

## **Preface**

### *Reflections on Moral Literacy*

**T**his study has been written within the paradigms and in support of the broad Israeli-Palestinian peace movement. These pragmatic compromisers have unfortunately been marginalized by the escalating violence and the advance of extremist policies among both Jews and Palestinians. The false notion that if you are not with *us*, you must be with *them* has gained ground on both sides in this polarized conflict. The majority of the Jewish diaspora in particular rallies behind Israeli government policy, regardless of that policy's consequences. We try to understand this uncritical ethnic solidarity that falsely equates critiquing the government with denying Israel's right to exist—or, with harboring anti-Semitic views. In the ideological battle, frequent references to the anti-apartheid struggle are made wherein Palestinians are equated with black South Africans. Shimon Peres, on the other hand, writes after meeting Mandela in 1993, "Two persecuted people, the blacks and the Jews can celebrate a new future."<sup>1</sup> We explore both problematic analogies at length, but above all we are interested in the lessons one can glean from South Africa's negotiated settlement that can be applied to a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Our metaphor, "Seeking Mandela," speculates on what would have happened in the Middle East had a Palestinian Mandela or Gandhi provided unifying moral and strategic leadership—or if one were to emerge and do so in the future. (The real Mandela visited the area only once on a private stopover in 1999.) We do not adhere to the theory that history is primarily shaped by "great men" or that the icon Mandela is infallible. Yet a social movement's policy is inevitably influenced by the moral clarity of leaders who are admired because of their principled guidance.

Ultimately, the African National Congress (ANC) emerged victorious not because it had militarily or strategically defeated its adversary, but because it had captured the moral high ground against all odds.

In venturing into this emotional minefield, we need guideposts, which can be called *moral literacy*. Like the *political literacy* of informed citizens, a moral literacy ought to underlie those citizens' daily judgments. Moral literacy denotes the ability to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate behavior, regardless of what is legal or customary in a given situation. Despite postmodernist relativism's popularity, our goal is to highlight universally acceptable criteria by which the antagonists in a polarized conflict can be held accountable—a common ground by which their mutual atrocities can be judged and by which peace can be negotiated.

A polarized struggle inevitably produces great moral confusion among the participants and onlookers alike. In South Africa, the effort to dismantle apartheid forced the parties to clarify their positions on which methods of liberation and resistance are legitimate and which are immoral. The South African Truth Commission further pronounced what constitutes human rights violations in a just war. It concluded that even in a just war, the forces of liberation may not defend themselves “by *all* means possible.” Attacking civilians or killing prisoners, for example, constitute “injustice in war” and violations of the Geneva Convention of legitimate warfare. When the partisans in the Middle East conflict refer to the anti-apartheid struggle, they often ignore these moral lessons. The British philosopher Ted Honderich, for instance, exemplifies this moral confusion by advocating “*liberation-terrorism* to get freedom and power for a people when it is clear that nothing else will get it for them.”<sup>2</sup> Honderich blatantly appropriates the South African case and misinterprets its relationship to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by morally justifying suicide bombing and glorifying martyrdom:

I myself have no serious doubt, to take the outstanding case, that the Palestinians have exercised a moral right in their terrorism against the Israelis. They have had a moral right to terrorism as certain as was the moral right, say, of the African people of South Africa against their white captors and the apartheid state. Those Palestinians who have resorted to necessary killing have been right to free their people, and those who have killed themselves in the cause of their people have sanctified themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its “armed struggle” the ANC, as the main voice of black South Africa, has never endorsed terrorism, defined as intentional harming of innocent civilians. In fact, the ANC admonished local combatants who deviated from this policy and successfully constrained its frustrated cadres to channel their anger into disciplined resistance. Not one suicide has been committed in the cause of a thirty-year-long armed struggle, although in practice the ANC drifted increasingly toward violence during the latter years of apartheid.

Our moral reasoning, hopefully without moralizing, also requires reflection on positionality when dealing with a very sensitive and controversial topic. Our Marxist friends (the few who are left) argue that, politically, “you stand where you sit.” We do not believe in such determinism that denies agency. We also guard against similar ethnic homogenizing, which assumes that peoples’ attitudes are primarily shaped by their ethnic background and that members of the same group view the world in more or less the same manner. Obviously vast intra-group differences characterize both Jews and Palestinians or white and black South Africans who are not monolithic entities. We also do not believe in *collective guilt*. However, there exists *collective responsibility* when crimes are committed in the name of your nation or you have unwittingly benefited from your group’s actions. This should be the case even if you took no part in these crimes or may have actively opposed them. At the very least, sensitivity about ethnic positionality and the strong emotions associated with it can be expected.

