

## Can South Africa be a Model for Israel/Palestine?

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This essay summarizes selected arguments from a much longer study: *Peacemaking in Divided Societies: The Israel-South Africa Analogy*.<sup>1</sup> It assumes basic knowledge of the origins of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict and proposed solutions on the controversial issues (settler expansionism, return of refugees, Jerusalem, occupation). Interested readers are referred to the larger study.

### Introduction

During the past decade, negotiations about historical compromises in ethnically divided societies have produced surprising successes in some cases as well as disappointing failures in other situations. The South African negotiated settlement of a seemingly intractable ethnoracial conflict provides an exemplary success story; the July 2000 Camp David talks between President Clinton, Barak and Arafat on a final status resolution of the vexed Israeli-Palestinian issues stand as an abject failure. What practical and theoretical lessons can be drawn from the South African 'miracle' for other unresolved ethnic conflicts, particularly in the Middle East? Is it at all possible to replicate techniques of peacemaking and reconciliation in different communal and historical contexts? The ongoing violence, despair and paralysis in Israel/Palestine resembles a similar impasse and gloomy mood in South Africa during the mid 1980s, yet progressive leadership on both sides succeeded in breaking the stalemate.

In addressing such questions, six elements of the conflict in both contexts can be compared: economic interdependence, religious divisions, third party intervention, leadership, political culture and violence. On most counts, the differences between apartheid and Israel outweigh the similarities that could facilitate conditions to a negotiated compromise. Above all, opponents in South Africa finally realized that neither side could defeat the other, short of the destruction of the country. This perception of stalemate, as a precondition for negotiating in good faith, is missing in the Middle East where both sides perceive themselves as 'righteous victims'. Peacemaking resulted in an inclusive democracy in South Africa, while territorial separation of the adversaries in two states is widely hailed as the solution in Israel/Palestine. However, despite some promising attempts, the opponents are so far unable to reach a final agreement on the return of refugees, borders and settlers, and the status of Jerusalem. Contrasting insights from very different solutions to a communal conflict shed light on the nature of ethnicity and on the limits of negotiation politics.

The topic obviously touches an emotional minefield where both sides quickly abuse each other with accusations of racism, colonialism, anti-semitism and terrorism. At a minimum, analytical reasoning on the comparative cases can lower the temperature of the discourse, debunk false analogies, contribute to political literacy and hopefully suggest new visions for negotiating a violent impasse that increasingly spills over to South African and North American campuses as heatedly as previously the anti-apartheid struggle in the 80s or Vietnam in the 70s.

## **Similarities and Differences between Apartheid South Africa and Israel**

1. Economic interdependence and the emergence of a politicized union movement since the mid 1970s socialized South Africa in negotiation politics and trade-offs. The Israeli economy depends minimally on Palestinian labour and two economies exist more or less side by side. Israel uses closure as collective punishment. Palestinians are deprived of industrial action (strikes, consumer boycotts) that was heavily used by black South Africans to combat apartheid.

2. Religion in South Africa served as a common bond to assail and delegitimize apartheid, while Judaism and Islam compete for sovereignty in Jerusalem. Religiously motivated settlers and ultra-orthodox believers may not be as easily marginalized as Afrikaner ethnic conservatives, merely interested in racial self-determination. Jewish orthodox believers are not seduced by the spoils of capitalist wealth, as a growing Afrikaner bourgeoisie was. Likewise, even after an Israeli withdrawal from the territories, some Islamist fundamentalists may still consider the very existence of a Jewish state on Muslim soil an insult to the faith.

3. Both the ANC and the NP eschewed third party intervention in their negotiations. An Israeli-Palestinian settlement depends heavily on US policy that strongly supports Israel. Sanctions (divestment and trade boycotts) are generally overrated in triggering SA change. Only loan refusals and, to a lesser extent, moral ostracism impacted significantly

on the apartheid government. Such action against Israel by the West is inconceivable at present. Unlike Afrikaners, Israelis enjoy a supportive diaspora.

