

Architectures of Oppression: The Role of Higher Education in Entrenching Apartheid in South Africa and Israel

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Abstract

This article examines the instrumental role of higher education in supporting, facilitating, and entrenching apartheid systems of oppression in South Africa and Israel. Following the comparative-historical analysis methodology and guided by the settler-colonial theory and decolonial theory, the article critically examines the parallels between apartheid and higher education in South Africa and Israel, exploring how they have shaped higher education systems and broader societies, and how they continue to influence knowledge production and scholarly thinking in these settings. The findings illustrate that in apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel, the state has shaped higher education policies and practices linked to the propagation of supremacist ideologies, segregation, dehumanisation, repression, and *othering*. At the same time, most universities and much of academia in both settings have participated in all this not because they were coerced by the state, but largely because many higher education leaders, administrators, and academics believe(d) in and were/are committed to settler-colonial and apartheid ideologies. The article concludes with a discussion about the role of international academic boycotts in challenging the complicity of higher education in apartheid oppression and *othering* in both countries, and the importance of sustained global campaigns to dismantle apartheid policies, practices, and coloniality, and to decolonise higher education.

Keywords: apartheid; higher education; decolonisation; academic boycott; South Africa; Israel



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Introduction

Under the Apartheid Convention and the Rome Statute, a system of apartheid consists of three key elements: a systematic and institutionalised oppression and subjugation of one racial group over another; a deliberate intent to systematically oppress and subjugate a racial group; and inhumane acts committed on a systematic basis to entrench and maintain oppression and domination by one group over another (Amnesty International 2022; Human Rights Watch 2021; International Criminal Court 2021; United Nations 1973). The systematic implementation of apartheid constitutes a crime against humanity under international criminal law, representing a fundamental violation of public international law and internationally protected human rights (Amnesty International 2022; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Falk 2010; Human Rights Watch 2021; International Criminal Court 2021; Tilley 2012; United Nations 1973).

The term “apartheid” originates from the Afrikaans language in South Africa and translates to “separateness” or “being apart”. Apartheid was implemented in South Africa through government policies and laws between 1948 and 1990. During this time, the apartheid regime, building on centuries of British colonial racism, oppression, and segregation, instituted, institutionalised, and implemented a racist governance structure based on white supremacist ideologies aimed at reinforcing subjugation and exploitation of the black majority by the white minority (Besteman 2019; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Farsakh 2015; Tilley 2012). Despite its South African origins, apartheid as a system of oppression has global relevance, manifesting in different contexts (Besteman 2019; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Falk 2010; Human Rights Watch 2021; Tilley 2012). A prime example is the state of Israel, established in 1948 as a product of the Nakba (meaning “catastrophe” in the Arabic language) (Dallaseh 2020), which entailed the forcible displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to create a Jewish-majority state of Israel (Radai 2021). Over decades since its establishment, Israel has been accused of practising repressive apartheid policies through systematic oppression of Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (Amnesty International 2022; Ben-Dor 2015; Besteman 2019; B’Tselem 2021; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Falk 2010; Human Rights Watch 2021; Pappé 2015; Said 1980; Tilley 2012; Yesh Din 2020) and within Israel (Ben-Dor 2015; Makdisi 2018; Pappé 2015).

Both South Africa and Israel are settler-colonial entities, emerging through the centuries of European settler-colonial conquests, rule, impositions, oppression, and dispossession (Khalidi 2020). From the critical Azanian perspective, the term “South Africa” is an imposed settler-colonial conception and terminology, with Azania seen as the appropriate name for the territory of what is today South Africa (Dladla 2018). In a similar way, the state of Israel was created in 1948 on the territory that used to be Palestine for centuries and that was taken from Palestinian people through violence and ethnic cleansing (Khalidi 2020). Fully aware of these historical complexities, in this article we use the terms South Africa and Israel to refer to the apartheid states which

have been committing crimes against humanity against black and Palestinian people, respectively, for decades. This is also in line with the literature we engage with in the article, which refers to South Africa and Israel when critically engaging with apartheid systems, policies, and practices in these settings.

Apartheid policies in South Africa and Israel have had an impact on higher education, which, in turn, has reinforced and advanced these oppressive regimes (Dawson and Mullen 2015; Mbembe 2016; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Wind 2024). In both settings, education has been used as a tool for colonising the minds of the oppressed (Biko [1978] 2004; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002), with higher education being a key tool for the maintenance of settler-colonial projects (Heleta 2018; Makdisi 2018; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Wind 2024). Higher education has contributed to ideological reproduction in both South Africa and Israel, embedding settler-colonial worldviews while erasing indigenous narratives, perspectives, and worldviews (Agbaria 2018; Awayed-Bishara 2023; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Heleta 2018; Makdisi 2018; Mbembe 2016; Rouhana 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002; Wind 2024). The subjugation, dehumanisation, *othering*, and repression at the core of the two apartheid higher education systems have been recognised at different times by segments of the global academic community, leading to calls for and practices of academic boycotts of complicit institutions in South Africa and Israel (BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Makdisi 2018; Nordkvelle 1990; PACBI 2014; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024).

Despite the structural similarities in how higher education in South Africa and Israel has contributed to apartheid *othering*, segregation, subjugation, and epistemic injustice, there is limited scholarly literature that critically and comprehensively compares them and draws parallels between the two settings. This gap matters because without a detailed comparative analysis, the role of higher education in reproducing settler-colonial and apartheid logics in different settings remains underexplored. Comparing apartheid in South Africa and Israel, whether broadly or in reference to higher education specifically, is admittedly complex (Agbaria 2018; Barnes 2019; Ben-Dor 2015; Dawson and Mullen 2015). Still, comparing these two settings and exploring the ways their higher education systems have been influenced by apartheid ideologies and have contributed to their maintenance is critical. In this article, through a comprehensive review of the literature about apartheid and higher education in South Africa and Israel, we critically and systematically engage with higher education-related parallels between these two settings—examining what they represent, how they impact(ed) higher education systems and the broader societies in which institutions are located, and how they have shaped and continue to shape and influence thinking within and through higher education. The article demonstrates that in both apartheid South Africa and Israel, the state has shaped higher education policies and practices linked to the propagation of supremacist ideologies, segregation, dehumanisation, repression, and *othering*. Importantly, most universities and much of academia in both settings have participated in this not because they were coerced, but largely because many higher education leaders, administrators, and academics believed in—and in the case of Israel

continue to believe in (Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Wind 2024)—settler-colonial and apartheid ideologies.