In ethnic terms, we are neither Jewish nor Arab/Palestinian by birth, but we identify with each for different reasons: We identify with Jews as a long-standing persecuted minority, whose survivors had nowhere to go in the 1940s; and we identify with Palestinians as a displaced, dispossessed, and discriminated against minority as a consequence of Jewish settlements. Not being an insider to either side of the conflict may disadvantage us, but the outsider status also immunizes against too-partisan and too-emotional involvement, which flaws much of the literature on the Middle East. As comparative analysts with long involvement in other conflict resolutions, we hope to escape the ethnic bias of own group affinity. This may enhance our ability to envisage scenarios beyond wishful thinking and moral condemnation. Otherwise, we deemphasize ethnicity as a criterion that endows automatic competence to pass moral judgments. For example, we doubt the notion that ethnic origin bestows a special moral authority to pronounce unquestionable views on memorialization or reparation. The brilliant architects who designed imaginative memorials in Berlin and elsewhere never claimed that their Jewish origin inspired them or that only descendants of victims should be the arbiters of appropriate memory.

There is also the argument that only insiders should write about intra-group affairs—that is, only Jews are allowed to criticize fellow Jews. Given the all-pervasive anti-Semitism, one Jewish friend suggested, all non-Jews are potential perpetrators and only potential victims can judge fellow victims. This logic reminded us of the claim of some feminists, that all men are potential rapists and therefore too tainted for credible involvement in women affairs. In this vein, black South Africans could argue that whites as perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid have no right to complain about black racism. Yet, intra-group affairs are never confined in their impact. In an increasingly interconnected world, it behooves outsiders to concern themselves with their neighbors.

The logic of political Zionism falsely assumes that anti-Semitism is an irreducible part of Gentile society. One writer articulates this widespread notion: “I believe that anti-Jewish genocide cannot be laid to rest as a discrete historical episode, but remains a possibility implicit in the deep structure of Christian and Islamic cultures, East and West.”<sup>4</sup> But anti-Semitism is a contrived, manufactured, and learned phenomenon. Therefore, it can be unlearned. If anti-Semitism were indeed “an essential aspect of non-Jewish human nature, and as a consequence, Jews can never hope to achieve equality of rights as religious and cultural minorities in Gentile societies,”<sup>5</sup> only an exclusive Jewish state could guarantee Jewish rights. All enlightened Gentiles would have to be supporters of political Zionism. The progress of Jewish equality and full integration into Western societies, the relics of anti-Semitism notwithstanding, would only be a delusion. These claims and assumptions are obviously historically and factually absurd; any support for Zionism can only be derived from a specific historical context—such as the Holocaust—not from innate cultural attitudes, which are constantly changing, let alone human nature. Rejecting the notion of anti-Semitism as an immutable part of “non-Jewish human nature” does not deny the possibility that anti-Semitic fascism could reappear in some parts of the world, but this is an empirical question, neither inevitable nor predictable, but dependent on historical circumstances.

Outsiders need to be careful when commenting on others’ experiences of oppression and sense of vulnerability. Historically, Jews have been and continue to be victimized. If one takes the pronouncements of Islamist extremists seriously, Jews are again singled out and the margin of error in Israel is small. Writing about a deadly conflict from the privilege of living in a safe environment does not expose the commentator to the consequences of proposed “solutions.” Refraining from prescriptions therefore is wise counsel for those who are not required to bear the risks. Yet there is a contribution to be made by outsider analysis. To view one’s own world through the eyes of others may well offer insights about unintended consequences and alternative arrangements. Uniqueness can only be discerned through comparisons. Critical comparisons are not usually received appreciatively and reactions range from self-righteous rejection to thoughtful introspection. One friendly reader of an earlier draft chapter concluded pithily: “A mixture of sense and nonsense.” We can only hope that the persuasive, sensible parts predominate.

As both insiders and outsiders, we have studied ethnic conflicts in many countries for the past thirty years. For the reasons mentioned, seldom have we felt so constrained to write as we have about our experiences in Israel. That one of us is of German origin and that the other has lived through apartheid victimization evokes special sensitivities. It is the heavy burden of an atrocious anti-Semitic history that cautions against judging the descendants of centuries-long persecution, culminating in the horrendous

Holocaust. Vulnerable, traumatized people long for security and protection at any cost, even at the price of expansionism. With Arab resistance to new Jewish settlers, the historically displaced inevitably engaged in displacement themselves. After four wars since 1948, the mythology of a promised land resulted in the Jewish domination of its Arab population. However, can the recent American settlers on the West Bank and Gaza still claim victimhood? With state subsidies and army protection, they confiscate more Arab land and use five times the scarce water per capita than the Palestinians are allocated.

