

Palestinian Solidarity in South Africa

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Palestinian solidarity work has been developing for at least two decades in South Africa. It was, however, restricted to particular communities and forms of activity. The year 2001 saw a dramatic change in the nature and quality of Palestinian solidarity work in South Africa.

This article will examine some of those changes and the factors that led to them. It will also look at what these new forms of activity mean for Palestinian solidarity in South Africa and in other parts of the world. In particular, I argue that the tenor of Palestinian solidarity in South Africa has shifted decidedly from being a Muslim campaign to being a secular and broader-based one and that this will result in more effective support developing in South Africa, and outside of it, for the Palestinian struggle.

The Palestinian struggle – particularly its armed struggle – had, since the 1970s, captured the imagination of South Africans. The Palestine Liberation Organisation and its leader, Yasser Arafat, had become representative of a well-organised liberation movement by South Africans who were waging their own national liberation struggle. Various dramatic armed actions by Palestinians made them heroes in South Africa. It is no wonder that many babies in that period were named Leila, after Leila Khaled, the Palestinian soldier who hijacked a Lufthansa aeroplane.

The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) was one of the first organisations to take up the Palestinian issue in South Africa in the form of a national and organised campaign. From the late 1970s the MYM began focussing on Palestine as a case of a Muslim population under attack. Palestine was not the only focus of the MYM. Other international focuses around the late 1970s and early 1980s included the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution. Other organisations, like the Muslim Students Association (also a national organisation at the time) and, later, Qibla also focused on some of these issues. Of all the international issues that these

organisations focussed on, Palestine held the most important place. The main reason for this was the religious and emotional attachment of Muslims to the Masjidul Aqsa in Jerusalem.

This also meant that a large part of the focus when it came to Palestinian solidarity was on Masjid al-Aqsa. The declaration by Iran's Imam Khomeini of the last Friday of Ramadan as *Yaum al-Quds* (Quds Day) then established for Muslims an annual commemoration of the plight of dispossessed Palestinians as various organisations, particularly the MSA, took up Khomeini's call. By the 1980s, the Palestinian issue had become very much a Muslim issue in South Africa. While this was due mainly to the vociferousness of Muslim organisations, an added reason was that Palestinian solidarity work in this period was undertaken in a climate of state repression against any alternative voices. The Zionist lobby was also connected to the repressive state apparatus and used it to prevent solidarity activity. One example was the South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS), which was very aggressive in its opposition to Palestinian support at the "White" liberal universities.

It is also worth considering why Muslim groups preferred to focus on the Muslim community. It was the community they knew best, but more importantly, it was a very conservative community where politics was hardly ever discussed as an Islamic issue and very rarely raised in mosques. The *'ulama* (clerics) refused to acknowledge that the oppression of Palestinians (and that of South Africans) had any relevance to Muslims and Islam. In such a climate, Muslim organisations felt it necessary to conscientise the Muslim community first about what they regarded as a Muslim issue.

In the early 1980s the MYM recognised the need for a project that focussed specifically on Palestine and formed the Palestine Islamic Solidarity Committee (Paliscom). This committee had a short life. Nevertheless, the MYM and the MSA took up various ad-hoc campaigns in Natal, Transvaal and the Western Cape, supporting the Palestinian struggle. These included mass meetings – e.g. just after the 1982 Sabra-Shatilla massacres – workshops, seminars and audio-visual presentations. Yet almost all of these campaigns focussed on the Muslim community. The activists and the target audiences were both Muslim. A few secular political organisations did, however, sporadically take up Palestinian solidarity actions. These were usually leftist

socialist groups and usually through their publications or independent of and in support of MSA programmes. But, for such organisations, like the Student Action Committee at Wits University, the South African struggle was always paramount and hence the dominance in Palestinian solidarity work went to the Muslim groups by default.

A quiet but important change came about in the mid-1980s when Muslim organisations successfully drew the parallels between Israel and apartheid South Africa and highlighted the relationships between the two racist states and between the liberation movements opposing them: the PLO on one side and the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress on the other. Also of note were those anti-apartheid groups within South Africa that worked independently of these liberation movements. These – such as the Azanian Peoples Organisation, the Cape Action League, Action Youth and some local organisations – also appreciated these parallels and used them in their own programmes. Nevertheless, Palestine remained a largely Muslim issue in terms of who was addressed and who was doing the addressing. Stories abound of socialists who were shunned by Muslim activists when they attempted to work together on Palestinian solidarity. For the Muslim activists, the Palestinian struggle was a Muslim struggle and anyone that wanted to support it had to do so under the leadership of Muslim groups.

