

Foreign Affairs

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Sections of the "Muslim world" received a significant amount of attention from South African media during 1997, much of it resulting from South African diplomatic and trade relations with countries in the Middle East and South East Asia. Where the president goes the media follow, and President Nelson Mandela made a number of highly publicised visits to important Muslim countries, while his counterparts – or high-level delegations – paid return visits to this country. The visits of Malaysian, Indonesian and Saudi Arabian officials all received headline media attention, each for its own reason: the Saudis were linked to arms deals, the Malaysians to local investment, and the Indonesians to the vexed question of East Timor.

Support given to the African National Congress during the liberation struggle plays an emotional role in the mutually supportive relations between South Africa and these countries. The ANC government feels an obligation to reciprocate for the hospitality, support in international forums and monetary assistance received. Furthermore, an old-fashioned "Third Worldism" can be discerned in government explanations for developing close connections with "the South" in new international conditions. While not antagonistic to the West, the government often makes its sympathies for the "non-West" very clear.

But it is mainly the real and prospective capacities of these states to bring large-scale and much-needed investments into the country, and more generally to oil the wheels of foreign trade, that shape the character of these relationships. The Saudis are useful for buying our arms, the Malaysians to pour in more of their private and public capital, the Iranians to supply oil. Apart from arms, it seems that South Africa is unable to supply its partners with much else of similar value. Except in a few cases, the overall picture is that trade statistics are rather unbalanced, and not in South Africa's favour. (See Appendix II)

One of the president's trips in 1997 received more than the usual media scrutiny, both at home and abroad. The American and British media were alive with comment on President Mandela's October visit to Libya, which upset the cordial diplomatic relationship South Africa has with the United States of America. When the president travelled to Libya – overland from neighbouring Tunisia so as not to break the United Nations air travel embargo – the US administration, which regards Libya as a "pariah state", was unsettled and uneasy. The British government and media focused on the president's ability to intervene productively in the stalemate over the Lockerbie air disaster in 1988. At home, the Democratic Party criticised Mandela for awarding Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi South Africa's highest honour, the Order of the Cape of Good Hope.

Mandela paid a visit to Egypt on the same North African diplomatic sojourn but this gained none of the attention received by the earlier Libyan part of his itinerary. Nor was the bestowal of the same national award on President Hosni Mubarak condemned. Egypt, which is a close ally of the US in the region, has come under no detailed international media scrutiny for its human rights record or its brand of "democracy."

Potential and actual arms deals with Syria and Saudi Arabia generated debate over relations with states with poor human rights records. While Syria was condemned, Saudi Arabia escaped more lightly, although both have equally dismal records as authoritarian states. Syria had expressed interest in purchasing arms from South African arms manufacturer Denel and this alone sparked controversy. But the question of human rights records is often selectively raised. The concern is often less with human rights than with other political agendas.

A country which has a more than questionable human rights record is Algeria, currently seized by a bloody civil war, and the South African government has chosen to align itself with the authorities there. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aziz Pahad stated that the crisis would be "best resolved internally". South Africa thus had no duty to support the recommendation for international intervention emanating from various international forums. He added that this

country should be developing strong links with the North African state because it was one of Africa's strongest economies and "on the verge of a take-off". Thus, Deputy President Thabo Mbeki visited Algeria in July to lay the basis for a subsequent round of visits. In November the first South African diplomatic mission was opened in the capital. A \$10-million pharmaceutical contract was reportedly secured, De Beers mining company was part of a high-ranking business delegation to Algeria and extensive discussions were held about bilateral trade and developmental ties, particularly in relation to mining and natural resources. South African arms were offered for sale to Algeria. The arms deal was concluded early in 1998.

The Middle East currently consumes about 40 per cent of the world's arms at a cost of \$15 billion a year. Saudi Arabia is the largest consumer, accounting for half of all the arms sold to the region. In September it was reported that South African arms were being used by both sides in the Sudanese civil war but the National Conventional Arms Control Committee denied that the government had authorised arms sales to Sudan. What is certainly true is that South African arms deals, limited though they may be, are nevertheless feeding the senseless accumulation of weapons in a part of the world that can ill afford more arms.

Arms deals aside, the Sudanese were accused of training South African Muslims in terrorism. The accusation was made at a parliamentary briefing in late March by senior Foreign Affairs official Anthony Mongalo. Based on "intelligence", the allegation was given sensational prominence in the Business Report. But neither Mongalo nor other sources in the Foreign Affairs Department could verify any of their claims when approached by various Muslim organisations. The issue quickly lost the spotlight but the Sudanese authorities and local Muslims had been accused, without supporting evidence, by a senior official.