4. The SA negotiations were facilitated by a cohesive and credible leadership with a widely endorsed open mandate on both sides. Leaders could sell a controversial compromise to a skeptical constituency. Both the Israeli and Palestinian leadership is fragmented, with militant outbidding a frequent tool of populist mobilization. Unlike the destabilizing PR electoral system in Israel, the first-past-the post system in apartheid South Africa favoured the stronger party and led to stable governments that could take controversial decisions without being held hostage by small special interest groups that command the balance of power in Israel.

5. Much more personal interaction in a vertical status hierarchy shaped SA race relations, compared with the more horizontal social distance between Jews and Palestinians. Paternalism characterized Afrikaner attitudes. Gradual moral erosion among the ruling elite in SA contrasts with moral myopia in Israel, a few hundred military objectors notwithstanding. Both sides in the Middle East display a collective sense of victimhood. Apartheid clearly privileged beneficiaries and disenfranchised a majority in a pariah state that lacked the universal legitimacy of Israel outside the Arab and Muslim world.

6. During the anti-apartheid armed struggle, suicide was never used as a weapon and martyrdom never celebrated. Resulting from the huge power imbalance and the imagined Israeli defeat by Hezbollah in Lebanon, the clandestine militaristic tactics of the second

intifada, as opposed to the non-violent resistance of the first uprising, are nevertheless counterproductive: the attacks on civilians unify Israeli public opinion on security, undermine necessary alliances between mainstream Palestinians and progressive Israelis and also destroy the social fabric of Palestinian society. As a public statement, signed by 600 prominent Palestinians (Al-Quds, June 21, 2002, New York Review, August 15, 2002:53) pointed out, they “kill all possibility for the two peoples to live in peace side by side in two neighboring countries”.

### **A Route-Map to Peace-Making: Rescuing Negotiations**

In the predicament between a shrinking middle ground and strengthened extremists on both sides, several steps are necessary to rescue negotiations. They could be labelled unconditional talks, third party intervention, credible leadership and inclusive negotiations. The South African experience in the four realms can be applied to the Middle East.

Unconditional open-ended negotiations should be started even in the absence of any trust between the parties. Enemies, not friends, need to agree on rules of coexistence. Increased trust is the outcome, not a precondition of negotiations. Likewise, cessation of hostilities is the intended result but not a requirement for negotiations. That was also the lesson of the Northern Ireland fragile compromise between Republicans and Unionists in the absence of IRA decommissioning. In South Africa, too, armed struggle, massacres, bombings and regular shootouts accompanied negotiations, until the very day of the first non-racial elections in April 1994.

In contrast to the SA transition, Third Party intervention may be necessary to bring the parties to the table. Outside pressure on both sides can assist if the outside party carries weight with both sides, even if it is perceived as relatively partial, as the US is in the case of Israel. Promises of financial incentives after a settlement or as rewards for interim compromises may also be required. In the Middle East, this role as interlocutor clearly falls to the US and to a lesser extent to the EU and Arab States. Yet, without a prior US decision to lean on Israel to settle with the Palestinians, no progress is likely, as the Palestinians are unable to achieve it on their own.

Michael Ignatieff (*National Post*, 23 April 2002) went as far as to recommend a US imposed solution. 'The time for endless negotiation between the parties is past: It is time to say that ... the United Nations, with funding from Europe, will establish a transitional administration to help the Palestinian state back on its feet and then prepare the ground for new elections before exiting; and, most of all, the United States must then commit its own troops, and those of willing allies, not to police a ceasefire, but to enforce the solution that provides security for both populations.'

