

## **The implosion of South African - Israeli relations**

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No one truly understands South African foreign policy, albeit that "policy" may be a strong word to describe our approach to the rest of the world.

One-by-one, we have watched our close friends and allies in the Middle East tumble from power in the Arab Spring. We have defended the military junta in Burma at the United Nations and we have supported some of the most tyrannical and vicious dictatorships and theocracies in the modern world.

Our support has been complicit in the gross human rights violations in our neighbours in Zimbabwe and Swaziland and we have cozy'd up to exemplars of oppressive regimes in places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, China and Sudan.

Our support for a no-fly zone in Libya, much to our horror and surprise, ultimately resulted in the overthrow of one of our closest despotic allies, Muammar Gaddafi. We knew that we should never make that same mistake again, and so we still watch silently as tens of thousands of Syrians are butchered at the hands of Bashar al-Assad and that country spirals irrevocably downwards into civil war.

Amidst our indifference to human suffering comes a new policy towards the Middle East, that of unbridled Israel bashing.

Now let's face facts, Israel is no paragon of virtue. Its occupation of territories captured from Jordan in 1967 has resulted in the rule over more than 2 million Palestinians, none of whom want to remain under Israeli control. No occupation is ever benevolent and the Israeli control over the West Bank is no exception. It is however one of approximately 200 international territorial disputes including our good friend China's occupation of Tibet.

Israel's human rights record within its own territory, especially towards its minority Arab population is generally perceived as good; and towards the Palestinians it occupies, generally poor. The conflict has however been subject to more propaganda than any other dispute in living memory.

The collapse of Middle Eastern peace initiatives, ongoing Palestinian terror targeting Israeli civilians, the failure of many Palestinian groups to recognize the right of Israel to exist, the Hamas coup against Fatah in Gaza, Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Yasser Arafat's rejection of all Israeli peace offers, ongoing Israeli security check-points, Hamas' rockets fired at Israeli civilian areas, the blockade of Gaza by Israel and Egypt, the capture of Israeli soldiers as hostages and the detention of Palestinian prisoners have all contributed towards the morass of the conflict.

To make matters worse, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu seems unwilling to settle the conflict with Palestinians, while Iran threatens Israel with nuclear annihilation and Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas seems unable to either get Hamas to recognise the right of Israel to exist or bring the Palestinian people along in any settlement deal.

The ANC has never had a particularly close relationship with Israel, but the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Fatah) did provide logistic support to the ANC in exile. For many within the ANC, they see echoes of their own struggle within the Palestinian conflict.

Thabo Mbeki visited Jerusalem in 1995 and President Nelson Mandela visited Israel in 1999. In 2006, then President Mbeki called on Hamas, the Palestinian group that controls the Gaza enclave, to recognise the right of Israel to exist - a challenge never consummated by the fundamentalist group whose militia literally threw Fatah supporters off tall buildings after gaining a majority in the Palestinian elections in Gaza in that same year.

Over the past few months, the South African government's increasingly aggressive pronouncements have caused relations between Jerusalem and Pretoria to spiral to unprecedented lows. Under the guidance of Deputy Minister of International Relations, Ebrahim Ebrahim, government has embarked upon a concerted campaign to demonise the Jewish state.

Relations between the two countries started their decline during Operation Cast Lead (2009) where Israeli forces bombarded Gaza in retaliation for the continued kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and later a barrage of rocket attacks fired by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad at Israeli civilian areas.

Pretoria, who has always seen itself as a referee in the Palestinian corner, failed to condemn Hamas' rocket attacks on Israel, the cross-border kidnapping of Shalit or the fact that Hamas used civilians as shields for their own forces. To Pretoria, Israel was merely exerting its force over the Palestinian enclave from which it withdrew in 2005. Hamas' actions during that period were later labelled as war crimes by a United Nations Commission that singled out Hamas for its failure to neither investigate nor take any action against any of its forces guilty of such crimes.

When Turkey dispatched a flotilla of boats laden with activists to break the international blockade on Gaza in May 2010 - a blockade declared legal by a United Nations Commission which investigated the issue - Israel intercepted one of the vessels which refused to stop, resulting in the loss of nine Turkish lives and the bludgeoning and stabbing by the Turks of a number of Israeli soldiers. South Africa, Nicaragua and Ecuador were the only countries other than Turkey to withdraw their ambassador from Tel Aviv as a result of the flotilla incident. The South African action placed us firmly in the anti-Israel camp.

In 2011, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) under the force of anti-Israel Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions campaigners, cancelled its bi-lateral agreement with the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, resulting in Israel withdrawing its technology used by UJ in water purification projects in South Africa. UJ was the first academic institution internationally to formally cut ties with an Israeli university.

