It is not uncommon today to see critics of Israel accusing it of being an apartheid state. Whether such a description is being used to describe Israeli policies towards Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or towards Arab citizens of Israel, the label is inaccurate, offensive, and often used to delegitimize and denigrate Israel as a whole.

Apartheid usually refers to the guiding policy of racial segregation in pre-1990s South Africa. While there is no doubt that Israel, like every country, has tremendous societal challenges and must do better in dealing with issues of institutionalized bias, discrimination, inequity and racism, choosing to apply the apartheid label would seem to question the legitimacy of the world’s only Jewish state and its continued existence.

Within Israel, there are safeguards aimed at ensuring the equal treatment of all citizens, Jewish or Arab, and Israeli laws and democratic institutions, including the independent courts and robust free press, assigned to uphold and speak out for these rights. Representing over 20% of Israel’s population, Israeli Arab citizens serve as judges, ambassadors, legislators, journalists, professors, artists and play prominent roles in all aspects of Israeli society. And for the first time, as of June 2021, an Islamist Arab political party is a partner in a governing coalition.

Israeli policies in the West Bank and related to the Gaza Strip are still subject to dispute and negotiation by both Israelis and Palestinians. They are complicated, and due to the lack of final agreement, there are indeed policies and restrictions – including limitations on movement and access to certain resources that can impose tremendous hardships on Palestinians. From an Israeli perspective, such policies are justified by security considerations, given the past and ongoing threats posed by Palestinian terrorist organizations targeting Israeli civilians, even within Israel’s pre-1967 borders. While Israel’s policies and practices can certainly be criticized, it is not factually accurate to say they are akin to a permanent and institutionalized system motivated and designed by racism.