**From the Editor**

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Some words cannot escape the horrors of the human past. When, in September 2001, President George W. Bush proclaimed a “crusade” against terrorism, he evoked in Muslim minds the indiscriminate slaughters by knights seeking to reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom. People have been lynched in many times and places, but the word “lynching” will always conjure mobs of white men hanging a black man from a tree in the post-slavery American South. Perhaps most powerfully, the term “holocaust” is invariably linked in the modern mind with the Nazi effort to annihilate the Jews of Europe. The association runs so deep that the word almost never appears uncapitalized in print, except in the phrase “nuclear holocaust,” the only calamity that seems to beggar the imagination like the mechanized mass murder at Auschwitz and Treblinka.

To use such words in description of the present is perforce to compare. It is to risk giving offense, for it unsubtly hints that the suffering of the past is not special. It is to yank that pain forward in time and display it anew. It is therefore to court accusations of irreverence or insensitivity, at best, and rank opportunism, at worst. Such comparison is a political act. It should be undertaken only with great care.

“Apartheid” is a word bomb akin to “lynching” or “untouchables.” It explodes upon the page, ripping the scabs off the wounds of state-enforced segregation in South Africa, a system that ended only in 1994. It exposes, like “untouchables,” the habit, visible in most societies in history, of ranking human beings to favor the few at the expense of the many. The collective shame of this tradition is sharpened in the case of apartheid by its attempts at gilding virulent racism with the language of science, the measuring of skulls by people with advanced degrees uncovering the dark side of the Enlightenment.

We have used the word “apartheid” to describe Israel’s system of rule over the Palestinians with eyes wide open to the incendiary quality of the term and the uniqueness of the South African ordeal that it automatically evokes. Our purpose in making this comparison is not to shock -- we are hardly the first publication to assay it. Rather, we seek in this issue of *Middle East Report* to stare hard, cold realities in the face and to participate in the discussion about how to transcend them without compounding the loss and dislocation they have already caused.

The hard, cold realities are these: Without a heroic reversal of decades of US policy, there will be no two-state solution in Israel-Palestine. As Oren Yiftachel demonstrates in these pages, the willingness of Israeli leaders to speak of Palestinian statehood has increased in inverse proportion to the chances that such a state will come into being. The advance of the settlement project, the proliferation of physical barriers between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, the cantonization of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the agony of Gaza -- all of these facts stand in cruel mockery of Israel’s stated determination to pursue a comprehensive peace. For its part, the Obama administration has backed away from its early advocacy of a settlement freeze, so eagerly taken as evidence of tough-mindedness with Israel, and hunkered down in the standard finger-pointing at the Palestinian side. Shortly after the release of the carefully compiled Goldstone report alleging Israeli and Hamas war crimes during the winter war of 2008-2009 in Gaza, Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice made known her opinion that the document was “anti-Israel crap,” and thereby announced that the new president would keep the world safe for Israeli impunity.

“Apartheid” is different, however, from its fellow word bombs in that it shakes loose memories of hope as well as despair. The regime of discrimination in South Africa, though it lasted for the better part of a century, did not endure. It was overthrown and replaced with far greater democracy with no one firing a shot. It is not inevitable that Israel’s system of rule over the Palestinians will go the way of South African apartheid -- injustice, in fact, often prevails. But neither are people of good will foredoomed in their efforts to imagine, and work for, a better future.