Earlier this year, the University of Kwazulu-Natal refused to allow Yaakov Finkelstein, Deputy Israeli Ambassador to South Africa, to address a gathering on its campus. So fierce was international condemnation of the University and its lack of commitment to freedom of speech, that the university was forced to issue an apology.

A spokeswoman at the Israeli Embassy commented that "Anti-Israeli elements have embarked on a campaign of intellectual terror which rejects everything that academia believes in, meaning dialogue, discussions, research, understanding and freedom of speech," she said. "The use of bullying to silence freedom of expression in an academic setting is a very sad development."

Meanwhile, at the behest of pro-Palestinian advocates, Open Shuhada Street, South African Trade and Industry Minister, Rob Davies announced that he was to issue an official notice "to require traders in South Africa not to incorrectly label products that originate from the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) as products of Israel."

There was little doubt that Davies was technically correct. Products manufactured in the West Bank are not manufactured in Israel, they are manufactured in Palestinian territory first occupied by Jordan in 1948 and then captured by Israel from Jordan in 1967. Israel has neither annexed the territory nor laid claim to the land. Davies said that Pretoria recognized the State of Israel "only within the borders demarcated by the United Nations (UN) in 1948" and that these borders do not include territories occupied by Israel after 1967. His phraseology was interesting, primarily because almost the entire world, including the PLO, appears to recognize the boundaries of Israel within the pre-1967 borders not the 1948 borders. Once again South Africa appeared out of step with the international community, albeit that Davies may well just be ill-informed of the detail.

The detail of the labeling issue was less about the labels and more about the political message Pretoria was attempting to send to Jerusalem.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman, Yigal Palmor, claimed Davies' notice displayed "unbelievable ignorance". He said "We have chosen harsh words to respond to the labeling issue because it is merely the latest in a long line of insults and undiplomatic behavior toward Israel, which sometimes smacked of racism".

Minister Rob Davies denied the move was politically motivated, saying that he was merely bringing product labelling in line with the Consumer Protection Act. The Minister's statements were however soon contradicted by Deputy Minister of International Relations, Marius Fransman who told an audience in Athlone, Cape Town, "economic diplomacy could be one of the most effective weapons of change in the Palestinian situation. Palestinians and their supporters, inspired by the economic boycott of apartheid-era South Africa, have been trying for years to emulate our success in that terrain. Until now their campaign of divestment and boycott has had negligible economic effect, but the voice of our government could be a symbolic boost. However, I am glad to inform you that our government, through the Ministry of Trade and Industry [DTI] has recently, in May 2012, released a government notice 379 of 2012, as a strategy to apply economic pressure on Israel."

He continued that he was "highly inspired by the role played by organizations such Open Shuhada Street, PSG, the MJC, Al Quds Foundation and others." A number of these organisations deny the right of Israel to exist.

In March 2012 the South African government granted entry to renown Hamas terrorist Abdul Aziz Umar to visit the country. Umar, was given seven life sentences for taking part in the Café Hillel suicide bombing attack in Jerusalem which killed 7 people and injured 50 in a sidewalk cafe. Umar was released in the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap deal.

Ironically, Umar whose organisation calls for the expulsion of Jews from the Middle East and for the establishment of a theocratic Muslim state in the current Israel, was dispatched to South Africa to promote Israel Apartheid Week.

So sympathetic has South Africa become to the anti-Israel cause, that terrorists last month felt comfortable enough to attempt to carry out an attack on Israeli targets in South Africa. While details of the planned attack remain sketchy, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu revealed some information about the foiled attack in the wake of the bombing of Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, which left 6 people dead and 17 injured.

When a group of South African Jewish communal organizations and business leaders attempted to address the appalling service delivery record of our government by training South Africans in Israel, government immediately attempted to step in to stop it.

Over the past 60 years Israel has been training Africans throughout the continent and has been one of the largest contributors to Africa in the fields of agriculture, rural development and skills training. Israel is also one of the few countries which has transferred actual technology into Africa and the Israeli drip irrigation method is one of the most important advances in African food security over the last few decades.

Under the leadership of Yehuda Paz and the Afro/Asian Institute of the Israeli trade union movement, the Histadrut, black South African civic leaders, trade unionists and NGOs have been trained in Israel since the 1970's. Yehuda Paz was banned by the Apartheid government from entering South Africa. Similarly today, a post Apartheid South African government attempts to use the same tactics to ban South Africans from travelling to meet Paz and his team at the Negev Institute in Israel. Paz and the Negev Institute have hosted many delegations from Africa, in general and South Africa, in particular.

The South African Department of International Relations has now attempted to put a stop to all of these exchanges. Israel has never sought publicity for its efforts in capacity building in South Africa, but behind the scenes many, even within the ANC, are furious at Ebrahim's actions.