We have often faced the questions: Why concern yourself with Israel at all, when there are so many more horrific human rights violations committed by Israel's Arab critics? Why else does the world pick on the Middle East's only democracy, if not for the world's latent anti-Semitism? The suspicion runs deep and may even be partly justified while it serves at the same time as a convenient armor to silence any criticism of the Jewish state. Indeed, Israel should not be held more accountable than others. Israel receives disproportionate scrutiny in global forums for a variety of reasons: First, it is precisely because Israel is a Western democracy for its Jewish majority that it is judged by these standards. Western commentators feel a greater affinity to a like-minded polity than to an autocratic Third World state. Second, the Jewish state enjoys a sophisticated diaspora for which it claims to be the spiritual home and sanctuary. Third, as a Western outpost in a strategic environment, the country is heavily bankrolled by U.S. taxpayers and donors and is therefore linked to its outside supporters. Fourth, radical Islamists use Israeli policies to mobilize anti-Western sentiment. In the streets of Iraq, for example, American troops are called "Jews." Unconditional U.S. support for Israeli expansionism potentially unites Muslim moderates with jihadists. If the silent struggle between Muslim modernizers and religious zealots ultimately decides the success of the "war on terrorism," leaving the Israel-Palestine issue unresolved ignites rage and drives the Muslim moderates into the extremist camp. In short, the Israeli domination of Palestinians not only harms Israeli society, but serves, together with Iraq, as the incubator of global anti-U.S. antagonism. The frontlines of this global contest are marked by what many consider the new "apartheid wall" in Palestine.

Above all, as former collective victims, survivors and descendants are expected to be particularly sensitive not to repeat ethnic discrimination. In short, concerns with Israeli policy for many reasons must be distinguished from anti-Semitism. Criticism of its government does not question the legitimacy of the state of Israel, neither should it be construed as an attack on Jewishness.

Thomas Friedman has written: "Criticizing Israel is not anti-Semitic, and saying so is vile. But singling out Israel for opprobrium and international sanction out of all proportion to any other party in the Middle East is anti-Semitic, and not saying so is dishonest."<sup>6</sup> One must agree with Friedman that

Israel's Arab antagonists warrant much more condemnation. Their oppression of women and homosexuals and their generally autocratic, corrupt, and self-serving systems highlight democratic deficits that have yet to be rectified in any Arab state. However, the strained effort at balance when comparing Israeli and Palestinian fighting also accepts the moral equivalence of the two peoples' antagonism and thereby easily dilutes the occupation as the central cause of the strife and suffering on both sides.

The occupation demeans and degrades not only the occupied but also the occupier, who has the prime moral responsibility for the enduring conflict. The media's moral accounting of the conflict remains one of the most contested issues, with both sides accusing reporters of heavy bias. For example, former long-time BBC Middle East correspondent Tim Llewellyn has criticized the BBC for its effort at "balance" in its reporting on Israel, compared with its reporting on apartheid South Africa:

When suicide bombers attack inside Israel the shock is palpable. The BBC rarely reports the context, however. Many of these acts of killing and martyrdom are reprisals for assassinations by Israel's death squads, soldiers and agents who risk nothing as they shoot from helicopters or send death down a telephone line. I rarely see or hear any analysis of how many times the Israelis have deliberately shattered a period of Palestinian calm with an egregious attack or murder. "Quiet" periods mean no Israelis died . . . it is rarely shown that during these "quiet" times Palestinians continued to be killed by the score. In South Africa, the BBC made it clear that the platform from which it was reporting was one of abhorrence of the state crime of apartheid. No Afrikaner was ritually rushed into a studio to explain a storming of a township. There is no such platform of the BBC's in Israel/Palestine, where the situation is as bad as apartheid, discrimination, racism, ethnic cleansing as rife as ever it was in the Cape or the Orange Free State.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the Israeli government has singled out BBC correspondents, accusing them of "hostile" reporting and restricting their access to information.

Problematic ethnic solidarity may also be questioned. We know many Jewish friends who are deeply troubled about Israeli policies. Yet these highly principled colleagues remain silent and will not criticize Israeli government policy publicly, particularly abroad. Elie Wiesel, who rightly assailed the world's initial silence about the Holocaust, personifies this contradiction best: "As a Jew I see my role as a . . . defender of Israel. I defend even her mistakes. Yes, I feel that as a Jew who resides outside Israel I must identify with whatever Israel does—even with her errors. That is the least Jews in the Diaspora can do for Israel: either speak up in praise or keep silent."<sup>8</sup> Such uncritical solidarity elevates fallible policies into the realm of the sacred. Acquiescence in the face of injustice constitutes complicity. Learning from the Holocaust implies concern for human rights everywhere. Why should breaking ranks on Israel amount to a betrayal of identity? On the contrary,

it reaffirms a cherished Jewish tradition of rational argumentation that risks being lost by an unquestioning loyalty. The several hundred conscientious objectors who refuse military service in the occupied territories (but would defend Israel proper) bravely uphold this tradition of autonomous reasoning. Yet they are ostracized as betraying fellow Jews.

