

South Africa: Reflections and Lessons

■ Katya Gibel Azoulay

Along with millions of other people on February 11, I shared the excitement of Nelson Mandela's release from Victor Verster prison at Paarl, 40 miles from Cape Town — 27 years and 74 minutes behind schedule. I hold to the view of history that says individuals *do* indeed make a difference. Nelson Mandela, who has become a legend in our

KATYA GIBEL AZOULAY has an M.A. in African Studies from Hebrew University. She is an anti-apartheid activist and a member of the Israeli Women's Peace Net (Reshet).

time, serves as a reminder that integrity and the pursuit of political power can be uncompromisingly combined.

Although clearly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not foremost on Nelson Mandela's mind when he recently met PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat he reportedly said that like the ANC, Yasser Arafat "is fighting against a unique form of colonialism." As a loyal member of the ANC, Mr. Mandela obviously could not deviate from the ANC's alliance with the PLO — an alliance which Israeli policy has nurtured and encouraged; nevertheless, I do not think his statement should go unchallenged. There are two separate issues here which have to be delineated and addressed. On the one hand, there is the ANC reaction to the Israeli-South African alliance and, on the other hand, its anti-Israel position in exchange for mutual support between the PLO and the ANC.

The limited sanctions imposed by the Israeli cabinet against South Africa in September 1987 were essentially symbolic, not substantive. Far more important than either commercial links or cultural exchanges is the military alliance our government has maintained with South Africa since 1976, and it is this dimension

of our bilateral relations which lies at the root of black hostility to Israel. Young black South Africans — the post-Sharpville generation — know little about the trauma of the Holocaust for world Jewry, and nothing about the Haganah or the Irgun (pre-state underground Jewish militias associated with the labor movement and the Revisionists respectively -ed.) and their influence on the strategic and organizational structure of the ANC's armed wing. Very few people know that Walter Sisulu, jailed for life with Nelson Mandela and released on October 15, 1989, visited Israel in 1953. Young blacks do know from first-hand experience that Israel has supplied the South African defense sector with arms, water cannons, electronic border fences; that Israel has trained South African soldiers and police, cooperated on military intelligence and participated in joint military research, development and production. They know that unlike other countries, this has been conducted at the governmental level — not through private sectors hidden behind a multi-national curtain.

Military links between the two countries have directly implicated Israel as an accessory to strengthening the apartheid regime. If prior to the sanctions debate in Israel there were many who believed — and wanted to believe — that hostile critics of Israel had fabricated a myth of extensive Israeli-South African ties, they were rudely shocked by the admission that our arms industry and defense establishment would be threatened by the imposition of sanctions in the military sphere. Overnight, denial of this association was replaced by a defense of Israel's economic interests. Israelis who were outspoken against our foreign policy warned that it was not in our short-term or long-term political self-interest to be linked to a regime which all experts agreed

would change radically in the near future. That day is now at hand.

President Fredrick Willem De Klerk has taken the initiative and legalized a movement which has been perceived by Afrikaners as a terrorist organization for three decades. A new generation of Afrikaner technocrats have contributed to tangible political shifts, reinforced by the business community's recognition that its interests are not served by an alienated work force and a siege economy. The conflict in South Africa is not over competing nationalisms or territories, but over privilege and power. There is now state recognition that material inequalities



Yasser Arafat and Nelson Mandela

produced by the political imbalance have to be addressed. Therefore, despite the fact that Nelson Mandela's release did not include two important preconditions — the lifting of the emergency regulations and the release of all political prisoners — De Klerk's government has taken an irreversible first step toward a settlement in which new constitutional arrangements providing both a universal franchise and an equitable redistribution of resources will have to be drawn up.

Israeli Dialogue with the ANC

Progressive Israeli political parties and organizations that define Zionism as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, and believe — despite the current fascination with revisionist history — that the pre-independence movements were fighting a defensive and legitimate armed struggle, must make a determined effort to establish lines of communication with the ANC. A dialogue is needed both to convey our own firm stand against the evil they are fighting, and to demand their recognition of our legitimacy. Blind anti-Zionism which refuses to recognize the difference between Ariel Sharon and Shulamit Aloni, and which supports reactionary Arab leaders simply because they are Arab and denounce Israel, is unacceptable. Nor should we ignore the ANC endorsement of the infamous resolution that Zionism is racism. Furthermore, precisely because the intifada has led to an intensification of efforts on the part of many Israelis and Palestinians toward dialogue leading to a political resolution of our conflict, a more balanced approach from the ANC is now called for.

Jews and Israelis must stop patronizing blacks by talking about Israel's contributions to Black Africa, and admit that its policies in South Africa have been inexcusable and short-sighted. At the same time, the anti-Semitic theme of Jewish power, adopted by the ANC during the period of Nelson Mandela's incarceration, has to be confronted. Ironically, this ANC theme echoes the rhetoric promulgated by the neo-Nazi Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB); its white supremacist ally, the Boerstaat

Party; and the official opposition in the white Parliament, the Conservative Party. Representatives of the Jewish Board of Deputies questioned Mr. Mandela about his comments comparing the Palestinian struggle and the black liberation movement, and he reportedly dismissed them by saying, "If the truth alienates the powerful Jewish community in South Africa, that's too bad" (*The Jerusalem Post*, March 2, 1990).

