

## **The Fact of Occupation Easily Forgotten**

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As the Israeli army fends off the umpteenth Palestinian uprising against occupation, we debate whether this distant conflict has anything to do with our own struggle to build a better society for all.

Those who believe that we can build South Africa as an island in a globalised world were proved wrong on a number of counts. They were wrong to think that South African borders could be sealed from other parts of Africa, except of course for our manufactured goods in search for bigger markets. They were wrong when they thought that the global flow of financial markets would give us some respite until we strengthen our economy and our democracy. They are wrong now to think that communities with varying links with Israel and Palestine can be forced to choose between South Africa and the Middle East.

There is an undeniable commitment on the part of the Jewish community of South Africa to support the society and the state of Israel. Numerous observers have repeatedly made the point that the close ties between Israel and the Apartheid State was facilitated by members and organisations within the Jewish community of South Africa. Similarly, the struggle for the rights of Palestine has enjoyed unconditional support from both Muslims as well as the broader liberation struggle. Such commitments cannot be switched off; particularly not now in a more global world. The issues cannot leave us “cold,” to recall the infamous statement of Jimmy Kruger when he was informed of the death in detention of Steve Biko.

What can be done, however, is to open the issue for vigorous debate and discussion, with concrete support for peace **and** justice. It is time that we begin to understand the conflict, and its underlying causes. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was a turning point in the unconditional Western media support for Israel, followed by the Intifada of 1987.

This recent uprising seems to be contributing to some fresh insights in the South African media about the nature occupation and the Palestinian resistance to the peace process.

The flaws of the peace process are beginning to be heard, whilst previously there used to be only a desperate desire to close the Middle East conflict file at all costs.

But there is also another development, less noticeable but equally important. Different voices in South Africa are beginning to be heard. It has been heartening to note that people are “breaking the ranks” in the face of truth. This seems to be happening among a number of leading Jewish students and individuals. A recent march by Muslim students at the University of Cape Town could have been a joint Muslim-Jewish march for justice and peace. When the Muslim student leader refused to compromise on some of the posters and his masked face, potential Jewish supporters and some of the Muslim students withdrew. Muslims are duty bound to recognise this subtle but important turn of events, and examine their own unconditional support for what sometimes passes as Palestinian resistance.

Most importantly, we must condemn the tendency within a sector of the Muslim community to celebrate Hitler. A recent rally in Cape Town upheld a poster declaring “Viva Hitler” which cannot be acceptable under any circumstances. The holocaust against Jews in Nazi Germany was not only directed at Jews in principle. Unfortunately, many Jews have popularised this notion, and ignore the white supremacist motivation of

Nazi ideology. Unfortunately, they ignore the same supremacist tendencies among Israeli settlers. For Hitler, Jews were the anti-symbol of pure Europeans. And Palestinians, Arabs, and the Muslims of Cape Town and South Africa would be included in what the Nazis and neo-Nazis consider semi-humans, worthy of subjugation and extermination in the service of the Aryan race. The tendency to elevate Nazis, and to quote from their research against Jewish people, is the most desperate, shortsighted, and immoral strategy to speak for the justice of Palestine and Palestinians.

As the crisis in the Middle East accelerates, the key issue is easily cluttered and disguised. Stone throwers dare tanks and helicopter gunships; and snipers shoot feebly at fortified settlements. Diplomats speak, and shuffle their feet from one place to another. Such images and detailed press reports, however, obscure the deep-rooted problem of occupation.

Palestinians, whatever other things they might be, are under occupation. They suffered occupation in 1948, and have continued to loose land ever since. The right-wing Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and the carving of the occupied territories into little homelands, are not merely unfortunate obstacles to peace. They are the vanguard battlefronts that spell occupation and humiliation for the Palestinians. And any future peace settlement cannot escape this important, but often forgotten fact.

Future compromises will have to take this into account. Failure to do will lead to more uprisings. The peace process of the past ten years, with the collusion of the only remaining superpower and a compliant Western press, obscured this fact under a debris of financial aid packages for Palestinian leaders, and security undertakings for Israelis. But always, the reality of occupation was forgotten.

As the increasing violence is reported from the territories, occupation is ignored. As Israel seems to be quelling the violence, occupation is forgotten. As Palestinian leaders are squeezed to make concessions, occupation is forgotten.

But occupation cannot so easily be forgotten. It has haunted the Middle East since the foundation of Israel. Memories are not like orchards, villages, and wells. When the latter are removed and occupied, memories nurture and protect the people. And when the right moment presents itself, they feed the resistance and struggle in the face of tremendous odds.

What is needed now is a bold initiative that does not repeat the mistakes of the past. You cannot have a peace deal with the odds and guns stacked against one partner. You cannot have a peace deal with a partial mediator. And you can never have a peace deal when occupation is ignored.