We are puzzled as to why morally sensitive individuals react allergically to the slightest condemnation of Israeli behavior. People who rightly celebrate the Jewish overrepresentation in the anti-apartheid resistance react uncomfortably when the possibility of Israeli apartheid is merely queried. Amiable conversations turn sour and the non-kosher topic is dropped with consensual self-censorship. Prominent liberal defenders of human rights the world over explicitly state that they will never venture into this emotional minefield. At an international academic conference, the mere designation of an official Jewish state as an “ethnic state” drew the outraged reaction of a prominent U.S. liberal colleague: “What about Turks in Germany?”—as if two xenophobias cancel each other out. “France and Britain are ethnic states—why should Jews be forbidden to long for the same?” is another frequently heard retort. Indeed, Jews, like any other nation, have a right to live in their own state, but should not treat their citizens differentially.

What causes the extraordinary ethnic solidarity and lack of erosion of Jewish nationalism (Zionism) at the height of its success? The answer lies in moral validity. One can question whether *objectively* there is moral validity to a given national identity. *Subjectively*, however, there are degrees of moral validity to national identity. The belief in moral validity is deeply embedded and bolstered by histories of felt wrongs. In the Jewish case, moral validity is fed not by an *imagined* injustice or defeat that happened centuries ago (as in Serbian or Quebec nationalism), but by a *living* history peopled by survivors and descendants. Jewish historical suffering has evolved into a collective resolve to not let it happen again that few other national identities display. Afrikaner national identity, for example, was not imbued with the same moral validity, despite the loss of 10 percent of the Afrikaner population in the Anglo-Boer war. Afrikaner moral standing was constantly undermined by exclusion and domination of blacks, even subconsciously in the minds of its beneficiaries. In contrast, the similar Israeli dispossession of Palestinians is perceived as self-defense and therefore not immoral. Zionism has convinced its adherents as well as Western public opinion that Israel has historical right on its side, which other nationalisms lack. A “normal” nationalism aims at achieving a common desire of belonging, while Jewish nationalism goes beyond beneficial bonds in asserting a moral existentialism, regardless of its consequences.

Continuing anti-Semitism as well as Arab hostility reinforces this moral righteousness that blocks the erosion of Zionism. Afrikaner nationalism disintegrated when it had achieved its goals. Conflicting class interests destroyed the former unity of a once relatively homogeneous Afrikanerdom as

different sections (civil servants, farmers, business owners, blue-collar workers) defined their interests differently. While apartheid ideologues also justified their rule by claiming self-defense against ANC-led communism, the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived Afrikaner nationalists of this rationalization. Continued Arab hostility sustains the Israeli perception of justifiable self-defense.

While a dominant U.S.–pro-Israel lobby blindly endorses or quietly tolerates any Israeli government policy, another vocal radical minority abroad—particularly in France and England—calls for apartheid-like sanctions. Other human rights liberals highlight the plight of victims, but they seldom analyze what causes the suffering. Most university administrations in North America, from Concordia to Harvard, would like to declare the controversial issue taboo and ban all discussions among agitated students and activist faculty. Such a position shirks rational, analytic debate where it should be encouraged. Do the calls to boycott Israel assist peace efforts in the Middle East? Progressive forces on both sides would be better served by concerned academics visiting and supporting them directly, if only to act in critical solidarity. Increased contact is also advocated by leading Palestinian intellectuals such as Edward Said, who writes:

I believe it is our duty as Palestinian and yes, even Arab intellectuals to engage Israeli academic and intellectual audiences by lecturing at Israeli centers, openly, courageously, uncompromisingly. What have years of refusing to deal with Israel done for us? Nothing at all, except to weaken us and weaken our perception of our opponent.<sup>9</sup>

While we consider the academic isolation of Israel counterproductive, we sympathize with boycotting the products of illegal settlements (as advocated by Gush Shalom). We also endorse the shareholder actions of companies that directly assist and profit from the occupation, such as Caterpillar, if only for raising awareness.

One note on our methodological guiding thread: In analyzing emotionally charged conflicts, one ought to guard against four traps: moralizing, theologizing, medicalizing, and personalizing.