Jews make up less than two percent of the white population in South Africa, and the question must be asked: Do they control the political power and financial resources in South Africa, or is Mr. Mandela as off-base as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Reverend Chikane of the South African Council of Churches and others? Unquestionably, a majority of the South African Jewish community have silently accepted apartheid, accommodating themselves quite comfortably to white domination. As a community they refused to link those Jewish traditions which emphasize liberation, human dignity and equality with the society in which they lived. This failure to provide a moral response to the political problems of South Africa alienated most Jewish anti-apartheid activists. As a result, whereas dissident Afrikaners, Christian theologians, and Moslems have been speaking out from their own particularist perspective, a specifically Jewish cry for justice has been barely audible. The May 1985 statement put out by the Jewish Board of Deputies merely reiterated President Botha's earlier claim that apartheid was no longer a realistic ideology. Although Mr. Mandela was reacting to the Jewish Board of Deputies, which has not earned the right to express any criticism of either Nelson Mandela or the ANC, other Jews who have been involved in the struggle — from David Bruce and Audrey Coleman to Joe Slovo and Helen Thornton, as well as Jewish anti-apartheid and peace activists in Israel — do have an obligation to question Mr. Mandela's response.

It is clear that the concept of Zionism has to be addressed in both the Jewish and black communities in South Africa as well as in Israel. We need to stress that if Zionism is conceptualized as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, then Zionists can accept and understand the national aspirations of other peoples. Therefore, those concerned with justice should be emphasizing an even-handed commitment to *both* Palestinian and Jewish movements by encouraging both sides — Israel and the PLO — to enter into direct negotiations. There is nothing inherent in Zionist ideology or Judaism that contradicts the possibility of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and it is important to point out that the 1947 partition plan accepted by David Ben-Gurion called for two sovereign states. The Palestinians rejected this at the time. In 1967, when the Israeli government and people might have been receptive to major territorial compromise, the PLO armed struggle consisted of deliberate attacks against civilians. In 1977, Yasser Arafat missed the opportunity offered by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Only with the locally initiated intifada, and an increase in Palestinian pressure from within the territories for an end to the occupation, did the PLO begin to formulate an official position recognizing Israel — thus enabling Israeli Zionists to begin to build a constituency which calls on the Israeli government to enter into negotiations with the PLO.

Learning from the South African Experience

The conciliatory theme woven throughout Nelson Mandela's first speech to the public since his statement at his 1964 trial foreshadows the tone which can be expected to characterize the ANC's negotiating delegation with the South African government. Nelson Mandela did not disappoint his supporters. By recalling his famous words: "I have fought

against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have carried the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities . . . if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" — Mr. Mandela reaffirmed his personal, as well as the ANC's, preference for a negotiated end to apartheid, accentuating his call to white compatriots to join in the shaping of a new South Africa.

Both Palestinians and Israelis can learn from the South African experience — for though the roots of the conflicts are dissimilar, the effects on the people involved are as tragic. President De Klerk set the stage for the Israeli government to enter into the spirit of the times and recognize the PLO. There is certainly evidence, suggested by all the public opinion surveys — indicating a shift in Israeli attitudes toward talking with the PLO. It may be that just as

Palestinian National Covenant. This has not eased the way for Labor Party centrists to come out in support of direct negotiations with the PLO.

Peace activists in Israel can also gain some insights into mobilization strategies from the anti-apartheid struggle. The movement for political and social justice in South Africa has fostered a coalition among various sectors. This is true for the Palestinians as well: political conditions under occupation blur the distinctions between professor and peasant, encouraging greater unity among those who feel oppressed. Nevertheless, until recently, the elitist and often paternalistic attitudes displayed by the peace camp leadership in Israel have alienated important sectors from participating in this pre-negotiation process. The inability to link the cause of peace with that of social justice has impeded efforts to effectively challenge the Israeli government's position from within.

A more balanced ANC approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now called for.

former South African President P.W. Botha was ultimately unable to "cross the Rubicon," Prime Minister Shamir will have to be replaced by a more enlightened and pragmatic leader. But it is also true that the ANC, in preparation for its participation in the process of political reform, clarified its 1955 Freedom Charter in its August 1989 Harare Declaration on Human Rights. This document, drawn up over a two-year period, sets out preconditions for negotiations and outlines constitutional guidelines for a democratic, post-apartheid South Africa. The PLO, in contrast, has consistently refused to undertake a similar revision of its quasi-constitution, the

The differences between the regional and domestic situations in South Africa and the Middle East should not serve as an excuse for failing to acknowledge some of the lessons which the South African experience has to offer at this juncture. While the momentum for fundamental change has begun in South Africa, more than goodwill will be needed to solve the enormous social and economic problems which have resulted from three centuries of racial discrimination. Nevertheless, the flexibility and fluidity of the situation there is enviable. While we in Israel are faced with stagnation and uncertainty, the South Africans are now cautiously optimistic. □