Last week, Deputy Minister Ebrahim Ebrahim went even further, now informing South Africans that Pretoria discourages all South Africans from visiting Israel. He said "Because of the treatment and policies of Israel towards the Palestinian people, we strongly discourage South Africans from going there." He later told a Sunday newspaper "Israel is an occupier country which is oppressing Palestine, so it is not proper for South Africans to associate with Israel." Days later, King Goodwill Zwelithini accepted an invitation from Israeli Ambassador Dov Segev-Steinberg to visit Israel.

Predictably the South African Jewish Board of Deputies described the Deputy Minister's stance as "grossly discriminatory, counter-productive and wholly inconsistent with how South Africa normally conducts its international relations and contradicts its official policy of having full diplomatic ties with Israel."

Probably the most eloquent and scathing criticism of the Deputy Minister came from the Chief Rabbi of South Africa, Dr Warren Goldstein, who, in a statement calling on the Deputy Minister to resign said "Most recently you have used your platform and title in an active campaign to prevent South Africans - and especially members of government - from visiting Israel. This is but one example of your irrational obsession with Israel to the detriment of the proper execution of your governmental duties. You have acted in breach of your government's own foreign policy, in terms of which South Africa and Israel have full diplomatic relations."

"Your actions hark back to apartheid-style control of information and censorship. Why would you try to prevent South Africans from travelling to Israel and seeing the situation for themselves? Do you think, Mr. Ebrahim, that the South African people are not as clever as you are, that they cannot think for themselves and that they need to be protected from the facts? For the sake of peace and justice, we need more information, not less; we need more dialogue, not less; we need more connections with other societies, not less. You clearly do not believe so, and hence you are unfit to hold public office. Do the honorable thing: resign."

One of Ebrahim's predecessors, Deputy Foreign Minister Fatima Hajaig, was herself dismissed from cabinet in 2009 after an anti-Semitic outburst against Jews to a Cosatu meeting in Lenasia.

Israel has little to gain from its contributions to South Africa. In the mind of Israel, South Africa is a underdeveloped nation battling with rampant corruption, spiralling unemployment, chronic under-education and crippling service delivery. To Israel, South Africa is an irrelevancy which during this past weeks Lonmin disaster, committed an abhorrent massacre against its own population.

Israel maintains close political and economic relations with the United States, Russia, China, India and the European Union. In fact, relations between Israel and the European Union were recently upgraded. The Israeli economy is booming while the South African economy languishes. Israel leads the world in its technological contribution in the fields of computers, agriculture, cellular technology, biomedicines and nano-technology.

We should all start fearing that Israel will take action to restrict its technology from being used in South Africa. Many farmers in rural Limpopo and other provinces around the country have moved from subsistence farming to commercial farming based entirely on Israeli knowhow and technology.

But the effect of the South African government's decisions, go much further and will be felt in subtle ways around the world. Israel has many friends in the third world, in European governments and American politics. Our government's approach to Israel may well start being factored into whether nations wish to assist us, trade with us or grant us preferential access to their markets. To all of these countries, Israel is a far more important ally and trading party than anything South Africa has to offer. Most worrisome for South Africa will be the danger that Ebrahim's comments become an issue in the American elections as both American parties scramble for the crucial Jewish vote for November's election.

South Africa's bona fides reached an all-time low in the MTN-Turkcell case, currently before the US court system. If the Turkcell allegations against MTN are correct, it would appear that South Africa allowed its

foreign policy to be rented to Iran in return for granting an Iranian cellular license to MTN. Iranian nuclear officials appear to have visited the South African government and with the alleged assistance of MTN bribes, South Africa agreed to protect Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Assisting Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, not only destabilises the entire middle eastern region but also puts South Africa on a collision path with most of the civilized world. Not only does it destroy South Africa's entire international credibility but it positions us firmly as a destructive force in international relations. It also places us squarely in the anti-peace camp in the Middle-East.

The ANC have jumped onto this bandwagon hoping that a rabid anti-Israel policy will potentially win them lost votes amongst the Muslim community in the Western Cape, the only province not controlled by the ANC.

It is possible that the ANC's gamble may well win them some votes in the Western Cape, but South African Muslim voters, like all voters, will rank poor service delivery, job creation, economic poverty and lawlessness far higher on their priority list of reasons to vote for any particular party in our next general elections.

Ultimately South Africa has lost its credibility to play any meaningful role in Middle Eastern conflict resolution. Its failure to take any moral stand on any international conflicts other than Israel/Palestine has merely undermined its own credibility. Its pronouncements on Palestine are mere platitudes to try gain domestic votes and while service delivery protests spread around the country, fewer and fewer government officials will receive the training in Israel they so desperately need.

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