

# The Israel-Palestine Conflict: a South African Perspective

CAN ISRAELI POLITICS BE COMPARED TO THE APARTHEID REGIME?

**In 1948 the apartheid regime was introduced and implemented in South Africa by the newly elected, white representative National Party (NP). In that same year the Jewish state of Israel was officially declared a sovereign state for the Jewish nation. During the years of apartheid (1948-1994) the people of SA bore witness to harsh segregation, discrimination and disenfranchisement of its majority population – the native black South Africans – by the white minority. Since the establishment of Israel it has repeatedly been compared to, and accused of having similar characteristics of the South African apartheid regime. Due to the history of the country, the new South African government, led by the African National Congress (ANC), expresses a clear view in favour of Palestinians and heeds against the actions of Israel. The Republic of South Africa recognises a Palestinian State, condemns and criticises the actions of Israel towards Palestinian people, supports the notion of a 'Two-state' solution, and articulates the differences between the apartheid regime and the policies of Israel. Due to SA's peaceful transition to democracy it is looked upon as a model state in this regard.**

A brief mention of the history of the formation of the State of Israel is imperative in understanding the ins and outs of the conflict. It should be noted that the Arab-Israeli conflict can be dated back to biblical times. Throughout the ages the Jewish people have not had a land to call their own, that is, until 1948. David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, proclaimed Israel a sovereign state just hours after the British

withdrew their authority, ending the British reign and giving some Palestinian land as present. Ben-Gurion read out a proclamation stating that, "by virtue of the natural and historic right of the Jewish people and by resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations, we hereby proclaim the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine to be called 'Israel'"<sup>1</sup>. It can be said that finally the Zionist dream of having a national home for Jews had become a reality. However, the Arab nations were, and some still are, resolute in wanting to wipe Israel off the map. It has often been argued by theologians and historians that the Arab-Israeli conflict will not, and cannot, be solved by human intervention alone, however, this remains to be a point of contention.

## The Legitimation Strategy of Apartheid

After the Second World War, the world was plunged into an uncertain period dominated by the fear of Communism and the possibility of impulsive usage of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The dark continent of Africa was also experiencing the height of colonialism followed by many bloody independence struggles, which resulted in its vulnerability to be influenced by Communism from the East. "The top priority (of the Reagan administration) is to stop Soviet

<sup>1</sup> Richard Cavendish, "Foundation of the State of Israel", *HistoryToday*. Published in, *History Today*, Vol. 48 Issue:5, 1998, <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/foundation-state-israel>. (accessed: November 20, 2014).

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encroachment into Africa"<sup>2</sup>. This objective was strategically used by the NP to legitimise its ever more restrictive Apartheid system. The NP viewed the ANC as a Communist organisation, threatening the stability and 'peace' of the country. In light of this and other protest actions against black oppression organised by the ANC, on the 30 March 1960 the NP banned the ANC on grounds of being a terrorist organisation<sup>3</sup>. Only in 1990 was the ANC unbanned due to the overpowering resistance by the blacks and other underprivileged groups resulting in the weakening rule of the NP.

During the height of the struggle for a democratic SA, many white leaders attempted a scare-tactic saying that if one was to "destroy white South Africa and our influence, [...] this country will drift into factional strife, chaos and poverty"<sup>4</sup>. However, on the 27 April 1994, SA held its first, peaceful democratic election, in which every citizen 18 years or older was allowed to vote. The ANC dominated the outcome with a 62.6 percent majority of the over 22 million votes cast<sup>5</sup>.

