

THE NEGOTIATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH AFRICA

For over twenty-five years it has been well known that there was close co-ordination between the Israeli and South African governments. Precisely where co-operation started and ended has not always been clear, but there was little doubt about contacts between the governments, the armies and the military intelligence forces, and co-operation in the manufacture of armaments and the development of the atom bomb.

Despite the many differences in the nature of these two societies, their histories and their economies, the factors bindings these two governments together were no secret. The minority governments of both countries found a common purpose in the suppression of the dispossessed majority. In Israel it was the Palestinians who had been the majority until driven from their land, when most were herded into territorial enclaves or into neighbouring territories. There they were confined to refugee camps, without security, and without meaningful existence. In South Africa the discrimination on grounds of ethnicity was more blatant and more complex. The Africans, indigenous to the country; the Coloureds, mostly the offspring of settlers; and the Indians, who had been brought into the country as indentured labourers, were all stripped of political rights — their political organizations mostly banned — and herded into urban or rural ghettos.

The lack of civil rights for the majority in both countries was in addition to the exclusion (except for a small minority) from the centres of property, of professional skills and of finance. Those who did find gainful employment were mainly confined to poorly paid menial labour, the rest joined the large reservoir of unemployed labour. That was the way the capitalist enterprises of the two countries — structurally so different — were built, with ethnicity determining those who had privileges, political rights and a stake in the country's economy, and those who had no such place. In other words these two countries were prime examples of the reign of capitalist enterprise where ethnicity (and colour) was added to class differences in determining a person's place in society.

The discriminatory practices were not imposed by the ruling class alone. It is one of the tragedies of the regime of differentiation that workers who belonged to the dominant ethnic (or religious) group did little or nothing to protest against the subjugation of their fellow workers, and often approved it. In Israel the Zionist project (with its myth of social 'normalization' through the return to Palestine) led to the restriction of Palestinian rights to employment.¹ In South Africa there was another myth. Most Europeans who arrived in the country assumed from the outset that they were the masters and that either the Africans should be excluded from the towns, or were destined to be used as unskilled labourers or servants.

In both countries the privileged immigrants showed open contempt for the dispossessed. But there were differences which grew out of the structure of the countries' economies and the ideologies and history of the settlers. The financiers of the mines in South Africa, who were in many cases based in Europe's capitals, in their wage-cutting offensives early in the century, increased the ratio of black to white workers. Simultaneously, they used the ethnic divide in society, and at the work-place, to weaken the working class. In Palestine (and later Israel) there was a dearth of natural resources and there was never any really viable economy. This acted as a barrier to the employment of native Palestinians until after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, while Zionist ideology kept the Palestinians who were employed in a subordinate position.

The similarities are obvious even if the factors that led settlers to the two countries were very different. Those men and women who migrated to South Africa over more than three centuries, came in the wake of European colonization. They came firstly as administrators and soldiers, and as servants of the Dutch East India Company. Then came settlers from Europe. Some were sent as soldiers, others were recruited as skilled workers or arrived to escape poverty or to better their living conditions; a minority arrived as refugees. Having established roots they became junior partners to their rulers and, irrespective of class, enjoyed their superior status as part of the 'white' community.

Some of the Jewish intelligentsia in eastern Europe were influenced by the nationalist ideologies of the nineteenth century,² however most Jewish immigrants to Palestine, in the late nineteenth or the twentieth century, came to escape poverty, discrimination and the anti-semitic pogroms in Russia. Yet their numbers were small because most Jews sought to migrate to the US or other countries. Then, faced with the greatest ethnic massacre of modern history after the rise to power of Hitler, and with most countries closed to them, the Jews scrambled in desperation for entry to this unattractive region in the middle East. There they found their path blocked by a British administration (the rulers of the region under a League of Nations' mandate), which played Arab against Jew in an imperial game of divide and rule. This part of history cannot be unscrambled — but it must be said loud and clear that, irrespective of the emergence of Zionist nationalism, the problem was created by the racism and genocide that engulfed Europe. The tragedy of European genocide was then transformed into a new tragedy as Jews, this time as authors of a new terror, drove large numbers of Palestinians out of their country. Those few left-wing Zionists who had a larger perspective and spoke of a 'bi-national state' surrendered their call and embraced the slogan of a Jewish national home.³ In so doing they became indistinguishable from the majority of Zionists.

