdraw from the occupied territories within five years.

“This is a centuries-old religious conflict.”

Palestinians Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived more or less peacefully side-by-side for centuries before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. It wasn't until the massive immigration wave of Jewish Europeans in the late 1800s and early 1900s that serious tensions began to arise between conflicting nationalist identities in historic Palestine. Zionist organizations and Jewish European immigrants began buying up Palestinian land exclusively for Jewish residents, establishing Jewish-only settlements, even forming their own Zionist militias that would eventually fight in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

In the end, this is not a religious conflict at all. This is a classic case of settler-colonialism and military occupation. There isn't a major conflict over religion; the conflict arises because one religious group is being given preference, rights, and power over all others, who are being discriminated against. Even questions around the status of Jerusalem are political – over who claims Jerusalem as their nation-state capital – rather than purely religious in nature.

“Palestinians just need to recognize Israel's right to exist.”

Over and over again, Palestinians have recognized Israel's right to exist. In 1988, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Yasser Arafat [recognized Israel's existence](#) and adopted the two-state solution. In 1993, after the end of the First Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising), the PLO entered talks with the Israeli government in the Oslo Peace Accords. In the days leading up to the talks, Arafat [signed a letter](#) addressed to the Israeli Prime Minister, again recognizing “the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security,” while renouncing all forms of terrorism, and expressing his desire to negotiate the terms of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel. The current Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas has also [publicly acknowledged](#) the importance of recognizing Israel. **Palestinian leaders have been recognizing Israel for decades yet continue to be scolded for refusing to recognize Israel.** It is Israel, on the other hand, who has **never** recognized the State of Palestine, and has consistently violated the terms of the Oslo Accords by expanding illegal colonies within the land slated for a future Palestinian state. Indeed, in the 2015 Israeli elections, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu was actually elected on [a promise](#) that there will never be a Palestinian state. In April 2019, Netanyahu was once again re-elected by [vowing to annex Israeli settlements](#) in the West Bank, precluding any possibility for a viable Palestinian state.

“Why BDS? Why can't Palestinians just talk with Israel?”

Palestinians have been in negotiations with Israel for decades, all the while Israel has continued to colonize Palestinian land, entrenching a discriminatory apartheid system and precluding the possibility for a viable Palestinian state. Israel has made it clear that they have no interest in a peace plan that would establish an independent Palestinian state or end illegal settlement enterprise in the West Bank. Since their occupation of the West Bank, Israel has moved over half a million Jewish settlers into colonies in the occupied territory. These settlements have been repeatedly condemned by the UN as “flagrant” violations of international law. Moreover, they have made the reality of a Palestinian state in the West Bank completely unattainable. At this point, any further “peace talks” with Israel would just be forcing Palestinians to negotiate the

terms of their own occupation. As American lawyer [Noura Erakat put it](#), further peace talks would just give Palestinians “the choice of how to decorate their prison cells.”

Palestinians have been to the negotiating table on several occasions, but the situation has not changed. That’s why in 2005, over a hundred Palestinian civil society organizations banded together to call on the international community to boycott, divest and sanction Israel until it respects Palestinian human rights. This movement is known as [the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement \(BDS\)](#). BDS is a peaceful, non-violent movement that was inspired by the Boycott Apartheid South Africa movement. The movement has compelled Israel’s more critical supporters to justify their opposition to non-violent forms of pressure on Israel, when the absence of real pressure has done nothing to bring occupation or settlement expansion to an end.

It is important to be clear that the situation in Palestine-Israel is an on-going project of settler colonialism. The conflict is not in a post-conflict space, nor is it currently capable of reaching a post-conflict stage, where proper dialogue and reconciliation can take place on an equal playing field. The asymmetrical power dynamic between the state of Israel and the people of Palestine is hindering just dialogue and peace negotiations. Indeed, since the early 1990s onwards, negotiations between the state of Israel and the Palestinians have repeatedly obscured the line separating colonizers and colonized, to make them both look equally responsible for the conflict. This is one of the main purposes of the BDS movement: that it can help Palestinians to equalize the asymmetric power relations using non-violent, peaceful means.

“Is BDS anti-Semitic?”

No. BDS doesn’t target Jewish people or the Jewish faith. The movement calls for a boycott, divestment, and sanctions on Israel “until it complies with international law and universal principles of human rights.” BDS targets Israel not because of its Jewish character, but because Israel has time and again trampled on human rights ignored international condemnations for its contraventions of international law.

The Israeli State is silencing its critics under the guise of equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. In fact, there are many Jewish people around the world that are distancing themselves from the Israeli state as way of reclaiming the Jewish tradition of justice and universality. Many groups such as, *Independent Jewish Voices*, *Jewish Voice for Peace*, *Boycott from Within*, and *If Not Now*, have affiliated themselves with the BDS Movement for this very purpose. Such gestures of solidarity are perhaps the clearest reminder that the BDS movement is not a boycott of the Jewish people (or any other ethnic community), but a boycott of a settler-colonial state that sustained a 50 year-long occupation on the people of Palestine. In fact, these [40+ Jewish groups across the world](#) agree that equating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism undermines legitimate criticism of Israeli state policy and governance. The goals of the BDS movement are to regain Palestinian rights, whilst transforming Israel from an apartheid state to a true democracy.

“Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.”