In terms of the structure of the article, the next section outlines the methodology and theoretical framing used. The following section focuses on how apartheid as a system of oppression and subjugation has been practised in South Africa and Israel. The next section explicates the ways settler colonialism and apartheid have shaped and impacted higher education in South Africa. This is followed by a section that, in a similar way, illustrates and unpacks the ways apartheid has impacted and shaped higher education in Israel. These two sections provide detailed and descriptive background and context about South African and Israeli higher education under settler-colonial and apartheid regimes of governance. The next section engages in a critical comparison of the two settings, exploring what comparing and contrasting apartheid South Africa and Israel and their higher education sectors tell us about the ways apartheid regimes, ideologies, policies, and practices impact higher education. The last section concludes the article and highlights the importance of international academic boycotts in challenging the complicity of higher education in apartheid oppression and *othering*.

Methodology and Theoretical Framing

This article follows the comparative-historical analysis methodology. Using this methodology, we critically examine and compare two or more cases and the historical processes, events, systems, and structures in these settings (see, for example, Grew 1980; Mahoney 2004). Through this process and the detailed and systematic analysis of each case using qualitative comparative analysis (Mello 2021), comparing and contrasting the evidence from different contexts can lead to the emergence of close parallels and similarities between them (Mahoney 2004). The article applies a two-component hybrid qualitative comparative design to the cases of apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel. The first component is the case selection, which is guided by the most different systems design (Przeworski and Teune 1970), premised on the argument that South Africa and Israel, while distinct across historical, legal, and geopolitical dimensions, converge on a shared outcome—the structural conditions of racialised territorial domination, *othering*, subjugation, and segregation. Thereafter, the second component is the analytical framework, which follows George and Bennett's (2005) structured focused comparison, wherein both cases are examined through a standardised set of criteria derived from a common basis of comparison. We do this through an engagement with the critical literature about apartheid and higher education in South Africa and Israel. We present detailed and rich descriptive backgrounds about the two settings, and then explore what comparing and contrasting higher education sectors in South Africa and Israel tell us about the ways apartheid ideologies, policies, and practices impact higher education.

In terms of the theoretical framing, this article is guided by the settler-colonial theory and decolonial theory. Systems of oppression, such as apartheid in South Africa and Israel, are best understood from the perspective of settler-colonial theory. The theory

posits that settler colonialism operates as an enduring system as opposed to a singular historical event (Wolfe 2006). Through this structure, racial hierarchy is inscribed into institutions and social life, positioning one group as inherently superior and legitimising their preferential claims over land, labour, material resources, and other socio-economic benefits (Collins 1990; Fanon 2004). Decoloniality aims to “unmask and describe” the colonial, settler-colonial, and neocolonial domination, power, violence, and *othering*, while at the same time cultivating “among the oppressed and dominated a critical consciousness and resistance to colonial ways of understanding the human and its condition” (Mpofu and Steyn 2021, 13). Both South Africa and Israel represent settler-colonial settings where colonialism and apartheid have attempted—and in the case of Israel continue to attempt—to destroy indigenous people, systems, structures, and institutions, and where higher education has been/is used to colonise minds and impose settler-colonial narratives, worldviews, and norms while sidelining and/or erasing indigenous worldviews and ways of being and knowing. Due to this, decoloniality is an important lens through which to look at these two apartheid settings and their higher education systems (Ayyash 2026; Hawari, Plonski, and Weizman 2019; Heleta 2018; Mbembe 2016; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002; Wind 2024; Zreik 2024).

Apartheid in South Africa and Israel

While apartheid as a system of oppression originated in South Africa, it is an important framework or lens for understanding Israel’s systematic oppression of the Palestinian people (Besteman 2019; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Falk 2010; Makdisi 2018; Tilley 2012). Greenstein (2015, 341) highlights that the “Israeli policies and practices meet many ... criteria identified in the international legal definition of apartheid”. Despite its origins in South Africa, where racial discrimination and oppression were based on skin colour, Dawson and Mullen (2015, 3) point out that “Israel’s policies in relation to the Palestinians amount to an institutionalised system of racial discrimination and domination”. International human rights law defines racial discrimination more broadly than only focusing on “race” and skin colour, and includes ethnic, religious, and other differences (Human Rights Watch 2021; Tilley 2012). In addition, due to the local constructions and understandings of Arab/Palestinian and Jewish identities, the oppression of Palestinians by Israel can be seen through a racial discrimination lens based on international human rights law and in reference to the definition of apartheid (Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Makdisi 2018; Tilley 2012, 2015).

Several scholars have written about similarities and differences between apartheid in South Africa and Israel, and the danger of making straightforward comparisons between the two (Agbaria 2018; Barnes 2019; Brooks and Griffiths 2024; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Greenstein 2015; Pappé 2015; Said 1980). Still, important comparisons have been made, including by those who have lived through South African apartheid and have had opportunities to visit Palestine and Israel. Desmond Tutu (2002), one of South Africa’s leading anti-apartheid activists, saw a similar humiliation that black people had experienced during apartheid in South Africa when he visited Israel and Palestine. He

witnessed the humiliation of Palestinians at Israeli checkpoints and was reminded of the daily degradation faced by black South Africans under apartheid. The forced removals of Palestinians from their homes and the confiscation of their lands to make way for illegal Jewish settlements echoed, and in many ways exceeded for Tutu, the brutal displacement of black communities to expand “white South Africa”. Drawing on these parallels, Tutu (2012) has argued that the Israeli system of apartheid has been more destructive than the crimes against humanity seen in apartheid South Africa—an assertion echoed by Makdisi (2018) and Brooks and Griffiths (2024).

