“It's an opportune moment to engage in more high-level conversations about Israeli apartheid and to make moves to finally end it.”

The group Independent Jewish Voices Canada (IJV) launched a new campaign Monday to “end Israel’s oppression against Palestinians” following a recent Amnesty International report that found Israel is committing the crime of apartheid against Palestinians.

The campaign, called Together Against Apartheid, is aimed at “educating and empowering people across the country.” Aaron Lakoff, IJV’s communications and media lead, told The Maple that a consensus is building among human rights experts about the nature of Israel’s actions.

“It's an opportune moment to engage in more high-level conversations about Israeli apartheid and to make moves to finally end it,” he explained. “We see a growing movement of Jews around the world who are standing up against Israeli apartheid, and IJV wanted to add our voice and our efforts to that.”

As reported by The Maple last month, Amnesty’s report found:

“Massive seizures of Palestinian land and property, unlawful killings, forcible transfer, drastic movement restrictions, and the denial of nationality and citizenship to Palestinians are all components of a system which amounts to apartheid under international law.”

Amnesty added: “This system is maintained by violations which Amnesty International found to constitute apartheid as a crime against humanity, as defined in the Rome Statute and Apartheid Convention.”

Here’s What Amnesty International's Report Calling Out Israeli Apartheid Means for Canada

“Amnesty is sending a message to governments like Canada that we have to do everything we can to distance ourselves from that regime.”

The Maple

Alex Cosh
The Rome Statute is a treaty that established the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002. It states that apartheid is a crime against humanity, and defines apartheid as:

“Inhumane acts … committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime.”

The word "apartheid" is more commonly recognized in the context of South Africa, where between 1948 and the 1990s the government of that country implemented a violent system of forced racial segregation and oppression to maintain the supremacy of the white-minority population.

The Amnesty report on Israel followed similar findings published last year by the Israel-based human rights group B’Tselem, as well as Human Rights Watch, an international non-governmental organization. Palestinian groups have accused Israel of apartheid for decades.

The issue draws significant attention in Canada, as this country is a key ally of Israel. Canada sells Israel weapons, maintains other trading relationships and has tried to halt efforts by the ICC to investigate Israel’s alleged war crimes in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Lakoff said TAA is a two-fold campaign, focusing on educating Canadians about Israeli apartheid, and also establishing “apartheid-free zones,” in which institutions stop purchasing Israeli products or divest from companies complicit in apartheid.

Lakoff noted that when the apartheid government of South Africa established “Bantustans,” areas the regime used to forcibly segregate Black people starting in the mid-twentieth century, it took inspiration from how Canada forced First Nations people into remote reserve lands.

At the same time, he continued, tools for countering apartheid have also been exported internationally. Notably, the current Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) campaign to pressure the Israeli government was partly inspired by methods used against South Africa’s apartheid regime.

“It was a campaign that South Africans called for, for the international community to join them in terms of bringing down apartheid, because a lot of Western governments were very, very slow to isolate the South African government and cut off ties,” said Lakoff, who added that this history should inform understandings of today’s situation.

“We see just this absolute disregard from the Canadian government in terms of giving Israel a free pass when it commits human rights abuses, but we have to remember that Palestinians only called for BDS in 2005 … and in the grand scheme of things it's not that long,” he explained. “Yet, in those 17 years, we've made incredible strides.”
Lakoff added that lessons from the BDS movement could also be applied to Vladimir Putin’s regime in Russia, which is accused of committing horrific war crimes in its ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

**Learning from History**

Michael Bueckert, vice-president of the advocacy group Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), which endorsed TAA, said he is excited by IJV’s initiative.

Bueckert, who completed a Ph.D. examining Canadian opposition to boycott campaigns, explained that during South Africa’s apartheid regime, civil society played an important role in building political consensus around the idea that the Canadian government needed to act.

“It took several decades of campaigning, and it wasn't really until the mid-1980s that Canada actually had a, relatively speaking, proactive position, including the imposition of several rounds of sanctions and diplomatic pressure,” he told The Maple. “That wasn't really enough, but it was a pretty significant change.”

Student campaigns boycotting products from apartheid South Africa, Bueckert explained, enabled civil society to bypass “institutional gatekeepers” and create on the ground what they expected to see from people in power. TAA’s apartheid-free zones, he said, can achieve similar goals.

“It's creating an awareness for people about the need to make sure that all of our interactions, the things we're purchasing, that these are not complicit in maintaining a system of apartheid, and demonstrating that it's possible to put those principles in place,” said Bueckert.

A major challenge in achieving those objectives, Bueckert said, has been establishing a “shared sense of reality” between Palestinian human rights supporters and pro-Israel advocates, some of whom refuse to even acknowledge that Israel is occupying Palestinian land.

However, he added, the recent human rights reports demonstrate there is a growing consensus among the broader public about Israel's actions.

“It's just at the levels of those in power, the political class, in particular, where the barriers are extremely difficult to overcome, but that’s why we need to keep pushing,” said Bueckert.

**MP Shares Thoughts at Launch Event**

TAA’s virtual launch event last weekend included comments from NDP MP Leah Gazan, who said the recent human rights reports have shown “it’s critical to educate the public, to galvanize action” in response to Israel’s alleged crimes.
Gazan added that she is pleased public conversations are now naming Israeli apartheid for what is. “What is happening in Palestine and against Palestinians is in fact apartheid, and Israel is committing the crime of apartheid,” she said.

Gazan said she believes the Canadian government refrains from calling out Israeli apartheid because, like Israel, it administers a settler-colonial state. “In real time it participates in neo-settler, neo-colonialism by continuing to violently dispossess Indigenous people of their lands in Canada.”

She added, “what we're seeing in Israel, what we see in Wet’suwet’en in B.C., [is] people being removed from lands by militarized police.”

Gazan called on Canada to stop selling arms to Israel, ban products made in illegal Israeli settlements and to cease economic cooperation.