Although racism developed out of the local conditions of these two settler countries, they were not disconnected from events in the western world. The settlers of South Africa and Israel both came into existence as part of the

migration out of Europe. Individuals moved in response to conditions that were often intolerable but this did not shield them from manipulation by imperialist (or colonizing) powers. In the process they carried with them the ideologies of Europe and the USA, with the beliefs of 'racial' superiority that reigned there. Furthermore, dependent on Europe and the USA, the new colonies were satellites of the big powers.

Inevitably both the Zionists and the settlers in South Africa became the instruments of big power influence in Africa: South Africa by its presence at the foot of the continent and Israel by virtue of its position alongside the Suez Canal — the gateway to the East when ships were the major transporters of men and goods.

The Pariah States

Israel only came into existence as a state in 1948 and, in its first years of independence, to the embarrassment of South African Jews, the Israeli government condemned apartheid. However, as Palestinian (and general Arab) resistance to the new state grew and was organized, the Israeli and South African regimes grew ever closer. They both found themselves in the camp of the West in the cold war, largely because they feared Soviet involvement in the Middle East and Southern Africa respectively. These two pariah states found that their interests converged and the basis for a covert alliance was established. The military machines of both countries drew closer. There was exchange of military information and technology and, when South Africa was subjected to international sanctions, the Israelis assisted the regime in sanctions-busting.

The Israeli state was involved in the wars of 1948, 1956 (with Britain and France over Suez), 1967 and 1973. After a large section of the Palestinians fled into surrounding territories all signs of Palestinian discontent was suppressed and Israel extended its grip over regions of the Middle East. This included major incursions into Lebanon, involving the destruction of large regions of the country and the formation of a Christian militia in the south of the country, the seizure of portions of Jordan and the Golan Heights, and the domination of Muslims by Jews. Similarly the South African government banned all opposition 'liberation' forces inside the country, extended its control of South West Africa (Namibia), and destabilised supposedly antagonistic states within and outside its borders. In particular, its security forces provided support for the Smith regime in former Rhodesia, and played an active role in destabilising Mozambique and Angola, in terrorising Zambia and Lesotho and controlling Swaziland. No forms of terror or slaughter were too dreadful. A bloody *Realpolitik* reigned.

To a majority of Jews in Israel it appeared that they were fighting for their survival. With memories of the holocaust ever present, they feared another massacre of Jews, this time by Muslim forces. The bellicose statements by Islamic fundamentalists, and the programme of the Palestinian Liberation

Organization (PLO), made this seem all the more possible. For entirely different reasons, including the belief in 'racial' superiority, the whites in South Africa also feared an onslaught by the blacks. In this case propaganda out-did reality and was contradicted by claims that Africans were incapable of mounting a serious offensive.

The events in Israel and South Africa shadowed cold war measures in the West. Great power rivalry with the USSR, made the US the patron and protector of South Africa in one continent, and Israel in another. Without wishing to over-simplify the course of events that followed the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, there can be little doubt that the collapse of Soviet hegemony and the fall of its minions in eastern Europe led to the end of an era of two-power control of world events. The hegemony of the US was assured and, in the wake of a depression that was not unconnected with this change, there came the dismantling of controls that had been considered essential. Russia became the willing tool of the US in these changes and the ANC (together with the South African Communist Party) was pressured to make its peace with the de Klerk government.