Apartheid as a system of governance and institutionalised oppression in South Africa began in 1948, the same year the state of Israel was founded (Agbaria 2018; Barnes 2019; Besteman 2019; Husain 1982; Khalidi 2020; Rouhana 2015; Said 1980; Turner 2024). Both of these settler-colonial and apartheid states (Ben-Dor 2015; Farsakh 2015; Makdisi 2018; Hawari, Plonski, and Weizman 2019; Pappé 2015; Tilley 2012; Turner 2024) were “planted in the soil by European empires to function as satellites for the geo-strategic interests of imperialist accumulation and have sought to dominate their respective indigenous populations through various mechanisms of exploitation, domination, and dispossession” (Turner 2024, 146). Beliefs in white supremacy in South Africa and Jewish supremacy in Israel have shaped the policies of exclusion, repression, and *othering* of black and Palestinian people, respectively (Makdisi 2018; Salamanca et al. 2012; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002, 2014). The European colonial and supremacist conceptions of “race” and *othering* that have underpinned both apartheid systems (Besteman 2019; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014; Vadasaria 2025) have shaped the “very logic of who has rights to land, life and humanity” in both settings (Vadasaria 2025, 46). South Africa and Israel were seen, and saw themselves, as Western and Eurocentric islands in Africa and the Middle East/West Asia (Husain 1982; Khalidi 2020; Magubane 1996; Polakow-Suransky 2011; Said 1980; Turner 2024; Vadasaria 2025). Both benefited from their close ties with British Empire, and later with Western Europe and the United States, receiving diplomatic, security, military, and economic support from much of the Western world despite the crimes against humanity they have been committing for many decades (Collins 2011; Dubow 2017; Husain 1982; Said 1980; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014; Turner 2024).

In South Africa and Israel, the repression and subjugation of black and Palestinian populations have been ideological, systematic, and structural, rooted in settler-colonial priorities, visions, and worldviews (Agbaria 2018; Amnesty International 2022; Besteman 2019; Collins 2011; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Human Rights Watch 2021; Makdisi 2018; Salamanca et al. 2012; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014; Tilley 2012; Turner 2024; Vadasaria 2025). In both settings, the “material, ideological and historical intimacies between racial, colonial and capitalist social relations” have sustained systems of domination and exploitation (Turner 2024, 145). Both apartheid regimes have relied on coercive security apparatuses to suppress resistance and maintain settler-colonial and white supremacist or Zionist rule (Dawson and Mullen 2015; Dugard and Reynolds 2013). Land dispossession and displacement

of indigenous populations have been defining features of settler colonialism in both cases (Amnesty International 2022; Badat 1999; Dubow 2017; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Farsakh 2015; Greenstein 2015; Khalidi 2020; Magubane 1996; Makdisi 2018; Rouhana 2015; Said 1980; Salamanca et al. 2012; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014; Tilley 2012; Wind 2024). Both regimes institutionalised spatial segregation and control—through the Bantustans in South Africa and the enclaves of the West Bank and Gaza—to fragment, contain, and politically neutralise subjugated populations (Badat 1999; Barnes 2019; Besteman 2019; Brooks and Griffiths 2024; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Davies 1996; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Farsakh 2015; Makdisi 2018; Tilley 2012).

The ideological similarities between South Africa and Israel have led to close economic and military ties between the two apartheid states in the 1970s and 1980s (Polakow-Suransky 2011). Israel was one of the largest exporters of arms and military technology to South Africa, particularly after the United Nations Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the country in 1977. South Africa and Israel collaborated on the development of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons (Dubow 2017; Gould and Folb 2002a; Liberman 2004; Polakow-Suransky 2011; Said 1980). Similarly, Israeli and white South African universities engaged in extensive research collaborations during South Africa's apartheid (Luukkonen, Persson, and Sivertsen 1992; Sooryamoorthy 2009) while much of the world boycotted the country's white higher education institutions (Nordkvelle 1990). These trends and collaborations have continued after 1994, despite the calls from Palestinians and South African anti-apartheid activists demanding that South African universities stop research collaboration with Israeli institutions complicit in the oppression and subjugation of Palestinian people (Heleta 2023).

Despite their many similarities, there are also important differences between the two apartheid states. South Africa was open and explicit about its racist apartheid aims, policies, laws, dehumanisation, and repression. Israel, on the other hand, has vehemently denied the apartheid label for decades while practising its segregationist, dehumanising, and repressive policies in all spheres of life (Makdisi 2018). South Africa's apartheid regime used "pass books" and policing to control the movement of black people in so-called "white South Africa" (Badat 1999; Besteman 2019; Brooks and Griffiths 2024; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Makdisi 2018), while Israeli apartheid restricts the movement of Palestinians through militarised checkpoints, walls, and a complete military siege of Gaza (Brooks and Griffiths 2024; Dugard and Reynolds 2013; Farsakh 2015; Makdisi 2018; Tilley 2015). While apartheid South Africa relied extensively on the systematic exploitation of black labour in its industries and economy (Besteman 2019; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Makdisi 2018; Tilley 2012), this form of exploitation has been a minor component of the Israeli political economy (Brooks and Griffiths 2024; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Farsakh 2015; Greenstein 2015; Makdisi 2018), particularly after the first Intifada, which ended in 1993 (Besteman 2019; Pappé 2015; Tilley 2012). Another key difference is that while apartheid South Africa represented the minority white settler rule over the black majority, the Israeli settler-

colonial project has included violent ethnic cleansing and displacement of the majority of the Palestinian population and the creation of a state where Jewish people are the majority and where the Palestinian minority has fewer rights and is systematically marginalised and excluded in social, economic, political, and educational terms (Ben-Dor 2015; Farsakh 2015; Greenstein 2015; Makdisi 2018; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014; Tilley 2012). The next two sections will engage in more detail with the ways settler colonialism and apartheid have influenced and shaped South African and Israeli higher education.