*Moralizing* focuses on what ought to happen rather than what is likely to occur. We all have our moral preferences, but we must avoid being blinded by them. Wishful thinking all too often overrides the need for a hard-nosed reality check. Realistic accounting turns out to be depressing and uncomfortable but is preferable to living with illusions about the inevitable triumph of good over evil. “Restoring Hope” is an inspiring theme for an academic conference on a seemingly intractable conflict, but the hope must also be grounded in realism. Self-serving moral sermons about the evils of the adversary or the need for justice only preach to the converted. Laments about broken international laws or unheeded UN resolutions obscure why the lawbreaker gets away with it.



*Theologizing* mystifies sociopolitical events as resulting from divine intervention or inexplicable developments. To dub the South African negotiated revolution a “miracle” sounds impressive but explains nothing. The popular concept of evil does not explain terrorism. In fact, it shuts off understanding of the phenomenon by labeling it beyond understanding. The concept of evil avoids the important questions of why and when evil expresses itself. The resurrection of the term *evil* has been mainly used for denunciation. As Robert Fine has argued, the prevailing usage of *evil* tends to exonerate us—the *good*—from any responsibility other than that of destroying evil, and forcibly divides the world between Absolute Innocence and the Unspeakable Beast. Praying for better times may comfort the soul, but resting hopes on the outcome means being paralyzed. At the same time, religious beliefs must be taken seriously because people act on the basis of their firmly held faith. However, we doubt that rising religious fundamentalism in a “clash of civilizations” with secular values can adequately explain militancy. The conflict between Islamists and Arab governments, even in the occupied Palestinian territory, is better understood as a class struggle between the disenfranchised poor and the countries’ autocratic and corrupt elites. Religion serves as a mobilizing device that gives the poor a moral identity and promises security and certainty in a climate of fear.

*Medicalizing* a deplorable social condition as a disease—a cancer—that needs to be eradicated, or as a pathological condition to be cured, resonates as an enticing metaphor. What does Tony Blair’s phrase of “terrorism as a spreading virus” explain? Medical analogies assume involuntary destiny, which obscures the conscious forces and interests behind specific policies. They do not help to evaluate policy.

*Personalizing* policy issues and demonizing leaders has a similarly ineffectual result. Merely denouncing Sharon as “the Butcher of Shatila” neglects the reasons underlying his growing appeal to an agitated Israeli electorate. Leaders mainly represent and articulate underlying interests and sentiments. Yet, while leaders are mouthpieces of their constituencies, they also mobilize, instigate, and persuade. It is for this reason that one may speculate whether Sharon may in time mutate into an Israeli de Gaulle or an F. W. de Klerk. The obsession with the late Arafat also testifies to a personalized politics that falsely believes that Arab politics depend on “great men” who manipulate ignorant masses.<sup>10</sup>

While we pay particular attention to the discourse of leaders in influencing the course of conflicts, we also doubt that one can attribute developments to leaders only. Celebrating prominent South African leaders as sole causes of solutions in addition often assumes a selective partisan focus: “Many times in the past it was rational to give up all hope for the future, to assume the nation would decay into a racial holocaust. It did not occur because of the transformative actions of those marvelous leaders Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, confounding the calculus of rationality.”<sup>11</sup> The

divine power bestowed on these noble figures indeed defies rationality. Even exemplary figures such as Mandela should not be romanticized. One has to question Said's portrayal of Mandela as displaying "profoundly affecting charisma," an "especially eloquent man" who utters "well-crafted words" and always has "something gripping to say."<sup>12</sup> Unlike Gandhi with his ninety-six volumes of collected writings and complex speeches, Mandela cannot be called an intellectual, let alone a philosopher. Far from being an inspiring orator, Mandela delivers the text of his speechwriters in a wooden manner and excites mainly when he ventures into spontaneous sermons. Mandela's achievement lies elsewhere. His acts of embracing his tormentors and his unique sense for unifying gestures of reconciliation almost exonerated whites from their apartheid crimes and made Mandela a hero across the racial divide. The aura of a forgiving president without the expected bitterness after a long incarceration, not innovative leadership, elevated Mandela to a universal icon of peacemaking.

In short, by viewing the Middle East through South African lenses, this study tries to break through the many clichés, such as an "endless cycle of violence," based on "ancient hatreds" in a "tragedy" of inexorable fate that is nobody's fault. In reality, a series of crimes committed can be traced to discernable causes and the initiators should be held accountable.

Our research methods and moral approaches are further illustrated in the following "travel report." As an ethnographic and impressionistic account, the chapter differs from the more "academic" analyses in the rest of the book. The journalistic piece, mainly recording conversations and voices directly, is also meant to whet the appetite of the reader for the analytical reasoning that comes later. Quantitatively oriented researchers normally ridicule such academic tourism as unworthy of inclusion in a sociological account that should report mainly objective, verifiable data and representative surveys. We contend that minute observations and subjective reflections often capture deeper insights than do abstract figures, just as good novelists and journalists often portray social scenes in a more riveting fashion than dry academic analysts are able to achieve. There is something to be gained in the combination.

