

South Africa's Anti-Israel Obsession

by **Michael B. Bishku**

Addressing the summit of the Economic Community of West African States in June 2017—the first non-African leader to do so—then-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu proudly declared, “Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is coming back to Israel.”¹

Yet while most African states had restored or established relations with Israel by the early 2020s, including five Arab League members (Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Mauritania, and Chad, an Arab League observer state), South Africa has become Jerusalem's fiercest critic outside the Arab and Muslim worlds. It opposed Israel's observer status in the African Union (AU), lowered its Israel representation in response to Washington's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and has positioned itself at the forefront of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the Jewish state. And while the ruling African National Congress (ANC) largely explains this policy as a response to Israel's cooperation with the apartheid regime, it has had no qualms about collaborating with other states that had closer ties with this regime. What, then, are the real reasons behind Pretoria's anti-Israel obsession, and how likely is it to change in the foreseeable future?



Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu arrives for a meeting of the Economic Community of West African States, Monrovia, Liberia, June 4, 2017, where he declared, “Israel is coming back to Africa.”

¹ [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), ECOWAS Africa-Israel Summit, Liberia, YouTube, [June 4, 2017](#).

Historical Background

South Africa was one of the thirty-three states that voted in favor of the November 1947 U.N. resolution partitioning mandatory Palestine into two states—one Jewish, the other Arab. Its prime minister at the time, Jan Smuts, vehemently opposed antisemitism and staunchly supported Zionism, from the Balfour Declaration through the establishment of Israel.² On May 24, 1948, ten days after Israel's proclamation of statehood, his government recognized (de facto) the nascent Jewish state, only to lose power two days later to the National Party (NP), which swiftly moved to institute the apartheid regime.

Despite the inherent antisemitism of most National Party politicians, notably Prime Minister Daniël François Malan (1948-54), the NP government granted Israel de jure recognition in May 1949 upon the Jewish state's admission to the U.N. Three years later, Israel established a legation in Pretoria.³ Subsequently, the two states maintained "correct, albeit not overly cordial"⁴ relations. The bilateral relationship deteriorated in the early 1960s as Jerusalem embarked on a sustained effort to cultivate relations with other sub-Saharan states and

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downgraded its South African representation.

This policy underwent a sea change after the October 1973 war when, due to heavy Arab pressure backed by a global oil embargo, all but four African states severed diplomatic ties with Israel.⁵ In response, Jerusalem opted to rebuild its relations with South Africa, establishing an embassy in Pretoria in 1974 and engaging in military cooperation that reportedly included a nuclear component.⁶ So important was this nascent relationship that, shortly after South Africa's consulate in Tel Aviv was upgraded to an embassy, the country's prime minister (and later president) B.J. Vorster, who was a member of the Afrikaner pro-Nazi Ossewabrandwag during World War II, held a 5-day visit to Israel in 1976, which included a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial.

At the same time, Arab and Muslim states also deepened ties with the apartheid regime. During the 1970s, for example, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) purchased one-third of Pretoria's gold output, and in the 1980s, the Persian Gulf Arab states together with the Islamist regime in Tehran provided South Africa with at least half of the country's oil imports, directly or through middlemen, worth over US\$1 billion annually.⁷

² Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, *The Jews of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008), pp. 97, 119-24, 126.

³ Walter Eytan, *The First Ten Years: A Diplomatic History of Israel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), pp. 13-4.

⁴ Naomi Chazan, "The Fallacies of Pragmatism: Israeli Foreign Policy towards South Africa," *African Affairs*, Apr. 1983, pp. 172-4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sasha Polakow-Suransky, *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), pp. 81-3.

⁷ Arye Oded, *Africa and the Middle East Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987), pp. 151-3.

Jerusalem's relationship with Pretoria prevented many African states from restoring relations with the Jewish state, despite the steep decline in Arab financial aid to these states and the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979. By the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, only eight African states had reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel, with one, Zambia, doing so on the same day as the Soviet collapse (December 25, 1991).⁸ Yet the return of Israel's Labor party to power in 1992 and the launch of the Oslo diplomatic process with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) the following year triggered a process of reconciliation between Jerusalem and the African states much to the displeasure of the last white government of President de Klerk. By the 2020s, Jerusalem had restored diplomatic relations with 46 of the 55 African Union member states and acquired an observer status in the pan-African organization.

