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'Apartheid' label doesn't fit Mideast

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Former President Jimmy Carter's use of the word "apartheid" in the title of his new book on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is highly regrettable, although it has certainly gained a great deal of publicity for the book.

It is regrettable because it is inaccurate and especially because it is unfair to black South Africans and the African National Congress in particular.

I in no way condone or agree with the way Israel has conducted its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and believe it was a huge strategic and costly military mistake to build the settlements on Palestinian land after 1967. At the same time, Israel's actions must be viewed in the context of the overall conflict: the Palestinians' refusal since 1948 to recognize Israel's right to exist and their decision to resort to airplane hijackings, murder on the high seas, suicide bombings and other forms of terrorism and armed conflict.

Rightly or wrongly, Israel has concluded that while it tries to negotiate a settlement of the conflict, it has to ensure its survival and safety through its military strength and superiority. This context in no way resembles the situation in which apartheid was developed as an ideology and social system in South Africa.

In a recent opinion column, John Dugard, whom I knew and respected greatly for his work against the apartheid system in South Africa when we lived there in the early 1960s and '70s, described some of the worst aspects of the apartheid system and Israeli occupation but totally failed to acknowledge the actions of the Palestinians that led to Israel's response ("Israelis adopt what South Africa dropped," @issue Nov. 29).

The evils and injustices of apartheid were truly unique to South Africa and should not be denigrated by loosely using the word to describe other situations.

From the time of its founding in 1912, the African National Congress adopted negotiation and peaceful protest in a vain attempt to end the discriminatory system under which all nonwhite South Africans were forced to live. It was only after the Sharpeville massacre

in 1960 and the subsequent arrest and jailing of its leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and many others, that the ANC leadership concluded that military force would be needed.

The armed wing of the ANC Umkhonto we Sizwe (or MK), translated Spear of the Nation, was only formed in 1961. Even then, almost all the targets were confined to infrastructure, the police and the armed forces. There were few notable exceptions when the general population was targeted, but these were the exception rather than the rule.

Increasing civil unrest, largely confined to black areas, made it clear to the nationalist government, and especially to the army, that the country was becoming ungovernable. To his great credit, President F.W. de Klerk saw that negotiations were the only way out, and he was incredibly fortunate to have a person of the stature of Nelson Mandela, who was willing to negotiate with him. The rest is history, but regrettably, Israel has never had a Mandela with whom it could negotiate.

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