We also provide first a bit of autobiographical information. Life histories and experiences in different settings shape academic choices and personal values. Exposing those influences allows the reader to evaluate sources of moral judgments.



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## **Controversial Issues in Overview**

### **Context**

**A**lthough Israel and apartheid South Africa are often equated as “colonial settler societies,” we argue that the differences outweigh the similarities. This analysis questions these popular analogies.<sup>1</sup> We believe that when policy makers and political activists reach a more nuanced understanding of the two disparate situations, they are likely to turn away from simplistic emulations of anti-apartheid struggles against Israel and search for more realistic compromises. In this respect, the South African model of postconflict reconciliation may indeed inspire revisions of unworkable policies.

For example, we hypothesize on the basis of the South African experience: An end of violence is the outcome of negotiations but should not be a precondition for their start. Only a relatively unified, not a fragmented, adversary guarantees adherence to controversial compromises and prevents populist outbidding. Transparency and bottom-up involvement through voter education must parallel top-down leadership deals. Leaders who are imposed from outside are tainted and acquire legitimacy only through their own constituencies. Each side has to understand the problem of its partner with his or her constituency and should empower the antagonists to deal with it.

In short, on the one hand, important lessons can be learned from South Africa. On the other hand, the simplistic assumption that the South African model readily lends itself to export may actually retard necessary new solutions by clinging to visions or processes of negotiation that may not work in another context. Above all, in South Africa an entire regime had to be changed

while in Israel the occupation and the status of the territories are the main contentious issues. However, should mainstream Palestinians turn away from the two-state option, because permanent settler presence and land annexation render a viable state impossible, then the South African solution of one person/one vote in a single state reemerges as an elusive goal. This would amount to the end of the Zionist quest, because Jews would soon find themselves in a numerical minority. We explore how feasible and realistic such a democratic South African alternative is likely to be in the long run, as opposed to a viable Palestinian state, or a Bantustan-like domination, or even expulsion.

Academic and journalistic commentators on the topic can be roughly divided into three groups:

1. The majority is incensed by the very analogy and deplores what it deems its propagandistic goals. Typical of this group would be Harvard President Lawrence Summer who inveighed against the “boycott Israel” campaign with the statement: “Any comparison between South Africa and Israel is implicitly anti-Semitic.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Ian Buruma, who rejects the comparison as wrong and inflammatory, deplores that for misguided activists, “Israel, in many respects, has become the South Africa of today.”<sup>3</sup>
2. The opposing “Israel is Apartheid” advocates include most Palestinians, many Third World academics, and several Jewish post-Zionists who idealistically predict an ultimate South African solution of a common or binational state. Prominent South Africans in this category, like Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu, advocate similar anti-apartheid strategies against Israel and assume that strong pressure would produce similar outcomes. The Israeli activist historian Ilan Pappé (*Green Left Weekly*, September 1, 2004) argues that the nonviolent strategy has no chance, “unless we create an international atmosphere in which Israel is treated as South Africa was.” A South African political scientist, Na’eem Jeenah, writes: “Israel is, in fact, an apartheid state.... And I suggest, similar problems within similar contexts can use similar solutions.”<sup>4</sup> A British social scientist, Daryl Glaser, starts his moral comparison with: “Most critics of Zionism argue that it is ‘like apartheid.’ I consider this (for Israel) unflattering claim of likeness to be substantially justified, though those making it rarely provide sophisticated arguments to back it up.”<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky compares apartheid favorably by asserting that the separation wall is “helping turn Palestinian communities into dungeons, next to which the Bantustans of South Africa look like symbols of freedom, sovereignty and self-determination.”<sup>6</sup> Since the 1980s, Uri Davis, focusing on legal arrangements, has argued the case for “Apartheid Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

3. A third group diagnoses similarities and differences, but, above all, looks to South Africa for guidance. “Israelis and Palestinians could learn a lot from how South Africa’s F. W. de Klerk approached peace,” comments *Globe & Mail* columnist Shira Herzog in her article titled “Take South Africa’s Lead!”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Tony Judt draws parallels<sup>9</sup> and, like many liberals in this camp, calls upon the United States to impose a solution on the warring factions.