Apartheid and Higher Education in South Africa

During the apartheid rule between 1948 and 1990, the South African higher education landscape was a prime example of systemic and structural racism and segregation. Ramoupi (2014, 270) argues that racism in the education sector was one of “the most brutal aspects of apartheid ideology”, providing quality educational opportunities to white people while denying the opportunities to black people and dehumanising them through the limited, strictly controlled, and Eurocentric education they were allowed to access. All levels of education, including higher education, were seen by the apartheid regime as key for the maintenance of racial segregation, white supremacy, and apartheid social order (Agbaria 2018; Bunting 2004; Davies 1996; Heleta 2018; Magubane 1996; Robus and Macleod 2006; Tilley 2012). The entire education sector was structured to further entrench and expand the apartheid ideology of white supremacy and perceived black inferiority (Badat 1999, 2015; Robus and Macleod 2006). White higher education institutions and much of the white academia gave the official racist ideas, ideologies, and state policies “an aura of scientific authority”, helping the settler-colonial regime to institutionalise the white supremacist subjugation of the black majority (Magubane 1996, 34).

The higher education sector in apartheid South Africa was segregated along racial lines, with institutions designated exclusively for white South Africans, black South Africans, Indian South Africans, and coloured or “mixed-heritage” South Africans (Badat 2015; Bunting 2004; Davies 1996; Nordkvelle 1990; Robus and Macleod 2006). The segregation was based on white supremacist beliefs and the goal to entrench settler-colonial domination, serving also as an attempt to divide the oppressed along racial, ethnic, and other lines (Robus and Macleod 2006). The majority of government funding was spent on white institutions, while the black, Indian, and coloured institutions were largely neglected. This significantly impacted the quality of education provided to different segments of the population (Badat 1999; Davies 1996; Nordkvelle 1990). Badat (2015, 187) notes that the racist planning systematically “institutionalised inequities that resulted in universities characterised by educational, financial, material and geographical (white) advantage and (black) disadvantage”.

It is important to note that the racial segregation in South African higher education did not begin in 1948, but decades before under British colonial rule. White institutions were established by white settlers, who modelled colleges and universities on the

institutions from colonial metropolises. The purpose of these institutions was to develop skills, capacity, and knowledge for the expansion and maintenance of the settler-colonial project and white supremacy. At the same time, a few institutions were established, largely with the help of Christian missionaries, to educate a small number of black people based on the imported and imposed Eurocentric curriculum and ways of knowing (Badat 1999; Heleta 2018). The racism and segregation in education significantly intensified after the start of apartheid rule in 1948 (Davies 1996; Heleta 2018), primarily because the Afrikaner-led apartheid regime did not think that the British colonial rule went far enough when it came to the oppression and subjugation of the black majority, on one side, and the white settler (and primarily Afrikaans) socio-economic and educational empowerment, on the other (Badat 1999; Davies 1996).

All white universities in apartheid South Africa were tools of white supremacist oppression and subjugation (Davies 1996; Heleta 2018, 2022; Nordkvelle 1990). While white Afrikaans-language universities and colleges openly served as ideological tools of the apartheid regime (Bunting 2004; Heleta 2018), the so-called “liberal” and “open” white English-language universities were, too, beneficiaries of apartheid and proponents of settler-colonial segregation, Eurocentric epistemic hegemony, and white supremacy (Davies 1996; Heleta 2018; Nordkvelle 1990). As highlighted by Davies (1996, 324), despite their liberal rhetoric, white English-language universities were “more concerned about their own institutional rights [and state funding] than about the emancipation of black South Africans”. When it comes to black, coloured, and Indian institutions, they were not independent and/or free from the interference of the apartheid regime. These institutions were fully controlled by white officials appointed by the apartheid government and were used as tools of suppression and control, allowing a limited and strictly controlled education aimed at the development of a small number of administrators and professionals needed to serve the interests of the apartheid state (Badat 1999, 2015; Bunting 2004; Davies 1996; Heleta 2018; Robus and Macleod 2006). Institutional structures, governance, mandates, and curriculum at black universities were strictly controlled by the apartheid regime and government-imposed councils, often in an authoritarian fashion (Badat 1999; Bunting 2004). Black universities were dominated by white academics (Bunting 2004; Nordkvelle 1990) and academic freedom at these institutions was restricted (Badat 2015; Heleta 2022). In addition, black students were frequently severely repressed by the police and subjugated by university administrators for any political activism (Badat 1999, 2015; Bunting 2004; Davies 1996; Nordkvelle 1990). Despite the repression, black universities were spaces where radical and critical thought, anti-apartheid activism, struggle for liberation, and resistance to white supremacy flourished, particularly among black students; their activism often spread to black communities and inspired or complemented broader anti-apartheid sentiments, campaigns, and protests (Badat 1999; Biko 1978 [2004]).

Most academic disciplines in apartheid South Africa were complicit in racist subjugation, oppression, and *othering*, from archaeology (Shepherd 2019) and genetics (Dubow 2015) to engineering (Shaw and Kloot 2025), to name only a few. The

complicity of the academic community and universities in apartheid's crimes against humanity are particularly evident in the role white universities, academics, and researchers played in the development of chemical and biological weapons for use against anti-apartheid activists and the black population more broadly. In the 1980s, a number of South African white universities and numerous white academics, scientists, and researchers contributed to the development of the apartheid regime's secret chemical and biological warfare programme known as Project Coast (Bale 2006; Gould and Folb 2002a; Singh 2008; Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998). The University of Pretoria provided facilities and laboratories for some of the research on lethal bacteria and the development of poisons, toxins, chemicals, and micro-organisms for use as weapons (Bale 2006; Gould and Folb 2002a, 2002b). At the same time, academics and scientists from the University of Pretoria, Rand Afrikaans University, and the University of the Orange Free State worked for front companies and laboratories behind Project Coast, all the while maintaining their institutional affiliations (Gould and Folb 2002a). The head of Project Coast, Wouter Basson, claimed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings after the end of apartheid that all white universities in South Africa were in some way involved in this project and the development of chemical and biological weapons (Gould and Folb 2002b). Project Coast was also propped up by an extensive international network of collaborators, supporters, and suppliers of materials and technology, including Israel and its academic and scientific community (Gould and Folb 2002a; Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998).