The Mandela Presidency

The apartheid regime fell shortly after the Cold War ended. The African National Congress (ANC), which had spearheaded the struggle against that institution, won the first free, multicultural elections on April 27, 1994, and its leader Nelson Mandela became South Africa's president two weeks later. He was succeeded by a string of ANC-originating presidents—Thabo Mbeki (1999-



In February 1990, Nelson Mandela (left) met Yasser Arafat in Lusaka, Zambia, stating, "There are many similarities between our struggle and that of the PLO."

2008), Kgalema Motlanthe (2008-9), Jacob Zuma (2009-18), and Cyril Ramaphosa (2018-to the present).

The ANC's domination proved a boon for the PLO, which had enjoyed long and multifaceted ties with it. For its part, the ANC deemed Israel's military ties with the apartheid regime as far worse than European and Arab economic relations with Pretoria and viewed its control of the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians (if not of the Israeli Arab citizens) as a form of colonialism similar to that which existed in Africa. And so, two weeks after his release from prison in February 1990, Mandela met Yasser Arafat in Lusaka, Zambia, hugging and kissing the PLO chairman on both cheeks and stating, "There are many similarities between our struggle and that of the PLO. We live under a unique form of colonialism in South Africa, as well as in Israel."⁹ He amplified this

⁸ Arye Oded, "Africa in Israeli Foreign Policy: Expectations and Disenchantment: Historical and Diplomatic Aspects," *Israel Studies*, Fall 2010, p. 141, Table 2.

⁹ James Zogby, "Mandela and Arafat," *Huffington Post* (New York), [Dec. 9, 2013](#).

message in a 1997 speech at the U.N.'s International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, where he claimed that "our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."¹⁰ Indeed, Pretoria prioritized the "Palestinian question" at both the U.N. and the African Union, alongside other cases of the "unfinished business of decolonization" such as the Sahrawi people of the Western Sahara.¹¹ The ANC's grievance over Israel's relations with the apartheid regime reinforced this approach (while turning a blind eye to similar relationships by many other states). As Mandela put it a few months before his appointment as president,

The ANC, in common with the international community, was extremely unhappy with the military cooperation between the State of Israel and the apartheid regime of South Africa. The refusal of Israel, over many years, to honor its international obligations to isolate the apartheid regime did influence our attitude towards that government.¹²

This grievance and PLO affinities notwithstanding, Mandela did not share the Palestinian organization's relentless commitment to Israel's destruction but rather

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accepted the Jewish state's legitimacy provided it did not stymie the realization of the Palestinians' national aspirations. As he put it in 1993: "We insist on the right of the State of Israel to exist within

secure borders, but with equal vigor support the Palestinian right to national self-determination."¹³

In line with this view, Mandela strongly supported the Oslo process, going so far as to tell the Israeli ambassador to Pretoria that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was more deserving of the Nobel Prize than he was. He also invited Israeli president Ezer Weizmann and Arafat, who attended his inauguration ceremony, to his first official meeting as president and asked them to sit down and hammer out their outstanding differences. And while he refrained from visiting Israel during his presidency, in 1997 he agreed to receive an honorary doctorate from Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba.¹⁴ At the same time, South Africa established formal diplomatic relations with the PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), created in May 1994 in accordance with the Oslo accords, and sent a representative to Ramallah and opened up a satellite office in Gaza; the Palestinians reciprocated by sending an "ambassador" to Pretoria.¹⁵

When he finally travelled to Israel in October 1999 after leaving office, Mandela combined the visit with stops in Syria, Iran, Jordan, and Gaza, where he met Arafat yet

¹⁰ Joan Deas, "Guest Writer: South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy on Israel-Palestine," *Middle East Monitor*, [Oct. 16, 2019](#).

¹¹ *The South African* (Cape Town), [Dec. 19, 2020](#).

