

OPINION – "The similarities between apartheid in South Africa and today's politics in Israel are many", Mats Svensson, former Swedish diplomat in Jerusalem, writes.



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Highlights:

- "Often my South African colleagues would cry out that apartheid in South Africa was a picnic compared to the West Bank and Gaza".
- "The HSRC declared that the similarities between apartheid in South Africa and today's politics in Israel are many. The state of Israel is guilty of colonialism as well as apartheid".
- "South African researchers now cast the spotlight not only on Israel, but also on each country within the European Union as well as America and others within the UN family".

Apartheid on Two Continents

Most surfaces are covered with post-its, yellow, green and pink. Each post-it has its place, not randomly dotted on the wall, but consciously placed with an exact distance to the rest. I look around and see a pattern, but don't understand all the codes: countries, persons, events, years, money...

The shelves are covered with books and folders; alphabetized and based on a library structure, but with the artist's own codes. Everything is in its place, always in the right place. I am actually not allowed in here -- no one is. Tor Sellström doesn't want anyone to mess anything up, change anything, move a book, a paper, a green post-it, a pen or a message.

Tor is the artist, the artist who paints an endless painting, a painting in text. It's art in words. He paints to make us understand, remember and never forgot what just was.

No one is forgotten. Everyone who was there, both famous and unknown have their place. The smallest organisations as well as the large ones are referenced. Everyone gets a value -- their own value. The palette contains all colors, even colors that don't exist.

'Israel is guilty of colonialism and apartheid'

Written by Mats Svensson

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Then I saw how the work of art was almost ready. Six years were completed. Just one year remained. The first book, *Sweden and National Liberation Southern Africa: Volume 1: Formation of a Popular Opinion 1950-1970*, had just been published. It was a 540-page tome.

Tor was starting to become impatient. The round-the-clock work, the loneliness, the sleeplessness, the constant search for facts began to take their toll on him. It was as if the struggle he described in the fight against apartheid had become part of his inner struggle. It came to be about the large political currents, but also about the artist's own inner storms. Tor waits anxiously to complete his last work of art with the subtitle, *Solidarity and Assistance 1970-1999* (912 pages).

Tor writes about the struggle against apartheid and about everyone who supported the resistance. He writes about everyone who didn't wait for someone else to act and everyone who didn't wait for something to disappear, over time, into the sand. Through Tor's work, we have an encyclopedia of apartheid and colonialism in our hands. Who acted and how; who didn't act and why, it's all there. He's produced three volumes, an epic two thousand pages of text with thousands of footnotes, words, lines and pages with an unambiguous message.

I lived in Shuafat in East Jerusalem when I finished reading the last volume, a dense, unwieldy, tedious volume. I have often told Tor that if someone says he has read all of the volumes, he can assume that the person is lying. Thousands of pages of scholarly text just become too strenuous. But Jerusalem, the place where I found myself in May 2009, gave me strength. I read about something that had been, that I had tried to understand for a long time, but that also still goes on. Then and now merged and became one in the reality of my surroundings.

In May 2009, I was invited to a launch of a report in Ramallah. The report was called *Occupation, Colonialism, Apartheid?: A re-assessment of Israel's practices in the occupied Palestinian territories under international law*, Cape Town, South Africa, May 2009

. I felt both happiness and sorrow when first I held the report in my hands. Happiness that somebody dared to begin telling the truth, but also sorrow about my own silence; that I had hidden behind my own cowardice and not been able to see what appeared so clearly for others. The truth, on paper, came from Cape Town.

If you want to understand apartheid and colonialism, take yourself to South Africa. Rent a car and drive out to Mamelodi. Sit in a shebeen or small jazz club, listen to the music and ask questions. If there's anything a South African understands, it's apartheid. As the mother has

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breast fed her child, the child has simultaneously received apartheid's whole system. As a Swede, I can never understand this. What recently happened in South Africa was disgusting and at the same time too consistent in its science. But, it also implies that researchers in South Africa observe, know and have a strong sensitivity to apartheid's tendencies elsewhere.

During my years in Palestine, I worked for short periods close to persons who were near President Mbeki and the Mandela couple. We worked in the Gaza Strip talking with factions. Often my South African colleagues would cry out that apartheid in South Africa was a picnic compared to the West Bank and Gaza.