As a result of the calls from anti-apartheid activists for an international social, economic, political, cultural, sports-related, and academic boycott of apartheid South Africa, segments of the global academic community boycotted South Africa's white universities and academia in the 1970s and 1980s. The academic boycotts were linked to the complicity of white universities and academia in racism, white supremacy, racial segregation, and the crimes against humanity committed with their assistance through the practice of racist science and academic work in a deeply racist higher education system. While many across the world, and particularly the institutions and academics from the African continent, other parts of the Global South, and Nordic countries, boycotted apartheid South Africa's white universities (Nordkvelle 1990), significant research collaboration occurred during this period between white South African universities and many Western European, British, North American, and Israeli universities (Luukkonen, Persson, and Sivertsen 1992; Sooryamoorthy 2009).

The belief in white supremacy and a "culture of ideological totalism" (Singh 2008, 9), combined with loyalty to the racist apartheid regime (Gould and Folb 2002b; Magubane 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998), contributed to the involvement of white universities and many white scientists and academics in racist and unethical projects and practices in apartheid South Africa. Sooryamoorthy (2010, 374) highlights that apartheid racism "commanded the science and scientific system" between 1948–1990. This contributed to a further entrenchment of an already colonial, Eurocentric, and racist university system and its metamorphosis into "an inhuman" higher education

system actively engaged in “inhuman science” that contributed to racist oppression and subjugation of black people (Nordkvelle 1990, 270). Despite all this and the evidence about the involvement of universities in developing and producing chemical and biological weapons for use against anti-apartheid activists and the black population that emerged during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in the mid-1990s, there has been no interest in post-apartheid South Africa to investigate this further (Gould and Folb 2002b; Singh 2008). There has also been no interest to critically and meaningfully interrogate the role of universities in propagating and maintaining white supremacy, Eurocentric hegemony, and black dehumanisation and subjugation, and supporting the apartheid regime and its crimes against humanity (Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Ramoupi 2014). To a large extent, the lack of interest among the post-apartheid political elites to hold complicit universities and academia accountable for their role in apartheid racism and oppression, combined with the neoliberalisation and commodification of higher education, has entrenched coloniality and ensured that the higher education sector remains a tool for disseminating Eurocentric hegemonic propaganda and worldviews, while at the same time disregarding other knowledges and ways of knowing (Heleta 2018; Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Maistry and Le Grange 2025; Mbembe 2016; Ramoupi 2014; Robus and Macleod 2006).

Apartheid and Israeli Higher Education

Higher education has played an instrumental role in the founding and expansion of the Israeli state, as well as the past and ongoing repression of the Palestinian people (BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Gunaratnam 2026; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Salameh 2025; Shoman et al. 2025; Wind 2024). A key component of Israeli settler colonialism has been the Zionist plan to “settle in historic Palestine and establish a Jewish majority as the basis for a Jewish state” (Wind 2024, 29). Higher education was seen as a crucial “part of the national Zionist narrative for building an exclusively Jewish state” in Palestine (Salameh 2025, 6) and the negation of the existence of Palestine and Palestinians as a people (Agbaria 2018). Over the past century, Zionist and later Israeli universities and other higher education institutions have been involved in epistemic *othering* and erasure of Palestine and Palestinian people and their history, the theft of Palestinian lands, propagation of Zionist narratives and ideology, and dehumanisation, exclusion, and *othering* of Palestinians living within Israel. The Israeli higher education sector has also been involved in repression of Palestinians within the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) through the training of Israeli soldiers and collaboration with the Israeli military, intelligence, and other state actors on the development of weapons and other tools of repression used against Palestinian people (Agbaria 2018; BRICUP 2025; Gunaratnam 2026; Salameh 2025; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024).

According to Taraki (2015, 21), since its founding, Israeli academia has been “firmly planted within the structures of power and domination in Israel and has historically been an active partner in the oppression of the Palestinian people”. Israeli universities and

academia have been deeply and directly involved in supporting and accelerating the settler-colonial project, including the forcible displacement and dispossession of Palestinians (BRICUP 2025; Salameh 2025; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). Before and during the 1948 war, for example, which led to the Nakba, the three higher education institutions established in Palestine by the then Zionist movement—Hebrew University, Technikon in Haifa, and the Weizmann Institute—took part in military efforts through the work of Science Corps, established to conduct research and improve military capabilities of Zionist settlers. This included the development of biological and chemical weapons used to poison Palestinian water sources to prevent the return of Palestinians to the villages they were displaced from during the Nakba (BRICUP 2025; Wind 2024).

Research by Wind (2024) illustrates that as more institutions were established across Israel and in the illegal Jewish settlements in the OPT over the decades after 1948, the role of higher education in Israel's territorial expansion and the subjugation of Palestinians gained prominence. Israeli universities expanded academic disciplines such as legal studies, archaeology, and Middle Eastern studies, to name a few, that directly contributed to strengthening and maintaining the apartheid system, the occupation of Palestinian territories, and the subjugation and displacement of Palestinian people. In addition, since the creation of the state of Israel, the country's universities and other higher education institutions have had extensive programmes in place to train Israeli security forces and soldiers, equipping them with skills and knowledge aimed at improving approaches and strategies for the oppression of Palestinians (BRICUP 2025; Wind 2024). In many ways, Israeli universities have for decades “taken on the role of supplementary military camps, effectively functioning as the academic arm of the Israeli security state” (BRICUP 2025, 34). Moreover, most institutions, through research and development in close cooperation with the Israeli army and weapons industry, have contributed to the development of weapons and technologies used for surveillance, subjugation, and murder of Palestinians by the Israeli state over many decades (BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). All this, according to Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab (2024, 173), is evidence that Israeli universities have for decades played a key role in the “eliminary nature of the settler-colonial project in historical Palestine”.