The 1990s saw a greater institutionalisation of solidarity work – but mainly in the welfare sector – with the formation of the Al-Aqsa Foundation and the fundraising efforts of organisations like the Muslim Judicial Council, Waqful Waqifin and Jamiatul Ulama. These activities still focussed almost exclusively on the Muslim community.

Much of that changed this year. Indeed, from the beginning of the Al-Aqsa intifadah in September 2000 there were hints of changes in the way the Palestinian struggle would be addressed in South Africa. Muslim groups began lobbying political organisations and trade unions about the issue and attempted to develop broader alliances. And this year, Palestine suddenly became an issue that was no more a cause taken up by Muslims for Muslims; instead it became a struggle for human rights and

against racism fought by all people who cared about these. These changes are due to several factors, of which I will consider the major ones here. These include:

- The rise of two new organisations: the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC), which was launched in 1998, and the National Consultative Forum on Palestine (NCFP), formed earlier this year. The consideration given by Muslim activists to draw in secular organisations into Palestinian solidarity. (There were other new Palestine solidarity organisations formed this year; these I will consider later in this article.)
- The holding of the UN's World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances (WCAR) and its associated NGO Forum in South Africa.
- The insistence on the part of the United States government that it would not allow the issue of Zionism being equal to racism or of the Palestinian question in general to be on the WCAR agenda.
- Increased attention given to South Africa by secular Palestinian organisations.
- The role of a few but significant anti-Zionist Jews.

I will discuss the significance of each of these factors, show how they contributed to making Palestine an important *cause celebre* in the South African imagination, highlight some of the gains made by South African Palestine solidarity work as a result and point to implications of this new status and new texture for the future.

The Johannesburg-based PSC was formed in 1998 as a decidedly secular initiative to promote the Palestinian cause in South Africa. The chief initiators were well-known political and trade union activists. It brought together mainly former anti-apartheid activists from a number of political tendencies to focus on Palestine. Not wanting to isolate anyone and recognising that activists might have allegiances to different Palestinian factions, the group adopted a platform that was broad enough to accommodate a range of people – from Islamists to supporters of the Palestinian Authority. Because the members of the committee were activists who were already involved in a number of other causes, not many activities were conducted except for workshops where PSC members themselves attempted to get to grips with the issues involved. Not, that is, until the beginning of the Al-Aqsa intifadah in September 2000.

From late last year, then, the group began meeting regularly, drew in more people to be actively involved in its activities, began publishing a newsletter and organised a few demonstrations. It also made determined efforts to increase links with Palestinian groups and individuals through visits to Palestine and regular correspondence with them. PSC members who were also involved with other civil society organisations began to continually raise the Palestinian struggle in these bodies. *A very significant activity of the PSC was the drawing up of a South African declaration on Palestine.* The declaration focussed on the parallels between South African and Israeli apartheid and the parallels between the liberation struggles and called for an end to Israeli occupation and for the establishment of a single democratic Palestinian state. The objective was to get prominent South Africans – especially non-Muslims – to endorse the declaration and launch it as a South African position. People targeted to be signatories included politicians and political activists, cultural workers, sports and religious personalities. During and after the WCAR, more than 10 000 copies were distributed. A particular target was anti-Zionist Jews. The declaration has for example been endorsed by Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro), the famous cartoonist. The PSC's Cultural Evening preceding the WCAR was another attempt by it to demonstrate broad support for the Palestinian cause. In attendance were cultural activists, trade unionists, sympathetic media people and anti-privatisation and anti-globalisation activists.

Earlier this year, PSC members joined the Political and Media Committee of the NCFP and under the NCFP banner pursued various activities around the WCAR. PSC members were able to network with a number of NGOs and political organisations – mainly those they had contact with through other activities – to help manoeuvre the Palestinian issue onto the centre stage for activities to be developed by a broad civil society coalition for the WCAR.