After 15 months of research, South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) declared that what is happening in Palestine is not only occupation, but also colonialism and apartheid.

There are similarities and differences between the HSRC's report and Tor's books. They are both based on an extensive factual basis, not feelings. At the same time, there is a decisive difference. In the South African report, it is shown that the international community is politically silent and there is little to report on. The authors of the report have chosen to analyze concepts such as colonialism and apartheid and do this in relation to legality. It is research with an address, research that means that we need to take a position, judge, value and as humans, react.

Colonialism and apartheid are expressions that we, as humanity, have decided to fight. They are both crimes against fundamental human rights. Each state has a legal responsibility to the international community not to be an active part of apartheid or colonialism. In accordance with this, each state has a responsibility to cooperate to end all forms of colonialism and apartheid; and not to recognize forms of actions that have their origins in colonialism or apartheid; and not to support countries committing these crimes. Sweden also stands behind this undertaking. It has been manifested under the common notion of international law.

After long periods of colonialism during which different European countries were the oppressors and the poor in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the oppressed, it finally became clear that this must be fought. Each Swede, with principles of law as a guiding star, stood behind this and came to support different liberation struggles around the world. In the same way, a clear understanding of apartheid as part of the utmost evil was formed.

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But the HSRC shows that apartheid remains. Professor John Dugard was the United Nations (UN) special rapporteur for Palestine in the UN Human Rights Council for several years. In his final report in January 2007, he posed the following question to the international community: "What are the legal consequences of a regime of prolonged occupation with features of colonialism and apartheid for the occupied people, the occupying power and third states?" The "third state" in this case, includes, but is of course not limited to Sweden.

Dugard's question is the starting point for the HSRC's report about occupation, colonialism and apartheid. And, after 15 months of intense research, The HSRC declared that the similarities between apartheid in South Africa and today's politics in Israel are many. The state of Israel is guilty of colonialism as well as apartheid. Those who have participated in commissioning the report come from different institutes in South Africa, England, Israel and Palestine.

Apartheid in South Africa had three starting points; to divide the population into groups based on race and give the white race preference in terms of rights, services and privileges; to divide the country up into geographically segregated areas, transferring the population into these, based on their race; and to institute a combination of security laws and rules created to oppress and suppress any resistance, which also had the effect of strengthening a system of domination based on race.

The authors of the report consider that the Palestinian people live under a similar system. The three prerequisites are visible in the occupied territories. The system of privilege is extensive and well built, the geographically segregated areas clear and well established and the security laws are one-sided and in place to preclude all forms of resistance.

The South African report has been handed over to and read by every diplomat in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Tel Aviv. At the same time, every self-respecting nation has, long ago, signed onto fighting apartheid in case its ugly face should surface again. And now it surfaces. South African researchers now cast the spotlight not only on Israel, but also on each country within the European Union as well as America and others within the UN family.

Researchers ask us what the third party is going to do. Apartheid is back. Apartheid is near. A short plane ride away and you can again experience what we all thought had been buried forever. We are asked to take a stand, have the courage to walk out on the stage and make our voices heard.

Israel bears the main responsibility for eradicating the crime it has created. This can be done by

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removing the structures and institutions that have led to apartheid and colonialism. There are also rules that demand compensation from Israel for the damage caused. Israel must also ensure that each individual in Palestine has the right to decide over his or her future, political belonging and economic and social development. For this to become possible, everyone living in Israel or within the occupied territory must be equal before the law.

In this effort to ensure that each Palestinian can live freely, a third party, for example Sweden, has an important voice and an important role. The international community demands, in accordance with international law, that Sweden also lives up to the common undertaking, to fight apartheid and colonialism in all its forms. South Africa has given us a baton and now it is up to us to dare to pick it up, to begin to call a spade a spade.

Mats Svensson,

Senior Policy Specialist, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), has been living in Jerusalem and working in the Swedish Consulate.

For the last year, he has been on leave from the Swedish International Development Agency and walking along the separation barrier in the West Bank from south to north, following house demolitions and settlement expansions in Jerusalem, and documenting life under the Israeli occupation.