All the major Israeli public universities operate “in direct service of the state and serve critical functions in sustaining its policies”, thus constituting “central pillars of Israeli settler colonialism” (Wind 2024, 28). Despite Israeli universities' claims of separation and independence from the state, their academic and other programmes and operations reveal the contrary, thus deeming them complicit in apartheid and settler-colonial crimes (Dawson and Mullen 2015; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). Wind illustrates this through the ways in which legal studies and the field's application across Israeli universities have been used to “innovate” the interpretation of international humanitarian law within the OPT. For decades, Israeli legal scholars affiliated with the country's public universities have worked closely with the state, security, and military

to develop a “legal infrastructure to justify extrajudicial assassinations, torture, and deployment of what would otherwise be considered disproportionate use of force against civilian populations tantamount to war crimes” (Wind 2024, 52). Another example is the role of universities in the development and implementation of the state propaganda strategy known as *hasbara*. Through this, all Israeli universities and many academics and students work directly with the state to undermine and sabotage international campaigns for Palestinian rights and freedom and the campaigns of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement (BRICUP 2025; Wind 2024).

Despite the Israeli higher education sector’s façade of diversity, inclusion, pluralism, and multiculturalism, the system and all institutions are fully committed to the Zionist project, Jewish supremacy, and the displacement, erasure, and dehumanisation of Palestinian people (Agbaria 2018; BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Makdisi 2018; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). Agbaria (2018, 222) argues that the entire Israeli education system, including higher education, is a “system of justification of the colonising of Palestine” through “negation of the Palestinians as a homeland population, similar to other settler-colonial contexts”. Similarly, Makdisi (2018, 322) notes that Israeli universities are “deeply integrated in that country’s racial regime and play an active role in its maintenance and elaboration”. Taraki (2015, 29) adds that while there are some dissident academics in Israel who oppose the occupation, apartheid, and oppression of the Palestinian people, the Israeli higher education system as a whole has been “complicit in violations of international law, grave violations of international humanitarian law, and outright war crimes”.

Built on the Zionist ideology and the belief in Jewish supremacy, and characterised by discrimination and *othering* of Palestinian people, the Israeli higher education system actively discriminates against and excludes Palestinian academics, staff, and students (Agbaria 2018; BRICUP 2025; Halabi 2016; Mansour 2025; Qassrawi and Al-Ramahi 2024; Sabbah-Karkabi and Abu-Rabia-Queder 2025; Salameh 2025; Wind 2024). The small number of Palestinian academics and scholars who work at Israeli universities have for decades faced harassment and silencing campaigns (Sabbah-Karkabi and Abu-Rabia-Queder 2025; Wind 2024). Israeli universities have also limited, conditioned, and restricted access to higher education for Palestinians living in Israel (BRICUP 2025; Halabi 2016; Qassrawi and Al-Ramahi 2024; Salameh 2025; Wind 2024). The small number of Palestinian students who are enrolled in Israeli higher education institutions frequently face alienation and discrimination on campuses, while university administrators collaborate with the state apparatus to “marginalise and criminalise Palestinian students by scrutinising them for signs of national, religious, or political expression” (Wind 2024, 181). Several studies have found that Palestinian students in Israeli higher education institutions face an institutional environment that is alienating, foreign, racist, and often hostile (BRICUP 2025; Halabi 2016; Mansour 2025; Qassrawi and Al-Ramahi 2024; Salameh 2025). This particularly manifests through the curriculum, which propagates Zionist narratives that erase Palestine and its history and

dehumanise Palestinian people (Qassrawi and Al-Ramahi 2024; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002; Wind 2024). Wind (2024) notes that despite the repression and erasure, Palestinian academics, scholars, and students continue to organise against and challenge the subjugation, injustices, and apartheid they experience in their lives and on university campuses within Israel.

Apart from the repression and exclusion of Palestinians within the Israeli higher education system, Israeli universities and academia have also been directly or indirectly involved in the deliberate and systematic destruction, repression of, and attacks on Palestinian higher education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Across the OPTs, Palestinian students, academics, and administrators have faced arrests, abductions, and incarcerations for decades, while the Palestinian higher education institutions have been frequently raided and closed (Al-Botmeh 2026; BRICUP 2025; Wind 2024). Since the 1970s, Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza have been under strict control by the Israeli state and under frequent attacks, raids, and closures by the Israeli security and military forces. Countless Palestinian academics, administrators, and students in the West Bank have been arrested, abducted, detained, and tortured by Israeli security forces over the past five decades (Abu Lughod 2000; Tilley 2012; Wind 2024). In Gaza, Palestinian universities have been consistently bombed by the Israeli army during multiple attacks on the Strip since 2008 (Milton, Elkahlout, and Barakat 2023; Tilley 2012) and have been systematically and deliberately destroyed since October 2023 (Forensic Architecture 2024; Ibrahim and Heleta 2025). All these attacks and repressive tactics have been aimed at suppressing the Palestinian struggle for freedom and liberation in which Palestinian higher education institutions, scholars, and academics play a prominent role (Al-Botmeh 2026; BRICUP 2025; Wind 2024). Importantly, and as illustrated above, Israeli universities and much of academia have been active participants in the development of capacity, strategies, and tools of oppression that have been used by the Israeli army and security forces for the closure, surveillance, and/or destruction of Palestinian universities and the abductions, displacement, and murder of Palestinian students, academics, and staff in the OPTs (Al-Botmeh 2026; BRICUP 2025; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024).