The position in the Middle East also had to alter. The terms of the change had been spelt out some years previously by George Ball, one-time Under Secretary to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. He had stated that peace for Israel depended on the establishment of a Palestinian state ('a rump Palestinian state in the West Bank', he wrote). In this event, Israel's security worries could be met by 'denying the new state any armed forces of its own and limiting the number and kinds available to the police'. This, he concluded, if the 'Holy Land' was not to erupt into warfare.⁴

Ball's crystal ball read future events incorrectly, but his prescription for a new 'rump Palestinian state' was precisely what has now been offered, if one town and a sand strip can be called a state. In the event the catalyst for change was the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq, once championed, charmed and armed by the western powers, misinterpreted the aims of the western powers and invaded Kuwait. Saddam Hussein, the tyrant who had destroyed the organized left in his country and gassed the Kurds out of their villages, and waged war on the Shia fundamentalists of Iran, had miscalculated. His erstwhile patrons had no intention of allowing him to establish control of the oil rich Gulf states. He had served his purpose in halting the Iranians. For that he was feted, but that was all. His bluff was called and his armed forces were crushed. In the process those forces that supported him were to be humiliated. Among these was the PLO, led by Yasser Arafat. Since the 1960s this had developed as a 'Third World' armed nationalist movement in exile much like the ANC. It was funded, armed and trained in the Soviet bloc.

After the Gulf War, the Palestinians who had worked in Kuwait were expelled, and the organization, which had relied so heavily on the largesse it received from Arab states, found itself without rich benefactors. For this movement there was obvious defeat and its ability to continue its already unequal struggle with Israel was over. It was only a matter of time before a

broker appeared to spell out the position: accept a 'rump' state or be damned. Without securing the release of political prisoners, or the end of action against PLO activists, or indeed most of the demands made during decades of struggle, Arafat accepted.

The situation in South Africa, determined by local events and therefore very different, nonetheless ended in similar terms. The armed forces of the ANC never entered South Africa and its acts of sabotage never threatened the state. The only effective local struggles were organized at grass-root level and co-ordinated by the United Democratic Front (UDF). Alongside this there was an organized trade union movement that was built without ANC assistance. The initial successes of the UDF were impressive but the unarmed population was powerless in the face of the army occupation of the townships. As a result the internal revolt of 1984-86 ended in a massive defeat. However much the internal resistance movement declared that the battle continued, it was obvious that the Mass Democratic Movement (which took the place of the UDF when it was banned) was in disarray. This prepared the way for events which were to follow, but not before the South African army suffered defeat at the hands of the Cuban backed Angolan army and the USSR called quits as the Soviet regime disintegrated

Shaking Hands, in Private and in Public

The withdrawal of the Soviet military presence in the region, principally in the form of the Cubans, was the crucial pre-condition for the move to formal negotiations. In the same way as Israelis met illegally with Palestinians (albeit secretly), groups of businessmen, academics and students also met leaders of the ANC. The situation in both cases came near to farce. While contact with the 'enemy' was prohibited by law, and Palestinians who entered 'peace talks' were supposedly untainted by membership of the PLO, Israeli cabinet ministers flew to Norway to meet leaders of the PLO. Similarly, in South Africa, where it was illegal to quote any ANC leader, Cabinet Ministers sent their envoys to the open prison where Mr Mandela was confined, and Mandela was taken to meet the then President, P W Botha. After several delays, in which the many political risks were examined, Botha's successor F W de Klerk released Mandela, unbanned the ANC, PAC, SACP and other organizations, and opened talks.

Mandela found de Klerk an 'honourable man'. And so too are they all honourable men, even if some are reluctant to shake hands in public. What a spectacle that was in Washington, when President Clinton had to prompt Prime Minister Rabin of Israel to take the hand of President designate Arafat. The man who was available to lead the Palestinians into a 'rump' state had no such qualms. His hand was freely available. In South Africa, where handshakes and smiles are now a matter of course, the question is whether a country that threatens to break into splintered and warring regions, will provide the first black President with any more than a 'rump state'.