The NCFP was formed as a forum where Muslim organisations working in different ways on Palestinian support could liaise with each other, share ideas and develop common programmes. The Forum established three committees: political and media, education, and welfare. At one of its first meetings, the political and media committee decide to expand itself to include non-Muslims and secularists because it recognised the need to end the perception of the Palestinian struggle as simply a Muslim one.

This committee also targeted the WCAR, a strategy that catapulted Palestine into prominence. Because of the American and Israeli attempts at the WCAR preparatory committee meetings to have the issues of Zionism and of Palestine removed from the agenda of the conference, the NCFP launched a campaign pre-emptively condemning the WCAR for this “imminent” omission, at the same time complimenting the NGO Forum secretariat for steadfastly agreeing to keep Palestine on the agenda – despite pressure from the Zionist lobby. The NCFP was the first organisation in South Africa to publicly politicise the conference and start a campaign against an aspect of it. Hence, it and the Palestinian issue received an enormous amount of coverage in the South African media. From the launch of the campaign, the NCFP made it clear that it was planning to reach common cause with a number of civil society organisations around the issue, implying that it would not pursue a Muslim communal agenda. Its activists, many of them Islamists, tried to ensure they promoted the Palestinian cause as a broad human rights issue rather than as a Muslim one. But more importantly, the promotion of the Palestinian struggle also became a campaign against US bullying as it continued in its attempts to prevent any discussion of Palestine at the conference by threatening to withdraw, etc.

But the PSC and the NCFP were not the only new Palestine solidarity groups to emerge into the spotlight this year. The three months preceding the conference saw the emergence of the Palestine Support Committee in Durban, Ansar Al-Aqsa wal Quds and the South Africa-Palestine Solidarity Group in Cape Town. The first two were Muslim groups while the third was a secular group. Besides these, there were also local solidarity groups formed in different towns. One of the activities that helped break down the notion of Palestine as a Muslim issue was a rally organised mainly by the Palestine Support Committee – a member of the Durban Social Forum. The rally attracted 4 000 people – mostly non-Muslim – from across various Durban communities.

From the above it is clear that the holding of the WCAR in Durban, South Africa, was a significant catalyst in catapulting the Palestinian cause into the limelight here. However, the significance of the conference went beyond the formation of new solidarity groups. The actions of the US had put the issue of Palestine *on* the agenda

of most organisations within South African civil society. Organisations like the National Land Committee, Jubilee South Africa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and various local groups like the Concerned Citizens Forum in Durban took ownership of the Palestinian cause. Cosatu organised demonstrations outside the US embassy in Pretoria and the US consulate in Durban to protest US bullying; the demonstrations focussed on Palestine. The NCFP became a key player in the civil society coalition which later came to be known as the Durban Social Forum (DSF). On the day the WCAR opened, the DSF brought 25 000 people out onto the streets of Durban, protesting against a range of injustices – from poverty and inaccessibility to basic services to the effects of globalisation. The oppression of Palestinians was a key item on the agenda of the march and other activities of the DSF. And the conference and activities around it became a sharing of experiences between South African and Palestinian activists.

While Palestinians learnt to *toyi-toyi* and saw reflections of their own refugee camps in the townships around Durban, South Africans discovered just how similar apartheid South Africa and Zionist Israel really were. The fact that many of the Palestinian groups in Durban were secular NGOs or political groups broke down the image for many South Africans of Palestine as simply a Muslim issue. And when Palestinians participated in the Landless Peoples' Assembly, joined the protests of the Dalits and cheered with South Africans for Cuba's Fidel Castro, the need for increased Palestinian solidarity work in South Africa became clearer to South African activists. Indeed, after cheering Castro, South Africans led the booing of UN Human Rights Commissioner, Mary Robinson, because of her position that Zionism had no place in the WCAR agenda. The Palestinian NGOs had, however, begun their lobbying of South African groups long before the conference. A few weeks earlier a delegation from the South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO) and the NGO Forum Secretariat visited Palestine as guests of the Palestinian NGO LAW.