Similarly, Tony Judt (*New York Review of Books*, 18 July 2002: 64) probably expresses a widespread liberal external opinion: 'There is only one possible peaceful outcome, everyone involved knows what it entails, and it is going to have to be imposed from the outside, the sooner the better.' In reality, however, the US president gave Palestinians the choice to either stick with their current leadership or recreate themselves on US terms,

before the US would contemplate a provisional Palestinian state. This dictate pre-empted democratic elections by predetermining which outcome is acceptable. It shuts down negotiations and allows the militants on both sides to shape the events with more tragedies.

During the likely breakdown of negotiations, popular expectations of gains have to be created by moderate leaders who undercut their uncompromising competitors. People must perceive an inspiring outcome to look forward to in order to back compromises. In South Africa, such prospects had to rescue an abandoned process on several occasions. After the Boipatong massacre, the Bisho shooting and the assassination of Chris Hani at Easter 1993, the negotiating leaders stepped back from the brink of civil war by agreeing to new compromises. The new compromises were: sunset clauses for civil servants, compulsory power-sharing for five years, entrenching constitutional principles and, above all, agreeing on an election date, even if no agreement on major constitutional principles had been reached. Since the much desired election date could not be postponed without risking major upheaval, rules of the crucial election and its aftermath also had to be eventually agreed upon. With an election looming, the ongoing violence at least became clearly unjustified, because the gains expected from an election outweighed those expected from further confrontations.

The mutual indemnity agreed upon by the South African opponents constituted a crucial precondition for compromise. The imaginative amnesty provisions of the Truth and Reconciliation Act (TRC) did not exculpate both sides from human rights violations, but

made it possible (after disclosure) to coexist without mutual retribution despite unforgivable abuses. The Middle East is one of the few ethnic conflicts where neither side is interested in an impartial historical accounting through a TRC, because both are dogmatically convinced of the exclusive legitimacy of their own truth and moral fortitude.

It is dangerous to postpone negotiations in order to 'await the outcome of the necessary civil war among Palestinians', as William Safire recommends (*New York Times*, 3 December 2001: A23). Encouraging a civil war among opponents, as some Third Force elements attempted in South Africa and some Israelis contemplate, may weaken an opponent, but the destruction and brutalisation caused, also affects the victor. After free political activity was allowed in 1990 in South Africa, the intra-black political violence caused 14 000 deaths, more than the entire anti-apartheid struggle together. At the same time it destabilized the new order through a widespread sense of insecurity and continuation of non-political crime.

It is vital to include all actors who are capable of upsetting a compromise in the negotiations. The two main South African parties included the smaller actors, such as Buthelezi's Inkatha Party, the Pan African Congress, and the liberal Democratic Party, only nominally in the so-called multilateral negotiations about the new constitution. When 'sufficient consensus' was reached between the ANC and the NP in essentially bilateral negotiations, this consensus was imposed on the smaller parties by inviting them to rubberstamp it. As a result, Inkatha opted out of negotiations, threatened to boycott the

elections and almost derailed the process before being persuaded to join at the last minute. Likewise, agreements reached by the leadership of the ANC and NP were imposed on their constituencies with little input from the grassroots. Thus, South African democracy was paradoxically born autocratically. This unnatural birth survived because of healthy parental authority. It is doubtful that such controversial compromises could be sustained in the Middle East, unless a final peace agreement is supported by an all-party coalition on both sides. Above all, painful compromises have to be marketed to a skeptical constituency, preceded by political education which neither Barak nor the Palestinians undertook, but was at least minimally attempted in South Africa

### **Conclusions: The Importance of Leadership**

In summary, in South Africa receptiveness to alternative visions among regime apologists was always greater than among Zionists in Israel, because of economic necessities, because of lower levels of violence, because of weaker religious justifications, because of different demographic ratios and because of the obvious illegitimacy of racial minority rule, compared with the global empathy with holocaust victims and the Western guilt about historical anti-semitism. With an articulate liberal opposition hammering home the contradictions of institutionalized racism and even powerful business lobbies constantly clamoring for the “high road” in fashionable future scenarios, Afrikaner nationalism soon fragmented into pragmatic reformists and into an ideological ethnic wing in 1983.

