As an organization devoted to upholding the civil and human rights of all those living under Israel’s control, Partners for Progressive Israel applauds the painstaking work of human rights organizations in Israel, Palestine, and worldwide, including that of Amnesty International.

This week, Amnesty International released a report entitled “Israel’s apartheid against Palestinians.” The report ably documents and analyzes both a pattern of discrimination within sovereign Israel that privileges the country’s Jewish citizens over its Palestinian Arab ones, as well as the daily oppression that occurs in the Occupied Territories, where Palestinians have been living for 55 years without any effective citizenship under a military regime – while the Israeli settlers living next door enjoy the freedoms granted by Israeli law.

That law, and the democratic institutions that produce it, are Israel’s greatest strengths. Within Israel, despite continuing discrimination, Palestinians are part of the governing coalition, while in the West Bank they have no control over their future. That is the essence of the Occupation and the never-ending injustices that flow from it; and we maintain it is the Occupation and its consequences on both sides of the Green Line, not antisemitism, that give rise to the accusations of apartheid, however phrased.

Sadly, a great many establishment organizations in the American Jewish community have directed their response to that one word, “apartheid,” rather than engaging with the specifics of the report. Meanwhile, these same organizations turn a blind eye to, or even justify, the actions and inactions of the Israeli government, including mass illegal settlement, politically motivated evictions, home demolitions, a permit regime that denies Palestinians’ freedom of movement, and an astonishing refusal to protect Palestinians in the West Bank against the unabashed predations of settler terrorists. If only these groups would spend half the time protesting such Israeli policies and practices as they did castigating Amnesty.

We also take strong exception to the abuse of the term “antisemitism” in criticizing both the report and Amnesty International. In an age when true antisemitism is recurring, it is particularly egregious to apply that slur to organizations that criticize Israeli policies and practices. Such usage cheapens the impact of the term itself and helps transform it into an all-purpose usage to be regularly trotted out when convenient.

As was the case with the report by Human Rights Watch last April (and a similar report by the Israeli NGO B’Tselem before that), Amnesty employs a definition of “apartheid” that is well known within the specialized field of International
Human Rights Law – but is far broader than the particulars of the South African regime that most people associate with the term. As we stated last year, our organization is not an arbiter of international law and avoids using such terminology, which is both legally rarefied and politically inflammatory. Moreover, use of the ultra-charged term “apartheid” also has the potential to actually undermine anti-occupation work by offering the right wing a path to redirect the public conversation away from genuine human rights abuses and into more convenient territory. That is precisely what has happened in this case.

Nonetheless, we would be remiss not to mention that use of the term “apartheid” is not uncommon within Israeli discourse, where figures as senior as former Prime Minister Ehud Barak have warned that Israel is on a “slippery slope toward apartheid,” and would inevitably reach that status if it continues to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state alongside it.

Ultimately, we strongly believe that the use or disuse of particular words does not alter by one iota the fundamental realities on the ground: Institutionalized discrimination unquestionably exists within sovereign Israel inside the Green Line, while beyond it much worse conditions exist for Palestinians, where the occupation (which only the most naïve or disingenuous still minimize as “temporary”) consistently denies them basic human rights.

While we therefore refrain from using the word “apartheid,” we appreciate the work of Amnesty International insofar as it directs American and international attention to the reality of ongoing injustices. Partners for Progressive Israel will continue to partner with those in Israel, Palestine, and elsewhere who seek peace and equal measures of freedom and human rights for all those, Jews and Palestinians, living between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.