### A South African Perspective from Two Generations: Surprisingly Similar

With SA being a model country for peaceful transition, a representative for the developing world and a leader on the African continent, former President, Thabo Mbeki, was invited to address the Fifth Al-Jazeera Forum in Doha 2010, articulating South Afri-

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<sup>2</sup> Thabo Mbeki, "Talking to the Enemy: the South African Experience" (Address to the Fifth Al-Jazeera Annual Forum, Doha, Qatar, May 24, 2010). Pp.2

<sup>3</sup> African National Congress, 2011. *A Brief History of the African National Congress*, 2011, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=206>. (accessed: November 20, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Thabo Mbeki, 2010: pp. 2

<sup>5</sup> African National Congress, 2011.

ca's stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict. In his speech, and among other things, Mr Mbeki stated the following:

*"Israel, itself a small state entity, enjoys major international support on the basis of a perspective it has elaborated and marketed in the rest of the world. This gives it the assurance that whatever it does, it will never face the danger of international isolation, especially by the major world powers, and will always ensure that regardless of the rhetoric, its interests and aspirations will always occupy the first place in the strategic considerations of the major world powers, with those of the Palestinians being dealt with as a peripheral irritation which, nevertheless, but within the context of an immutable strategic paradigm, cannot be ignored. Therefore, there will always be much publicized diplomatic activity targeted at resolving the Israeli-Palestine conflict, which would give hope to the Palestinians while putting the Israelis at ease because of the certainty that this activity would produce no result to which they are opposed, communicating the message that the activity is itself the result"*<sup>6</sup>.

This statement makes clear that the South African government is critical of the position that Israel holds in international politics, and also recognizes it being dangerously similar to the NP in hiding behind a façade of *protectionism* but truly acting in its own interests.

A media bonanza rocked the South African Jewish community in 2014 when the deputy head boy of King David School, Joshua Broomberg, posted a picture of himself wearing a Keffiyeh in support of the Palestinians who had been killed in the Arab-Israeli conflict thus far<sup>7</sup>. The South African

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<sup>6</sup> Thabo Mbeki, 2010: pp.14-15

<sup>7</sup> Katharine Child, "King David pupil goes to HRC", *Times Live*, August 14, 2014. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2014/08/14/king-david-pupil-goes-to-hrc>. (accessed: November 20, 2014).

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Jewish community flew into uproar about Broomberg's public support for the Palestinians and criticism of Israeli actions. They demanded through a petition consisting of over 2000 signatures that Broomberg be stripped of all his school leadership acknowledgements. King David School has the student leadership sign a code of honor stating that "pupils in leadership must at all times support the State of Israel"<sup>8</sup>. Broomberg apologized for the hurt that he may have caused in his community, but articulated that the Jewish board of education has generated the unfortunate impression that one can only be either for or against Israel. This leaves no room for being critical. According to Broomberg, he "supports Israel's right to defend itself but rejects and will continue to criticize some of the government's actions"<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to that, there have been calls from student organizations and other groups that implore South Africans to boycott products from Israel, in particular products from the Dead Sea, as these are products that have in actual fact been extracted and produced in Palestinian occupied territories. Furthermore, in Sea Point, Cape Town, on the 24 October 2014, students from the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) embarked on a protest against Israel by placing a pig's head on a Kosher shelf in the Fort Road Woolworth supermarket store<sup>10</sup>. Woolworths has also

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<sup>8</sup> Katharine Child, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Broomberg, "King David Dep. Head Boy Stands with Palestinians", *Eye Witness News*, August 9, 2014. <http://ewn.co.za/2014/08/09/King-David-Dep-Head-Boy-stands-with-Palestinians>. (accessed: November 21, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Sbonokuhle Magcaba, "'Woolworths is not kosher, we will bring you to the pigs': COSAS", *ENCA*, October 24, 2014. <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/woolworths-not-kosher-we-will-bring-you-pigs-cosas>. (accessed: November 1, 2014).

been criticized in the past months for stocking Israeli products due to the conflict in Gaza. COSAS has pledged a strong alliance to the people of Palestine but does not condone the placing of the pig's head in a kosher section of Woolworths. The organization claims that this action was performed by an individual, Siphakamise Ngxowa, who has been duly suspended from COSAS<sup>11</sup>.