¹² Raphael Ahren, "Nelson Mandela was close to Jews, resolutely loyal to Palestinians," *Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Dec. 6, 2013](#).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "[Palestine \(The State of\)](#)," South Africa Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), Pretoria.

again. While in Jerusalem, he lauded the newly-elected prime minister, Ehud Barak—who had promised to withdraw Israeli troops from southern Lebanon and to pursue peace talks with Syria and the Palestinians—as “a man of courage and vision.” Following his visit to Yad Vashem, he claimed that the experience left him “deeply pained and enriched.” Praising the South African Jewish community’s contribution to his country, he hugged South Africa’s chief rabbi saying: “Now I feel at home, my rabbi is here.”¹⁶

Mandela’s ANC Successors

None of Mandela’s successors have ever visited Israel, nor have incumbent Israeli prime ministers traveled to South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994, in contrast to state visits by both Arafat in August 1998 and his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, in March 2006. The first and highest-ranking Israeli official to visit Pretoria was Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in October 2004. There he met with President Thabo Mbeki and Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad, who took care to clarify that the meeting did not imply the warming of South African-Israeli relations.¹⁷ Indeed, just a few months earlier, Pahad submitted an affidavit to the International Court of Justice in Hague decrying Israel’s security barrier established along parts of the demarcation line with the West Bank as violating international law. “[It] is



A Hamas delegation visits the prison cell of Nelson Mandela, December 2018. Pretoria still considers Hamas a “national liberation movement” rather than a terrorist organization.

not a security wall,” stated the affidavit, rejecting the barrier’s designated goal of stemming the 4-year-long Palestinian war of terror waged in September 2000 (the so-called “al-Aqsa Intifada”). Pahad’s affidavit continued,

It is a wall to enforce Occupation, a wall that has separated hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their families, homes, lands, and religious sites. ... [It] is an anathema to the peace process ... as it eliminates the prospects of a two-state solution.¹⁸

For his part, President Mbeki quickly endorsed the outcome of the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections—the only ones ever held in the Palestinian-controlled territories—that made Hamas the dominant political party in the territories:

[T]he people of Palestine have elected ... Hamas as their majority

¹⁶ Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA, New York), [Oct. 20, 1999](#).

¹⁷ *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), [Oct. 22, 2004](#).

¹⁸ Aziz Pahad, deputy minister of foreign affairs, The Hague, The Netherlands, DIRCO, [Feb. 23, 2004](#).

legislative representatives. Democratically they have constituted the legitimate authorities that must lead them in their continuing quest for an independent state of Palestine, democracy, and development.¹⁹

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While, in May 2006, Mbeki was persuaded by a delegation of South African Jewish leaders not to meet Hamas representatives because “it would destroy his ability to act as a mediator in the Middle East crisis,”²⁰ Pretoria has continued to consider Hamas a “national liberation movement” rather than a terrorist organization. In the words of Sisa Ngobane, South Africa’s last ambassador to Israel: “Hamas is the product of Palestinians wanting a better life.” However, he conceded Jerusalem’s “legitimate demand” for Hamas to eschew violence and recognize Israel as the PLO had done.²¹

By the time he left office, Mbeki had become very frustrated with the stalling of the Oslo process, which he exclusively ascribed to Israel. Speaking at a forum in the Qatari capital of Doha shortly after leaving office, he claimed that the establishment of a Palestinian state “is a matter of urgent necessity for the people of Palestine, while the majority of Israelis seem convinced that this outcome can be postponed indefinitely.” In his view, this alleged recalcitrance was a corollary of Israel’s control of the inter-

national narrative of the conflict, something that

gives it assurances that whatever it does, it will never face the danger of international isolation, especially by major world powers, and will always ensure that regardless of the rhetoric, its interests and aspirations will always occupy the first place in the strategic considerations of the major world powers, with those of the Palestinians being dealt with as a peripheral irritation.²²

Pretoria’s anti-Israel policy gained considerable momentum during the Jacob Zuma presidency (2009-18), with a U.N. report on the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza war that branded Israel as a potential perpetrator of war crimes and “possibly crimes against humanity” adding fuel to the fire.²³ And while the South African Jewish jurist Richard Goldstone, who headed the fact-finding mission that wrote the report bearing his name, later acknowledged that Israel did not intentionally target civilians,²⁴ Pretoria continued to castigate Jerusalem for its supposed “disproportionate use of force”—a standard diatribe levelled against the Jewish state in the 2012, 2014, and 2021 Gaza wars.