Relations with Iran seem to grow consistently warmer. In 1995 a joint commission was established to facilitate co-operation between the two countries in a number of areas. In September 1996 a powerful Iranian delegation, including then President Rafsanjani, visited South Africa and a trade agreement was signed the following month. Iran is now this country's biggest supplier of crude oil, providing nearly two-thirds of our annual intake. Although there were extensive discussions over storing Iranian oil in Saldanha Bay, this proposal seems to have been shelved. However, a number of press reports referred to high-level scientific discussions between the two countries. Iran was said to be interested in purchasing equipment and materials necessary for making nuclear weapons but this was denied by officials of the Atomic Energy Commission. By the end of the year it emerged that China, not Iran, was buying these materials. South Africa has been developing solid trade and diplomatic relations with Malaysia and Indonesia. The former is now one of the leading three foreign investor nations in this country. President Mahathir of Malaysia thus brought along a substantial trade delegation on his visit early in 1997. Relations with Malaysia have not been tainted by controversy; there have been no diplomatic or political barriers to the rapidly advancing economic ties. Additionally, aspects of that country's social and economic policies have their local proponents.

Lack of controversy is not the case with Indonesia, where President Soeharto and his family until very recently ran an authoritarian state which has been much criticised in South Africa.

Nepotism, government corruption and a mighty military machine still thrive alongside what was until recently a burgeoning economy. As a result of its historically good ties with the US, rooted in Cold War allegiances, Indonesia has managed to avoid consistent international condemnation. Its occupation of East Timor, in contravention of UN resolutions, and its reign of terror there, did not lead to the ostracisation of the Soeharto regime. It was President Mandela who raised the issue of East Timor on his visit to Indonesia, where he held talks with East Timorese leaders. Mandela was mandated by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to mediate in the East Timor question, and this was again a subject of discussion during an Indonesian visit to South Africa in November.

Although a small section of the leadership of the Cape Town Muslim community extended a warm welcome to President Soeharto, his visit was met by protests from the trade union

federation Cosatu, and the award to him of the Order of the Cape of Good Hope was widely condemned.

President Mandela has assumed the role of the great mediator. In August 1997 he hosted talks between the presidents of Uganda and Sudan after meeting with Southern Sudan opposition leader John Garang at the end of 1996. Mandela also attempted to mediate between the West and Libya over the Lockerbie issue, and raised the East Timor crisis when he visited Indonesia. The moral stature of Nelson Mandela is among the factors affording South Africa a powerful voice in African affairs and, potentially, in international politics. Such interventions may improve the country's chances of gaining the seat for the South on the UN Security Council.

In regard to trade, there is a marked unevenness in South African relations with the "Muslim world." The oil-producing Gulf states, not surprisingly, are major exporters. The rest mainly import from South Africa. Jordan, for instance, sells nothing to this country. By contrast, trade with Israel at \$550 million per annum appears to be the most diverse and has no oil component. As noted earlier, historical support for the ANC seems to influence the way foreign policy issues are now decided upon, at least to some extent. President Soeharto donated money for the ANC's 1994 election campaign and reportedly supported the organisation's New York office in the past. Libya aided the movement in exile and, indeed, the whole Muslim Middle East played a vociferously anti-apartheid role in the international community. President Mandela frequently invokes past support as legitimisation for current cordial relations with states and leaders regarded as dubious by others. It is perhaps a reflection of inexperience in government that such relations have become a significant element of South African foreign policy. It certainly reflects the undeveloped state of the government's foreign affairs thinking. For, whatever its worth may be, the Department of Foreign Affairs has yet to release a coherent policy document.

Despite the diplomatic and trade contacts discussed here, it would appear that relations with the "Muslim world" and the Middle East are not priorities in the minds of most South Africans.

According to a recent survey by the Foundation for Global Dialogue and the Centre for International and Comparative Politics at the University of Stellenbosch, North America, and the West on the whole, are much more significant regions for, and partners of, South Africa. While the African continent is, of course, very important, the conflicts and economies of the Middle East claim little attention.

Sources

The Sunday Independent, Mail and Guardian, The Cape Argus, The Cape Times and The Middle East: facts and figures (Department of Foreign Affairs, April 1997).