Various political actors also use the South African analogy self-servingly in their exhortations and rationalizations. The Deputy Prime Minister in Sharon’s government says: “I shudder to think that liberal Jewish organizations that shouldered the burden of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa will lead the struggle against us.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, former Prime Minister Barak warns of broad international support if the Palestinians turn away from the two-state option and demand a single state “in the spirit of the twenty-first century,” as long as there is no acceptable Israeli plan on the table. South African civic democracy haunts the Zionist Left and Right as a nightmare. In Barak’s reasoning:

“One man one vote”? Remind you of something? Yes, South Africa. And that’s no accident. It’s precisely their intention. And that’s their long-term plan. So, we have to say honestly today: the strategic blindness of the Israeli Right and the Sharon government’s effort to grab more than it can hold, indeed endanger the future of the Zionist enterprise.<sup>11</sup>

United States rhetorical cautioning, though never followed by action, reinforces a new hegemony of beleaguered siege in Israel. Colin Powell muses: “I don’t believe that we can accept a situation that results in anything that one might characterize as apartheid or Bantuism.”<sup>12</sup> Because of this political climate, spokespersons of all parties, including Sharon, have repeatedly deplored the occupation and seeming “South Africanization” but have done everything to entrench it. The hypocritical rhetoric masks the successful game of “playing for time” while changing the sociostructural reality. The huge discrepancy between words and deeds simultaneously assuages critics at home and abroad with hope for peace while quietly accommodating settler expansionists with new opportunities.

### **Uses and Abuses of the Israel–South Africa Comparison**

With a slightly different perspective, one could state that comparisons between South Africa and Israel have been employed for three different but interrelated purposes. The first purpose is to contrast forms of domination and resistance of a subjugated population. The second is to focus on

ideological similarities, as expressed in the equation of Zionism with racism or the self-concept of some Afrikaners and Jews as “God’s Chosen People.” The third is to draw strategic lessons from the negotiated settlement in South Africa for the unresolved conflict in the Middle East. The latter is the main focus of this study.

Academic comparisons of Israel and apartheid South Africa mostly invoke the notion of settler societies,<sup>13</sup> focus on similar religious mythologies<sup>14</sup> or deal with interstate relations as an “unnatural alliance.”<sup>15</sup> In the colonial settler perspective, alien intruders conquer and displace an indigenous population. They act on behalf of a metropolitan power. The colonial analogy has inspired both Palestinian and South African black resistance. However, settlers also develop their own interests, independent of and often against their sponsor abroad. The colonial concept leaves unanswered when and how settlers become indigenous.<sup>16</sup> As the always-incisive Canadian columnist Rick Salutin comments: “Israel was never just a ‘colonial settler-state’ like, for instance, South Africa. It was a people who felt they were returning home.”<sup>17</sup>

The Israeli sociologist Eliezer Ben-Rafael<sup>18</sup> distinguishes between “colonialism” and “colonization,” which he considers a more accurate, though not morally superior, description of Zionism. Ben-Rafael wants to avoid the negative connotations of a vanishing colonialism, feeding into “Israelophobia,” while highlighting the frequency of new nations establishing themselves in the modern era. However, if colonization means “a new population” displacing a local one and building up “a society of its own,” as Ben-Rafael defines colonization, the distinction is merely semantic and the permanent conquest may actually be worse than temporary economic colonial exploitation for the indigenous people, the frequency and general acceptance of new settler dominance in North and South America notwithstanding.

Yet the right of settlers to coexist with displaced people in the same land has long been conceded by mainstream Palestinian leaders (Oslo Accord) and confirmed by the ANC’s Freedom Charter of 1955. Disputed issues are the terms of coexistence, the meaning of equal citizenship, and how to redress the legacy of past injustice.<sup>19</sup> The notion of “settler societies” carries explanatory weight only if their varieties are distinguished. As Canadian historian Donald Akenson has pointed out, “there is scarcely a society in Europe or North and South America that is not a settler society.”<sup>20</sup>

Emphasizing the similarities between apartheid and Israeli forms of domination has the effect of delegitimizing Israeli governance. After fascism and African decolonization, the apartheid regime constituted an international pariah state, and equating the Jewish treatment of Palestinians with Bantustans and the suppression of national liberation casts the Jewish state in a similar pariah role. Already in the 1980s, prominent Israelis such as Shlomo Avineri warned that continued control over the West Bank and Gaza “means continued oppression of a million-and-a-half

Palestinians and a slow ‘South Africanization’ of Israel.”<sup>21</sup> Buruma, who doubts the validity of the comparison, nevertheless diagnoses that “Israel, in many respects, has become . . . the litmus test of one’s progressive credentials,” similar to the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, Vietnam in the 1960s, Chile in the 1970s, and apartheid in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

An obvious difference between Israel proper and apartheid South Africa lies in the universal suffrage. It includes the 20 percent Palestinian Israeli citizens in Israel who have the right to vote for the Knesset. However, if the Palestinian territories under more or less permanent Israeli occupation and settler presence are considered part of the entity under analysis, the comparison between a disenfranchised African population in apartheid South Africa and the three and a half million stateless Palestinians under Israeli domination gains more validity. Most Israeli social scientists treat the two territories as separate issues and thereby avoid drawing some uncomfortable conclusions.