¹⁹ [News release](#),” South Africa Department of Foreign Affairs, Tshwane, Mar. 9, 2006.

²⁰ JTA, [May 15, 2006](#).

²¹ *Times of Israel*, [May 22, 2014](#).

²² Thabo Mbeki, “Lessons of the South African Experience: Thoughts on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Foreign Policy*, [May 26, 2010](#).

²³ Makhura B. Rapanyane, “Consistency and inconsistency in foreign policy of the Republic of South Africa towards Israel,” *Journal of Public Affairs*, Aug. 2021, p. 6.

²⁴ Richard Goldstone, “Reconsidering the Goldstone Report on Israel and war crimes,” *The Washington Post*, [Apr. 1, 2011](#).

Within this framework, not only did Zuma condemn Israel's "occupation of the Palestinian territories" and urge the admission of the "State of Palestine" to the U.N. as "a decisive step towards achieving lasting peace, economic cooperation and prosperity for the millions of people in the Middle East,"²⁵ but his government began accusing Israel of practicing "apartheid." In September 2012, for example, the minister of international relations and cooperation, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, derided Israel as an apartheid state, claiming that "only South Africans and Palestinians knew how it felt like to live under such a system of governance."²⁶ The following month, Baleka Mbete, South Africa's former vice president and national assembly speaker, claimed that, as one who "had been to Palestine herself," she could attest that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians was "far worse than apartheid South Africa."²⁷

No less importantly, in October 2012, the South African cabinet approved a measure "requiring the labelling of goods or products emanating from IOT (Israel-occupied territory) to prevent consumers being led to believe that such goods come from Israel." In response, Israel's deputy foreign minister Danny



In December 2012, the ANC made BDS its official policy "to support the programs and campaigns of the Palestinian civil society" and "put pressure on Israel to engage with the Palestinian people."

Ayalon accused Pretoria of remaining "an apartheid state."²⁸

In December 2012, the ANC made BDS its official policy when its national conference called on

all South Africans to support the programs and campaigns of the Palestinian civil society, which seek to put pressure on Israel to engage with the Palestinian people to reach a just solution.²⁹

This pretext was patently false as it was the PLO that had walked away from negotiations in September 2010 despite Netanyahu's acquiescence in the establishment of a Palestinian state and a 10-month construction freeze in the West Bank.³⁰ But the sentiment of

²⁵ Jacob Zuma, statement, 66th U.N. General Assembly, New York, [Sept. 21, 2011](#).

²⁶ Makhura Benjamin Rapanyane, "An Afrocentric exploration of Jacob Zuma's anti-Apartheid stance: The question of Israeli-Palestinian struggle," *Journal of Public Affairs*, Oct. 2019, p. 3.

²⁷ *Electronic Intifada* (Chicago), [Oct. 29, 2012](#).

²⁸ *The National Post* (Toronto), [Aug. 23, 2012](#)

²⁹ *Electronic Intifada*, [Dec. 20, 2012](#).

³⁰ Efraim Karsh, "Obama's Middle East Delusions," *Middle East Quarterly*, [Winter 2016](#).

“punishing” Israel for its policies towards the Palestinians had been building for some time. In March 2011, for instance, the University of Johannesburg severed all ties with Ben-Gurion

University³¹—a rather ironic move given Mandela’s acceptance of an honorary doctorate from that university—while in August 2012, Deputy Foreign Minister Ebrahim Ebrahim urged South Africans to “refrain from visiting Israel.”³²