The high point was at the end of the Durban march when the NCFP and SANGOCO – as members of the DSF – launched the “International Anti-Apartheid Movement Against Israel”. The launch was caucused beforehand with a number of Palestinian solidarity groups and Palestinian organisations around the world. While the launch itself was more symbolic than substantive, it marked the beginning of the process of

building such a movement. It was followed by discussions among Palestinian solidarity groups and other organisations within and outside of South Africa about the shape of such a movement. One result is a national conference in December which will bring together all such groups within South Africa to work out a strategy for Palestinian solidarity in this country. The conference will also serve to consolidate work and organisations. Already the South Africa-Palestine Solidarity Group in Cape Town has changed its name to the Palestinian Solidarity Committee and joined up with the Gauteng PSC. The conference will also be the precursor of an international conference scheduled for next year, where solidarity groups from around the world will converge on Johannesburg to give substance to an anti-apartheid movement against Israel. The idea is to develop an international movement in the image of the anti-apartheid movement which helped bring apartheid South Africa to its knees. It will be a broad-based, secular structure which will seek to internationalise the Palestinian struggle to a greater degree than it currently is.

The idea of a broad-based secular movement explicitly accepts the role that anti-Zionist Jews have within it. Anti-Zionist Jewish voices in the latter half of this year also helped strengthen the image of the Palestinian cause as a human rights issue for all people. A number of foreign anti-Zionist Jews came to South Africa for the WCAR. These included Jews from Israel (or Palestine '48; many of them refuse to recognise the state of Israel and refuse to be called "Israeli Jews") as well as from other countries. Most visible were the rabbis of the Natura Keita organisation in the US who took every opportunity to display their placards giving the message that "authentic rabbis" had always been against the establishment of Israel. Another prominent Jewish personality was Uri Davis, scholar and author of a number of books, including *Israel: An Apartheid State*, which was republished in South Africa during his visit here. Interestingly, Davis was hosted by the Pretoria-based Media Review Network, an organisation widely maligned as being anti-Jewish. He delivered a number of lectures and had many meetings with prominent South Africans. Other Jewish anti-Zionists who came to South Africa particularly to campaign the Palestinian cause included people like American Barbara Lubin from the Middle East Children's Alliance and members of the leftist Abna al Balad party from Palestine '48. These Jews had an impact on a broad spectrum of South Africans, as well as on South African Muslims working on Palestine.

But South African anti-Zionist Jews should not be forgotten as they voiced their opinions during the WCAR, on radio talk shows and in newspapers. These included South Africa's Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Ronnie Kasrils, who argued in the media that South African Jews that fought against apartheid were all anti-Zionist. This is in stark contrast to statements made by his colleague – Education Minister Kader Asmal – that Zionism should not be opposed since South African Jews that were in the anti-apartheid struggle were also Zionists. Kasrils did not stop there. He has now, together with Max Ozinsky, an ANC MPL in the Western Cape, begun a campaign to get South African Jews to endorse a statement opposing Israel's occupation and oppression of Palestinians.

I have argued that the year 2001 has seen a qualitative shift in the kind of Palestinian solidarity work done in South Africa. On one level, thanks to the work of Palestine solidarity groups, the WCAR and, ironically, the US government, Palestine had ceased to be just a Muslim cause in South Africa but has been adopted by a range of organisations and individuals. Furthermore, South Africa is set to play a crucial role in terms of Palestinian solidarity internationally. One reason for this is the similarities between apartheid South Africa and what is increasingly being referred to as apartheid Israel. However, a new factor is the changing of the world after September 11. Palestine solidarity work is becoming increasingly difficult and risky in various western countries, especially in the United States. South Africa is one of very few Muslim minority countries where pro-Palestinian, pro-Arab or pro-Muslim organisations can operate easily and without stigma. And it is one of the few Muslim minority countries where there is a groundswell of support for the Palestinian struggle.

“Leading” an international movement against Israel – a role envisioned for South Africa at the launch of the Anti-Apartheid Movement – will also have implications for the nature of the South African solidarity movement and the kind of activities it will undertake. South African civil society is currently revitalising itself and developing as a force that does not rely on the state for patronage. A new vibrancy in civil society will assist international solidarity work in South Africa. Also, solidarity groups are keen to integrate the struggles of South Africans with those of Palestinians and

develop links between different civil society sectors. These will not be easy tasks – as working towards and during the WCAR was not an easy task. As with all activist work that seeks to draw in a number of groups with somewhat dissimilar perspectives, there will be tensions, debates and struggle. Some of these were seen during the WCAR when tensions arose between the Islamist and secularist groups. Nevertheless, the changes that already characterise the Palestinian solidarity movement in South Africa are sure to have a lasting impact on the international scene.