It is not necessary to introduce a hidden hand theory of history to see what happened, in broad terms. The fine details of how the opposing sides were brought to the talking table is less certain. The Norwegian government played a part in the Middle East talks; such intermediaries were not needed in South Africa. But these details, interesting in themselves, do not explain why the talks were suddenly organized. The crucial factor for the Israeli and South African governments was the severe straits of the economy, and with this the ability to continue the struggle. In the case of the opposition movements there were also considerations of funding, but the central issue was the defeat of the latest offensive — of the *Intifada* in Palestine, and the township revolt of 1984-86 in South Africa. To these must be added, in the case of the PLO, the rise of Hamas, the fundamentalist Islamic group, as a rival in the Palestinian ghettos.

The parallels between the two countries do not end here, although the consequences are more obvious in Palestine. The offer of limited autonomy (in Gaza and Jericho) is derisory and unacceptable to the majority of Palestinians. Despite the hopes of many that the bloodshed will stop, the proposals provide little in political terms, and nothing for most of the inhabitants in material terms. If the negotiations are not brought to a precipitate end by violence, then outside the flying of a new flag, the singing of a new anthem, the creation of a new police force, and entrance into the state bureaucracy for the political leaders and their friends, the only change will be the transformation of a political elite into the suppressers of their people.

Various apparent changes have been discussed in South Africa in talks over the past two years. All that has transpired, despite the putting aside of the apartheid legislation, has been the surrender of issue after issue by the leaders of the ANC.⁵ They have junked their economic programme, vague as it was, given way on federation, accepted power sharing and a government of 'national unity', and effectively accepted the right of the whites to veto major issues like control of the security system after the coming elections. They have also dropped their demand for a constituent assembly, and watched passively as the educational and health care systems have been dismantled.

Yet even after making all these concessions the country is falling into a state of chaos as right wing whites and Homeland leaders — orchestrated by Gatsha Buthelezi — destabilize the country. The election set for April 1994 (itself questionable when the population is not yet registered for the franchise) must be in doubt and could be postponed *sine die*. Even if it does take place as announced, it is obvious that de Klerk and his followers will do their utmost to prevent the ANC gaining a large majority. In the circumstances the only answer that Mandela can find is to extend the vote to 14 year olds — a proposal that might win votes but would make nonsense of democratic procedure. Whatever happens the forces ranged against a settlement have the capacity to keep the country in turmoil for years to come.

In like fashion the proposed settlement in the Middle East is in danger of being aborted by opposition from right wing Israelis and a Palestinian opposition, backed by forces from the surrounding states. The only difference with South Africa is the impossibility of an alliance being maintained between the hard liners in the two antagonistic ethnic communities.

There are a series of very urgent problems that must be honestly confronted by a journal like *Searchlight South Africa*. Among Jews the most important alternative to a Zionist (that is, nationalist) programme in the Middle East has for over a hundred years been various arguments for international socialism. As a solution to the 'Jewish problem' this alternative is obvious in the thoughts of Marx, and animated socialist such as Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and many others. This particular current, associated in Isaac Deutscher's phrase with the 'non-Jewish Jew', has suffered an enormous historical collapse of uncertain duration, amid both the triumph and ruination of capitalism in a new international economic depression.

Nothing contributed so much to this collapse as the monstrous parody of socialism over so many decades in the Soviet Union. There, anti-semitism and nationalist chauvinism raged in more open or more covert forms, in mockery of the original ideals of socialism in the early days of the revolution – a reality about which leaders of the South African and Israeli Communist Parties deluded themselves and others. This perversion, concealed behind the myth of 'socialism in one country', proved fatal to any talk of progress, and has sullied the ideals of socialists everywhere.