### Can South Africans Stand Together?

In light of the different incidents of protest in South Africa against the actions of the Israeli government, it is clear that most South Africans are of the same opinion. However, within the Jewish community, and because the State of Israel is their home, this is a difficult position to be in. It is good to publicly criticise a state for doing wrong to its civilians, however, as Broomberg points out, it is equally important to recognise a state's right to protect itself. Hamas has been sending countless rockets over to Israel, dug secret tunnels in order to launch surprise attacks on innocent Israeli civilians, and also used school, hospitals and UN camps in Gaza to shield themselves from Israeli counter-attacks.

With regards to boycotting Israeli products one needs to take into account South Africa's long standing trade relations with Israel. Out of over R926 billion of exports in 2013, South Africa sent R5,5 billion worth of commodities to Israel<sup>12</sup>. In return South Africa imported approximately R995 billion of

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<sup>11</sup> Collen Malatji, "COSAS STATEMENT ON WOOLWORTHS PIG HEAD INCIDENT", *PoliticsWeb*, November 4, 2014. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71651?oid=782728&sn=Detail&pid=71651>. (accessed: November 21, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> The Department of Trade and Industry, "Statistics", *the DTI*, 2014. <http://tradedstats.thedti.gov.za/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>. (accessed: November 25, 2014).

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which R2.7 billion is imported from Israel<sup>13</sup>. Even though the trade amount may reflect small in the greater picture, trade relations with Israel are growing, not only in quantity but also in quality. The South African-Israeli Forum (SAIF), organises many excursions for young South African business entrepreneurs to Israel to network and expand business opportunities<sup>14</sup>. These kinds of partnerships are invaluable for international cooperation and the promotion and growth of civil societies. As has been evident in many democratic states and emerging democracies is the prevalence of civil societies.

### Concluding Remarks

When assessing all the above to establish the South African perspective on the Arab-Israeli conflict, one deduce several interesting trends. In the first place, former President Mbeki not only offers an official stance which the State of South Africa presents on the international stage, but also one coming from a previously disadvantaged race. This is one that clearly articulates the State's criticism of the actions carried out by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people, and the support in the creation of two states; the State of Palestine and the State of Israel. The official South African view is also one which promotes peaceful transitions to democracy, or in the least two separate states existing peacefully side-by-side. These messages are strongly communicated by the ANC.

An interesting observation is that a young, Jewish, South African male echoes the official stance of the South African State. Even though curbed by his heritage and leadership position at a prominent Jewish school

in SA, he encourages and promotes critical thinking towards the actions of Israel, while still recognising its right to defend its statehood. This represents an emerging critical-thinking among some young people of South Africa. On the other hand, however, there are, one could say *left* orientated, youths that feel extremely strongly about the injustices done to the people of Palestine. This is evident in organisations such as COSAS. Even though Ngxowa acted on his own, and COSAS claims no responsibility for the Woolworths pig head incident, it is still clear that some young people in SA feel that the Palestinian people have been treated unjustly by the Israeli state.

Finally, it is equally important to recognize the trade and international relations opportunities which exist between Israel and SA. One needs to critically assess whether or not it is worth damaging a well-established cooperation over a conflict which has raged for thousands of years, and does not seem to have an end in any near future.

Furthermore, one also needs to be open to the fault that lies with catalysts such as Hamas, who seem to provoke violence by breaking cease-fire agreements and making public threats to wipe Israel off the map.

There are certainly important lessons to be learnt from SA, especially with regards to peaceful transition. However, one needs to acknowledge that the Arab-Israeli conflict is absolutely nothing like the situation was in SA when Apartheid fell. The willingness to make the transition needs to come from within a nation, not from external forces. Without internal buy-in, there cannot be success or peace.



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<sup>13</sup> The DTI, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Brotman, "Young SA Entrepreneurs discover Innovation in Israel", *South African Jewish Report*, October 22, 2014. <http://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2014/10/22/young-sa-entrepreneurs-discover-innovation-in-israel>. (accessed: November 25, 2014).