

Why South Africans Question Zionism

Palestinian awareness is high in South Africa, which enjoys an active Palestinian solidarity movement. Recently, the ANC government has called for a downgrade of its embassy in Israel due to US president Donald Trump's insistence on declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel in flagrant violation of international law.

When I first visited Palestine, shortly after Oslo and the fall of South African apartheid, I walked around in a daze for several days. Made to feel thoroughly unwelcome by suspicious and surly Israeli immigration officials, I was asked so many stupid questions that my head was ringing by the time my papers were stamped.

Once inside Israel – I had arrived via Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport – I was confronted by scenarios that disturbingly reminded me of the old South Africa. With all the uniformed officials and bristling sidearms, there was that air of distrust that could only be engendered by a militarised society; and then, as I was queue-bombed, there was the brusque Israeli culture of entitlement.

It became evident to me, from very early on, that Arabs were deemed, second-class citizens. Soldiers in the Old City stopped our Palestinian concierge, asking for his ID card, and when a youth in the crowd swore at them, he was harshly beaten and frogmarched away. I can remember that you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, so thick was it with fear and loathing – made worse by aggressive settlers openly carrying arms in the streets of Arab Jerusalem and Hebron, or a man at the Wailing Wall screaming obscenities at us.

What was painfully obvious was the deliberate spatial divide between Arabs and Jews. The red-roofed, West Bank settlements were always perched on mountaintops. They towered over Palestinian villages like fortresses. The settlements were served by newly tarred roads, which were forbidden to Palestinian-registered vehicles, although it was Palestinian land.

The West Bank reminded me of the stark differences between the black Johannesburg townships of 1976, and white Sandton shimmering on a hilltop, with its pseudo-Baroque facades and deep green lawns. It reminded me of how the highways of South Africa always skirted the black townships, ensuring that you could visit a sanitized version of the country, and never see the hard truth.

In Israel, the social gulf between Arabs and Jews – as between black and white – was equally profound. Like South Africa, I could travel right across Israel in a parallel universe and not encounter one Palestinian.

When I returned home, I reported that I had visited the world's last surviving apartheid-colonialist state; one fostered by a political nationalism called 'Zionism', blessed by Britain's Lord Balfour – and since the 1960s – supported unconditionally by every US government.

I was hurt by its racism. I was outraged by the political expediency of Europe in seeing Zionism as an answer to its 'Jewish problem' of the 19th century, especially at the expense of the Palestinian people, who became the unfortunate victims of something that was not of their making. I was angered by the disrespect European Zionism had shown to Judaism, and how – as the world's only unchecked nuclear power – Israel had conjured up victimhood in a non-nuclear Arab neighborhood.

On later visits – especially with the South African government as an observer – I would see, first-hand, the camaraderie between members of our ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Some ANC cadres had undergone military training together with the PLO in North Africa, and the bonds were close.

But more than that, there was a common understanding of what struggles anti-apartheid activists had faced, and what the Palestinians still had to endure in gaining recognition of their statehood – particularly

as the much-debated Oslo Accord was deliberately being undermined by Ariel Sharon.

We all understood that President Nelson Mandela's statement on his release in 1990, '...we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians' was an emphatic call for the end of Zionist discrimination, as much were his words on apartheid, '...never again'.

Zionist shrills have always tried to downplay the import of Mandela's declaration. But no matter what, it has proved to be one of the iconic dictums of the 20th century. For when the greatest statesperson of our time makes the equivocation between Zionism and apartheid, you sit up – and take note.

The point is that for South Africans who were affected by apartheid, Israel has always been an apartheid state – a brother Frankenstein, as it were, sugar-coated as an authentic democracy. For where one group of people discriminates against another in the same space – and legitimizes that discrimination – you have apartheid, deemed a crime against humanity by the UN in 1973, and by the Rome Statute in 2002.

The experience of apartheid (a term meaning 'separateness' in Afrikaans) is best defined as cancer that eats into every aspect of your life. Designed to advantage one group over the other, apartheid is the genocide of self-esteem – it buries the human soul in a mass grave of societal prejudice.

Most South Africans, as I have already said, instinctively understand this. A host of prominent anti-apartheid activists such as Nobel Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and former ANC government minister, Ronnie Kasrils, have unanimously said that Zionism – whilst reminding them graphically of the indignities of apartheid – has far surpassed the abuses of the South African system.

So what is it that South Africans recognize in Zionist apartheid?

The prime issue is one of land. For indigenous South Africans, such as the Khoi-San, the amaXhosa and the amaZulu, colonialism, and apartheid meant being physically displaced, economically disempowered and politically disqualified.

It meant being forced on to 13 percent of the land in Bantustans, artificially created ethnic enclaves. These Bantustans, the pet project of the Nationalist Afrikaner ideologues, were in effect migrant worker silos. Hundreds of thousands of South Africans were harassed off their land and herded, like their cattle, into impoverished rural ghettos.