Over many decades of systematic Israeli attacks on Palestinian higher education in the OPTs and consistent repression and subjugation of Palestinian academics and students within Israel, most of the Israeli academia and university administrators have remained silent and indifferent, ignoring the attacks and restrictions on Palestinians' academic freedom (BRICUP 2025; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). In 2004, this direct complicity with the repression and subjugation of Palestinian people led to a call by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) for an international academic boycott of complicit Israeli institutions (PACBI 2014). In many ways, PACBI's call for an academic boycott of Israeli higher education has been inspired by the similar calls for an academic boycott of South African universities complicit in racist oppression and subjugation of black South Africans during apartheid (BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; PACBI 2014; Wind 2024). The academic boycott campaign

remains an ongoing and active global project aimed at putting pressure on Israeli higher education institutions and their international backers, supporters, funders, and collaborators (Dawson and Mullen 2015; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024), and is seen as an important part of the “struggle for justice and liberation for the Palestinian people” (Taraki 2015, 29).

Apartheid and Higher Education: Complicity, Oppression, and Erasure

In 1996, Davies highlighted the importance of critically engaging with the politics of higher education under apartheid. This was in reference to South Africa’s higher education after the country emerged from more than four decades of racist apartheid rule (Davies 1996). As we have illustrated above, it is similarly important to critically interrogate the politics of higher education and its role in the subjugation and *othering* of Palestinian people under the Israeli settler-colonial and apartheid regime. Putting South African and Israeli higher education systems next to each other allows us to see glaring parallels between the two, illustrating how settler-colonial, racist, supremacist, and ethnonationalist beliefs, as well as apartheid segregation, subjugation, exclusion, *othering*, and epistemic violence are “entangled and evident” (Agbaria 2018, 220) in both settings. Doing this offers a “language that ... identifies” an oppressive and *othering* apartheid and higher education “trajectory when it sees one and renders it reminiscent of other trajectories” (Piterberg 2008, 55). As highlighted by Greenstein (2015), critically analysing and comparing apartheid practices in South Africa and Israel and drawing parallels between the two are not necessarily about outlining similarities and/or differences, but primarily about reflecting critically on the ways apartheid policies and practices have been implemented and used for the subjugation of the oppressed. In this article, we have done this in reference to higher education. Focusing on apartheid and higher education in South Africa and Israel illustrates the ways the sector has played a role in South Africa’s and continues to play a role in Israel’s apartheid segregation and repression, as well as in suppression, erasure, and *othering* of the oppressed peoples and their knowledges, ways of knowing, and their humanity. Most importantly, putting these two settings and their higher education sectors next to each other allows us to see how higher education can become a tool for the propagation of racism, supremacist beliefs, *othering*, murder, forcible displacement, and epistemic injustice in settler-colonial and repressive societies.

In South Africa and Israel, the subjugation and dispossession of black and Palestinian people, respectively, have been based on the imbalance of military, political, and economic power between the settlers and indigenous people (Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024). Settler-colonial projects and apartheid systems in both settings were supported and enabled by settler universities and academia. In addition, both apartheid states invested heavily in settler universities in order to develop “scientific” validation for settler-colonial and apartheid projects (Badat 2015; BRICUP 2025; Magubane 1996; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Wind 2024). Both apartheid higher education systems engaged in inhuman science, research, teaching, and learning aimed at the

enhancement of oppression and subjugation of black and Palestinian people (Magubane 1996; Nordkvelle 1990; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). Universities and much of academia in both settings were/are also key to the development and propagation of hegemonic narratives aimed at the normalisation of settler-colonial projects, the erasure of indigenous people, and the justification of their oppression and dispossession (BRICUP 2025; Hawari, Plonski, and Weizman 2019; Wind 2024). Beyond this, universities, academics, and researchers were also directly involved in the development of biological, chemical, and other weapons used to poison, murder, terrorise, and subjugate black and Palestinian people (BRICUP 2025; Gould and Folb 2002a; Wind 2024).

Davies (1996) highlights the role and importance of the state in shaping and influencing higher education policies and trajectories in apartheid South Africa. This is particularly true for the public higher education sector, which depended, in part, on state funding for research and operational functioning of universities during apartheid. Wind's (2024) research illustrates that the role of the state in Israel in relation to the public higher education sector has been a similar one. In both apartheid settings, the state has shaped higher education policies and practices linked to the propagation of supremacist ideologies, segregationist practices, dehumanisation, *othering*, and subjugation of the oppressed. In both settings, this has been done through epistemic injustice, ideologically framed research and teaching, and close collaboration between the universities, state and security apparatuses, and military industries (BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Gould and Folb 2002a; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). In South Africa and Israel, apartheid academia has actively contributed to the erasure and subjugation of African and Palestinian narratives, perspectives, and worldviews, respectively (Agbaria 2018; Awayed-Bishara 2023; Heleta 2018; Makdisi 2018; Mbembe 2016; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002; Wind 2024). It must be stressed, however, that the universities and academia in both settings have participated in all this not because the state coerced them, but largely because most of their leaders, administrators, and academia support(ed) the settler-colonial and apartheid ideologies and believe(d) in and were/are fully committed to white or Zionist supremacy (Agbaria 2018; BRICUP 2025; Gould and Folb 2002b; Magubane 1996; Makdisi 2018; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002; Singh 2008; Taraki 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998; Wind 2024).