Nkoana-Mashabane, minister of international relations and cooperation, created a stir in Israel in November 2013 when she stated that her government was going to “slow down and curtail senior leadership contact with that regime [Israel] until things [i.e., the treatment of Palestinians] begin to look better.” In reaction, Israel’s foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman accused Pretoria of “creating an atmosphere of anti-Israel sentiment and antisemitism that will make a pogrom against Jews in the country just a matter of time.”³³ In an interview with an Israeli newspaper in May 2014, two months before the outbreak of yet another Gaza war, South Africa’s ambassador to Israel diplomatically described Lieberman’s comment as “unfortunate” and expressed hope for the improvement of the bilateral relationship. Yet he defended his government’s policy as aimed at redressing the “power imbalance” between Israel and the Palestinians, comparing the situation in the West Bank to that of apartheid South Africa “where there was a

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preponderance of force that is ready to be used at any given point.”³⁴

In October 2015, the ANC hosted a rally in Cape Town for a Hamas delegation headed by its leader Khaled Meshaal.

President Zuma exchanged gifts with the terrorist leader and signed a letter of support for the Palestinians. In introducing Meshaal, a senior ANC politician labeled Jerusalem’s policies toward the Palestinians as “state-sponsored crime” and declared that “we have to reaffirm the message of unity of the oppressed masses.” In response, the Israeli foreign ministry summoned Pretoria’s deputy ambassador asserting that the visit “encourages terror by giving some legitimacy to a terror organization.”³⁵

South African-Israeli relations plunged to their lowest in December 2017 when the ANC’s national conference announced that due to the Trump administration’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, South Africa’s Israel embassy would be downgraded to a liaison office.³⁶ At that meeting, Cyril Ramaphosa, who would become South Africa’s president in February 2018, became the ANC leader—foreshadowing the nature of future bilateral ties. Indeed, in May 2018, Pretoria recalled its ambassador—and has still not filled that position—following clashes between Israeli military forces and Hamas rioters along the border with Gaza, in response to the move of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Three years later, when Hamas’s missile

³¹ *Sowetan Live* (Johannesburg), [Mar. 24, 2011](#).

³² *The Forward* (New York), [Dec. 12, 2012](#).

³³ *Times of Israel*, [May 22, 2014](#).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Agence France-Presse* (Paris), [Oct. 21, 2015](#).

³⁶ Reuters (London), [Dec. 21, 2017](#).

attack on Jerusalem under the false pretense of defending the al-Aqsa Mosque from supposed Jewish machinations triggered yet another conflagration, Pretoria unequivocally sided with the terrorist organization. As anti-Israel activists marched in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Port Elizabeth to commemorate “Nakba Day” and to demand the severance of all ties with Israel, the government chastised Jerusalem for acting

in stark violation of international law, and a total disregard of United Nations Security Council Resolutions ... including 446 (1979) and 2334 (2016), which explicitly call for an end to Israeli occupation and the fulfilment of the rights of the Palestinian people, including self-determination and independence.³⁷

This policy stood in sharp contrast to that of the African Union, which in July 2021, a month after the end of the Gaza hostilities, granted observer status to Israel. According to one prominent South African professor, Pretoria’s opposition to this move, alongside some Arab states in Africa, put it “out of sync with the views of most African heads of state.”³⁸

Conclusion

As more Middle Eastern and African countries are expanding ties with Israel, breaking the longstanding subordination of

their national interests to the “Palestinian problem,” Pretoria appears to be going the opposite direction by endorsing the BDS campaign to delegitimize and isolate the Jewish state. In the current South African parliament, the ruling ANC controls 230 of the 400 seats and is likely to continue to place the “Palestinian problem” at the forefront of its foreign policy agenda.

As long as the ANC remains the dominant political party in South Africa, nothing will change; it had close connections with the PLO and other “liberation groups” during its struggle against the apartheid regime, and much of South Africa’s black population, which largely votes for the ANC, has an affinity with the Palestinians. Consequently, Israel is going to face much more of the same treatment, at least until there is a universally recognized Palestinian state achieved through negotiations and peacefully coexisting with Israel.

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³⁷ *Anadolu Agency* (Ankara), [May 16, 2021](#).

³⁸ Hussein Solomon, “Why the push led by South Africa to revoke Israel’s AU status is misguided,” *The Conversation* (Waltham, Mass.), [Sept. 16, 2021](#).