The split roughly resembles the Labour-Likud or ‘left-right’ division in Israel, except that the National Party always held a slight majority among the ‘volk’ and could rely on

support from English voters for its reforms, if it lost majority support in its core constituency. Similar to Rabin's reliance on Arab parliamentarians in the Knesset, such support by ethnic outsiders was castigated by the right-wing opposition as betrayal, but constituted a legitimate fallback position. Unlike the disillusionment with Labour in Israel, the National Party did not lose control of the reform process.

The authoritarian Afrikaner culture places great trust in legitimate ethnic leaders, unlike the more fragmented Jewish political scene. Even most disaffected Afrikaner right-wingers would respect the legitimacy of democratically elected incumbents of office, despite their deep disenchantment and distrust. A few months before de Klerk unbanned the liberation movements, no breakdown of ethnic cohesion had taken place. A comprehensive student survey by Stellenbosch political scientist Jannie Gagiano in mid-1989 revealed solid sympathy towards public authority with only 6 percent of Afrikaans-speaking whites unsympathetic, but 41 percent of English-speakers. Less than 10 percent of Afrikaner males (as opposed to 35.5 % of English-speakers) would consider refusing to do military service and only 6 percent of Afrikaners expressed unsympathetic attitudes towards the security establishment (21 % among English students). What Gagiano calls the "repression potential" amounted to more than 90 % among Afrikaners and the author concludes: 'The state need have no inordinate fear that repression will be seriously resisted by strategic sections within the white community'.

Yet a few months later repression was replaced with liberalization and a new power sharing, transitional state. Gagiano, unfortunately, does not explain what accounts, in his

words for the “symbolically very significant and previously unthinkable, defections from the Afrikaner community to the ranks of the liberation movements” within the course of a year. Following trustingly a political leadership by ethnic conformists, regardless of major policy changes, would seem to provide a large part of the answer. If that is the case, the quality and vision of leaders in ethnic democracies would appear far more important than sociologists commonly tend to admit, although successful leaders must also be in tune with major material and ideal interests of their constituencies.

Conventional explanations of regime change focus on turning points when rising costs outweigh benefits or battle-fatigue ‘ripens’ a conflict to be settled. These rational choice conceptualizations underestimate leadership agency. Leaders, however, are rarely only shrewdly calculating individuals, but always come with their own idiosyncrasies. Even a major change of the political environment, - such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War that finally triggered the South African transition - might not have been sufficient to have lead a Conservative Party in power to similar shifts. Equally important: without a conciliatory Mandela counseling moderation and assisting the Afrikaner ideological leap into another order, it may have gone off the rail. Unfortunately, neither has Sharon the vision of de Klerk, nor does Arafat resemble Mandela. Nor is there a de Gaulle in sight, either in Israel or in Washington, who would impose a solution. As long as the US and a supportive diaspora bankrolls uncritically any hardline Israeli policy, and as long as Palestinians facilitate their own marginalisation with counterproductive suicide attacks, the mutual violence continues and may even get worse. Some 46 percent of Israel’s Jewish citizens support expulsion of Palestinians out

of the territories, while 31 percent favor ‘transferring’ even the remaining 1 million Israeli citizens of Arab origin out of the country (A. Barzilai, Ha’aretz, March 12, 2002). The ethnic cleansing by an Israeli Milosovic cannot be expected to encounter the same intervention as against the Serbian dictator. Some have argued that both Israel and its Arab neighbours require a perpetual state of semi-war in order to prevent their internal cleavages from exploding. This is a cynical assessment, although the historical reality would seem to confirm it.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam, Heribert. 2002. “Peace-Making in Divided Societies – The Israel-South Africa Analogy.” *Social Cohesion and Intergration Research Programme, Occasional Paper 2*. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).