For those whose labor was needed in the cities, there was confinement to ugly dormitory townships called 'Native Yards'. It meant carrying a passbook and no access to white areas after dark. If you didn't have your pass, it meant a heavy fine or a jail sentence. The passbook – the curse of black South Africa – came to be called the 'dompas', in English 'a stupid document'.

Being black, then, meant restriction of movement, inferior education, inferior medical treatment, job reservation, land dispossession, political disenfranchisement and enforced separation in public places and on public transport. For other non-white urban groups, such as the Malays, Indians and Coloureds (apartheid's terms of reference) it meant being corralled into specific areas, usually on the outskirts of towns and cities next to the 'Native Yards'.

As in Israel, South African apartheid was premised by the theft of land, and the creation of facts on the ground. This had begun with the Native Land Act of 1913, which effectively destroyed the black middle class so that its men could be forced down the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. Land 'expropriation' culminated with the Group Areas Act of 1950 that excluded all non-whites from living in the most developed areas, which were restricted to whites.

In Palestine, the theft of land commenced with Ben Gurion's notorious 'Plan Dalet' before the partition of 1947, and the ethnic cleansing of 1948, which openly defied the UN Partition Plan. It continues, to this very day, as illegal settlements dice the West Bank into hundreds of little Bantustan slivers. Then there is Gaza, an open prison – which is, essentially, what a Bantustan was always meant to be: the confinement

of as many people as possible on as little land as possible.

With regards to the land issue, indubitably the biggest question in Palestine, none of this is lost on South Africans. Travel in any part of South Africa today, and thousands of elderly survivors will easily be able to point out the property, the farms and the tribal fiefdoms that they lost during apartheid.

Not even a kilometer from where I write this, I can show the reader the rubble of the homes of District 6, just outside Cape Town's CBD, from where a whole community was forcibly removed during the 1970s. Palestinians can do exactly the same, be it Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, the Negev, the West Bank, Haifa or Jaffa.

But the story does not end here. Peaceful resistance against apartheid was met with an iron fist. The Sharpeville massacre of March 1960 – which saw 69 people being killed – is the emblematic event, as is the Rivonia Trial of 1963 that saw the likes of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Ahmed Kathrada being given life sentences, and narrowly escaping the gallows.

From the 1960s to the late 1990s in South Africa, recurring detention without trial, widespread torture, solitary confinement, extra-judicial assassination, political bannings, states of emergency, township curfews and house arrests were the order of the day.

Hundreds of people – such as Steve Biko, Imam Abdullah Haron, and Ahmed Timol – died in detention, murdered by their jailers. Death squads ensured that activists such as Mathew Goniwe disappeared. And medical practitioners, such as Dr. Wouter Basson, headed a chemical and biological unit that tried to poison anti-apartheid activist and head of the South African Council of Churches, Dr. Frank Chikane, in 1989.

Dr. Chikane would most certainly have something to share with Hamas' Khalid Meshaal, who was poisoned by Mossad agents in Amman in 1997 – much to the annoyance of the Jordanian authorities – who caught the agents, and who only managed to obtain the antidote after publically threatening to hang them.

Who would not be able to see the joint resonance of apartheid South Africa and apartheid Israel? And what conscience-stricken South African would not be able to empathize with Palestinian detainees, the house demolitions, the barbaric behavior of the settlers and the trigger-happy excesses of the military? What South African would not immediately recognize the criminalization of peaceful political resistance – exemplified today by Ahd Tamimi and so many others?

Another piece of the Israeli apartheid-South Africa apartheid parallel is the question of 'dirty tricks', the destabilization of regional territories to deal with perceived, or manufactured, external threats. In the case of South Africa, it was 'rooi gevaar', the 'red danger' of communism, seen in actions and invasions against the Marxist governments of Angola and Mozambique, as well extra-judicial killings in Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.

For Israel, it has been the extra-judicial murder in Gaza of people like Shaikh Ahmad Yassin and Dr. Abdul 'Aziz Rantisi. It has been the destroying of Yasser 'Arafat's PLO in Lebanon in 1982; the bombing of civilian infrastructure to get at Hezbollah in 2006 and ensuring anti-Zionist states such as Iraq and Syria are ungovernable via alleged covert support for ISIS, and rattling a nuclear saber at Iran.

Comparisons – as the English saying goes – are said to be odious. In the instance of Israeli and South African apartheid, this is literally the case. However, it is in the similarity of applied principles that most South Africans are able to see right through the Zionist project. For as long as the Israelis discriminate against Palestinians – consciously denying them human and political rights – Israel will, by definition, always remain an apartheid state, actively participating in a crime against humanity.