Wind (2024) sees the calls for the international academic boycott of complicit Israeli institutions as a key part of a broader struggle to decolonise Israeli higher education and for holding its leaders, administrators, and academics accountable for active participation in settler-colonial and apartheid dehumanisation and oppression. In this, she sees parallels with the academic boycotts of South Africa's white higher education institutions during apartheid. In the case of apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel, academic boycotts were/are about challenging the settler-colonial and apartheid universities and academia and their role in crimes against humanity and the subjugation of indigenous peoples (BRICUP 2025; Dawson and Mullen 2015; Nordkvelle 1990; Taraki 2015; Wind 2024). Academic boycotts are also about the fundamental

reimagining of the university in settler-colonial and repressive settings such as apartheid South Africa and Israel, including “the relationship to the land on which ... [the university] stands, the knowledge it produces, and the pedagogy it practices” (Wind 2024, 281).

The case of post-apartheid South Africa’s higher education and the failure to engage critically and systematically with the role of universities in apartheid oppression, as well as the failure to engage meaningfully with epistemic decolonisation (Heleta 2018; Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Mbembe 2016), illustrates that the settler-colonial, supremacist, and Eurocentric hegemonies tend to persist in academia long after the formal end of apartheid rule. While Wind (2024) sees accountability as a key aspect of a complex process of decolonisation in Israel and Palestine, post-apartheid South Africa has failed to hold the higher education sector and its leaders, administrators, and academics who have been complicit in racist oppression, *othering*, and crimes against humanity accountable for their wrongdoings (Heleta and Dilraj 2024). This has further entrenched Eurocentricity, whiteness, and coloniality in South African higher education. It should not come as a surprise that the very universities and academia that have refused to confront their own apartheid complicity in South Africa would, to a large extent, turn a blind eye to Israeli apartheid and oppression of Palestinians, maintaining their silence even amid the genocide and scholasticide in Gaza since October 2023 (Ibrahim and Heleta 2025; Maistry and Le Grange 2025).

Conclusion

In this article, we have critically engaged with the relevant literature to compare, contrast, and examine higher education-related parallels between apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel. Bringing these two apartheid settings together and putting the spotlight on higher education reveal how higher education systems, institutions, academics, and researchers are not merely passive observers but are structurally entangled and complicit in the reproduction of apartheid *othering*, segregation, subjugation, dehumanisation, racism, and epistemic injustice. What is also evident is the role of much of the global, and largely Western, academia in supporting and collaborating with the higher education systems, institutions, and academia in apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel, despite all the evidence of subjugation, racism, and direct complicity in crimes against humanity by their higher education systems, institutions, and much of the academia. The article addresses a gap in the literature about the parallels between apartheid South Africa’s and Israel’s higher education sectors, and their complicity in apartheid and settler-colonial oppression and subjugation. Importantly, critically unpacking the similarities and parallels shows that in South Africa and Israel the apartheid regimes’ supremacist ideologies have fundamentally shaped and influenced higher education policies and practices for many decades. Far from being neutral spaces fostering objectivity and universal humanity, universities in South Africa and Israel have frequently been instrumentalised by apartheid regimes to perpetuate oppression and reinforce domination, *othering*, and segregation. At the same

time, universities and much of the academia in both settings have been committed to apartheid projects and oppressive ideologies; rather than challenging state power and oppressive ideologies and practices, they have served to legitimise and extend the settler-colonial and apartheid subjugation, contributing to the marginalisation, exclusion, and even murder of the oppressed.

Wind's (2024) call to hold complicit Israeli higher education institutions, leaders, administrators, and academics accountable for participation in settler-colonial and apartheid *othering*, oppression, and crimes is an important and largely overlooked aspect of the decolonial project in higher education globally. As we have illustrated, post-apartheid South Africa has completely neglected to hold its higher education sector—deeply complicit in racist oppression, *othering*, and apartheid crimes against humanity—accountable for past wrongdoings. This, in turn, has contributed to whitewashing of history and a largely superficial transformation that has preserved the status quo, coloniality, Eurocentricity, and whiteness in the higher education sector (Heleta and Dilraj 2024). As several scholars have argued, this also explains, at least in part, the silence of many higher education institutions in South Africa during the genocide and scholasticide in Gaza since October 2023, which have led to the obliteration of the Palestinian higher education sector in the Gaza Strip (Ibrahim and Heleta 2025; Maistry and Le Grange 2025).

As South Africa's experience shows, the struggle for decolonisation of higher education in Israel, and for epistemic and other forms of justice for Palestinians, is likely to take many decades; the same remains true in South Africa. Rather than leading to resignation, this calls for more advocacy, activism, critical engagement, and mobilising within and across institutions and countries and across borders and continents to challenge the oppressive status quo and coloniality on local, national, and global levels. Salamanca et al. (2012, 5) argue that the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice, like the South African and other struggles against apartheid, settler colonialism, and coloniality, "can only be won when ... [they are] embedded within, and empowered by, broader struggles—all anti-imperial, all anti-racist, and all struggling to make another world possible". Exposing the role of higher education in propagating and maintaining settler colonialism and apartheid in South Africa and Israel, and the subjugation of the Palestinian people in the OPT, is part of this process. Similarly, a key part of this process is the support for international academic boycotts of complicit institutions and working with movements globally to decolonise higher education and broader societies in settler-colonial and other oppressive settings (Wind 2024).

Crucially, this process also requires a reckoning with the global circuits of knowledge production. Higher education systems, institutions, academic disciplines, academic journals, publishing infrastructures, citation economies, international ranking systems, and funding mechanisms are not neutral arbiters of scholarly and academic merit. Rather, they are embedded in and actively reproduce colonial, imperial, neocolonial, and the dominant Euro-American logics, paradigms, and epistemologies that sustain

apartheid, settler colonialism, *othering*, subjugation, Euro-American hegemony, and epistemic injustice across the world. Readers and scholars who engage with this work from within these circuits are therefore not outside observers; they are participants in systems whose dismantling and transformation are urgent and necessary. This calls for resistance to the oppressive status quo in global higher education, challenging the dominant hegemonies, coloniality, apartheid, and other ills, and opening “fissures and cracks” within the dominant structures and systems “in order to sow and cultivate an otherwise or something else” (Walsh 2023, 526).

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