Israel ranks on the Democracy Index as a “flawed democracy,” with the greatest disparity between democratic participation and civil liberties of any country in the world. While Israel does experience a high voter turnout, there are systemic legal and societal discriminations which

demote Arab citizens of Israel to second-class status. Israel ranks far lower than other modern democracies in equality, religious tolerance, racial discrimination, and personal freedoms—all necessary facets of a healthy democracy. Moreover, this ranking does not even consider the Palestinian populations living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank. If Democracy Index were to include Israel's occupation in its evaluation, Israel would certainly not qualify as a democracy, as those living under occupation face severe human rights violations under Israeli military rule. Another consequence of the 'only democracy in the Middle East' argument is that it seeks to vilify other Middle Eastern and Arab nations, some of which like Tunisia have fully-functioning democracies, and others such as Jordan which have strong democratic institutions.

When Israel passed its [Nation-State Law](#), it legally solidified Israeli apartheid by defining its nation-state as a Jewish State. The law implements three undemocratic characteristics; 1) It states that "the right to exercise national self-determination" in Israel is "unique to the Jewish people." 2) It establishes Hebrew as Israel's official language, and downgrades Arabic — a language widely spoken by Arab Israelis — to a "special status." 3) It establishes "Jewish settlement as a national value" and mandates that the state "will labor to encourage and promote its establishment and development." There is no democratic state in the world that defines its constitutional identity on exclusive racial grounds, and as serving an ethnic group, according to [Adalah](#) Attorney Myssana Morany.

Within Israel, equality is far from being achieved. About 20% of Israel's population is comprised of Arab Christians and Muslims who face daily societal and legal discrimination. [Dozens of laws](#) allow the legal discrimination of Arab-Israelis, who are widely considered second-class citizens. Hate crimes against Palestinians living both in Israel and the West Bank [have shot up](#) in recent years, and Arabs face high rates of [legalized racial profiling](#) by Israeli officials. However, it's not just Palestinians who experience discrimination in Israeli society; African migrants and refugees to Israel—including Jewish refugees—face harsh realities of racism and [physical violence](#).

" Hamas is the biggest threat to peace in the region."

Hamas is a Palestinian Islamist political organization and militant group which uses armed violence as a form of resistance against the Israeli blockade and siege of Gaza. Hamas's charter was revised in 2017 to allow for acceptance of a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli state. It is the ruling political party in the Gaza Strip, and is widely criticized, even from within Palestine, for its radical religious views, its violent tactics against civilians, and strict governing laws. Hamas was founded in 1987 and in 2006 won a majority of the seats in the Palestinian Authority legislative elections.

However, to understand why Hamas exists, it is crucial to understand the harsh living conditions in Gaza. At the end of the day, Hamas is widely recognized as a terrorist group by international governments, however under international law, occupied peoples have the legal right to take up arms to resist occupation. Israel is the fourth largest military power in the world which enjoys the financial backing of most Western nations. The armed wing of Hamas has nowhere near the military capability of the Israeli forces. Israel is militarily stronger than any neighboring country in the Middle East, including Iran. The biggest threat to peace in the region is Israel's refusal to comply with international law and abuses of human rights – thus unnecessarily perpetuating the conflict in the Middle East.

“Israel is being singled out and treated unfairly.”

Israel certainly is singled out. It is singled out for leniency and favouritism by Western nations. The United States, for example, has used half of its vetoes in the UN Security Council in the past [50 years](#) to block resolutions condemning or criticizing Israel, while Israel has consistently maintained its place as the US’s highest recipient of foreign aid for the past [70 years](#). Where the world can universally condemn the North Korean and Iranian regimes for nuclear proliferation, Israel’s nuclear program is never questioned, and neither are their daily violations of international law.

BDS activists do not “single out” Israel – they are merely holding Israel to the democratic standard it has set for itself. Yes, it is true that many countries in the world have repressive regimes and appalling track records on human rights. However, none of these states would dare call themselves “the only democracy in the Middle East,” or claim to have “the most moral army in the world,” in the way that Israel does. BDS activists are answering an explicit call from Palestinians themselves, who are seeking out international solidarity and action. BDS is a movement that was devised and promoted by Palestinian civil society. Just because there hasn’t been a grassroots BDS movement by Saudi citizens, for example, doesn’t mean that human rights activists wouldn’t adopt the same means to see justice realized there. Boycotting was successful in South Africa, yet no one is accusing supporters of South African divestment of singling out South Africa?

“The West Bank Wall is for Israel’s safety.”

Israel began construction of the separation wall in 2002 during the Palestinian *intifada* or uprising. Thus far, 465 km of has been completed. The Israeli government justified the wall, claiming that it would protect Israelis from Palestinian terror attacks. Today, however, this wall functions to control and impede the movement of Palestinians, interrupting their daily lives. Palestinians – thousands of whom work inside Israel yet live in the West Bank – must spend hours every day waiting at checkpoints along this “security wall” in order to access Jerusalem. For [access to basic services](#) pertaining to health and education, Palestinian citizens of Jerusalem must cross these stringent checkpoints. Even within the West Bank, there are arbitrary check points that restrict the freedom of movement between Palestinian cities, towns and villages. Without the ability to control their own movement, Palestinians bear the heavy burden of life under occupation, their freedoms stolen from them by Israeli military control.

The wall is indeed the ultimate visual depiction of Israeli occupation and discrimination. The wall functions to keep Palestinians out of sight and out of mind. The actual construction of the wall itself has also caused hardship for Palestinians. Large numbers of Palestinian homes have been demolished to make way for the wall, the wall has encircled Palestinian villages and cut off Palestinians neighborhoods, and local agriculture has been disrupted due to the construction of the wall or the wall closing off access to Palestinian land. The wall was deemed illegal by the [International Court of Justice](#) in 2004. However, Israel continues with its plans to finish [the wall](#) along the Jordan valley and in the Gaza Strip.