In the international climate following the collapse of the eastern bloc, racism, nationalism and ethnic wars have sprouted like weeds after rain. The socialist perspective of international harmony between peoples, based on a unified international working class movement and the ending of relations of exploitation, has suffered defeat and is in disarray, despite some assertions to the contrary. Trumpeted by George Bush in the US, a capitalist 'new world order' is presented as the only present and foreseeable reality. The nationalist leaders of the ANC and the PLO, together with their communist allies, have predictably and readily conformed. They are now hostages to the capitalist order and its ethnic conflicts, to which they have submitted. They now become ready agents in overseeing these conflicts.

This journal would dearly welcome an end to the fratricidal killings and sectarianism in both regions. But there can be no genuine peace in the Middle East and no genuine resolution of conflict and oppression in South Africa in the absence of social change. A botched 'peace' or a botched 'democracy' does not meet the needs of the people of the Middle East or southern Africa. But while the talks take place there is an even more sinister development that makes nonsense of talk about peace. In Israel the military continues to 'flush out' militant groups at will, killing and maiming people, destroying homes, terrorising the Palestinian population. In South Africa the military machine is unreformed. Its personnel able to enter the capital of the Transkei, a supposedly independent territory, shoot up its youthful in-

habitants and claim that these children were part of an armed terrorist group. Although details are sparse as we go to press, it is obvious that there has been no change in either country in the pattern of armed repression.

On matter deserves special mention. One of the ANC demands was for the release of all political prisoners. Many have been released and President de Klerk was quick to let right-wing killers walk free. Undoubtedly Rabin will make some deal with the PLO on the release of Palestinians from Israeli jails. But it is unlikely that they will concern themselves with the fate of **Mordechai Vanuna**, kidnapped by the secret bureau Mossad, and sentenced to life imprisonment for revealing Israel's atom bomb programme in the British press.⁶ Those in Israel who support a peace accord and those who have shown concern for prisoners of conscience, must call for his speedy release.

The problems faced by people in these regions are part of a much larger problem. Although there are small groups in most countries espousing the need for a socialist outlook, they are ineffectual and often confused. In a period of destruction and warfare, of brutal killings and the desecration of human rights, none are big enough to rally large scale support for peace and social change. Precisely during this period the editors of this journal find it necessary to argue the need for a humanist, and internationalist socialism.

There are no easy solutions and noready formulae along which to proceed. The ideas of socialism must be appraised and reappraised and placed against our understanding of world conditions today. If the 'socialism' that once presented itself in the Soviet Union is now buried, then long live a socialism that can bring hope to humanity.

References

1. The dominant philosophy on the Zionist left, following the writings of Ber Borochov, was that the Jews needed to form a strong peasantry and working class through settlement on the land. That is, they alone would constitute the new working class after migration to Palestine. They also claimed that there was no significant indigenous population.
2. The appeal of nationalism draws heavily on popular historical perceptions.. The belief in a return to Jerusalem, in the wake of the Messiah, was always an integral part of Jewish religious consciousness in the diaspora. In the creation of a state, the appeal to the bible with its messianic belief in Jerusalem as the Jewish 'Holy City', has shaped Zionist ideology. The Palestinians also base their claim to Jerusalem on the presence there of one of their most holy mosques, the Dome on the Rock. This religious conflict adds a further dimension to the tension in the region and also militates against the establishment of a secular society (or societies).
3. The concept of a (socialist?) bi-national state is itself problematical, but it never carried much weight and was submerged in the general appeal to Jewish national solidarity.
4. *Los Angeles Times*, 17 January 1988, quoted in Ralph Schoenman, *The Hidden History of Zionism*, 1988, Veritas Press, California, p 123. In referring to this book I do not wish to associate myself with some of the author's conclusions.
5. This has been discussed in several articles in *Searchlight South Africa*, and is referred to again in the current issue.
6. Vanunu is held in solitary confinement in Ashkelon prison in Israel. This inhuman form of detention, used by the security force in South Africa for periods of 90 or 180 days with devastating effect, was and is unacceptable. In Vanunu's case it is cruel to the extreme.