Moreover, the Israeli Palestinians resemble in many ways “Colored” and Indian South Africans. As targets of cooptation, they have been allowed to vote since 1983, albeit for separate parliaments, which held joint sittings with the exclusively white chamber as well. The toy parliaments of the minorities could never outvote their white creators and acquired little legitimacy and voter interest. While the more legitimate Arab parties sometimes hold the balance of power in a split Knesset, they also struggle with widespread apathy of their alienated constituents. Above all, both Israeli Palestinians and Colored and Indian South Africans are restricted to second-class citizen status when another ethnic group monopolizes state power, treats the minorities as intrinsically suspect, and legally prohibits their access to land or allocates civil service position or per capita expenditure on education differentially between dominant and minority citizens. Another example: A 2003 Israeli law forbids Israeli Palestinians newly married to non-Israeli Palestinians to live together in Israel.

Israel’s immigration practices clearly parallel differential immigration entitlements under apartheid. South Africa encouraged and subsidized white immigration from any country. Nonwhite immigration was simply not allowed. However, unlike the situation in Israel, security justifications were never used—it was simple and pure racism. The ruling minority had to be strengthened and not “swamped” by more blacks coming in. The closest parallel concerns the one million second- and third-generation Indian minority who customarily imported brides from India. Various linguistic, religious, and caste subgroups practiced traditional endogamy, which required the pool of potential partners to be larger than that available in South Africa. Apartheid outlawed this practice and cut the Indian community off from any contact with India because Indians were supposed to “go back” rather than come in. No exceptions were allowed. Indian South Africans were one of the most law-abiding, well-educated, hard-working, and

traditional of South Africa's ethnic communities, yet because they were considered (by blacks and whites alike) eternal "aliens," they were also on the lowest rung of the communal ladder.

Ironically, the apartheid stricture also had the progressive effect of enabling the group to develop a distinctive Indian South African identity, which was more cosmopolitan in nature. Most Western constitutions award families special protection from disruption as they are considered the building stones of healthy states. By splitting up families, Israel does the opposite and does this on a discriminatory ethnic basis, as Jewish citizens are not affected. It amounts to a violation of basic human rights, respected even by European xenophobic states with regard to noncitizen migrants. Whether a self-declared Jewish state in theory and practice, therefore, represents an "ethnic state," an "ethnocracy," an "ethnic democracy," or (if these are oxymorons) no democracy at all, as some Palestinians assert, is endlessly debated among social scientists.

The apartheid analogy is mainly employed to mobilize people and motivate action. The moral comparison, however, yields little insights into specific circumstances that have to be evaluated in their own right. Even commentators who diagnose Israel's human rights abuses realize this. Thus U.S. law professor Dena S. Davis writes:

The references to South Africa's former government have wasted a lot of time and energy on the pointless question of whether Israel's human rights abuses approach the level of that famously immoral regime. I have absolutely no interest in this question. The questions that interest me are: Do Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and its treatment of the Palestinians constitute a serious abuse of human rights? I'd say yes.<sup>23</sup>

The Israeli sociologist Avishai Ehrlich has pointed to the difference between Zionism and other nationalisms: "Zionism is an oddity among modern nationalisms—it did not just call for self-determination in the place where its 'nationals' resided, but shifted its imagined community to a different place. Zionism is thus a colonizatory ideology and project."<sup>24</sup> However, while all other European colonizations were driven primarily by economic motives, the original Labor Zionists moved elsewhere because of persecution and vulnerability. It makes little difference to the displaced indigenous people whether colonization comes out of necessity or out of greed. The newcomers, however, acquire a different relationship to the land, because they have no homeland to return to, unlike economic colonizers. Moreover, once the quest for a safe territory is focused on an imagined ancestral homeland, the guilt of alien intruders is removed. In their perception—or, as others would argue, self-deception—Zionists now reclaimed the land "by right" of return. The later religious zealots of Gush Enumin even invoke divine destiny in occupying their outposts in Eretz Israel. Whatever the historical differences between Zionism and Afrikaner nationalism, their



adherents share the notion of their current residential territory as their only homeland, regardless of whether this is accepted by their neighbors.

The Zionist project was further strengthened demographically and ideologically by the expulsion of Jews from most Arab countries. This expulsion was in direct response to the establishment of Israel. These low-status Sephardics and their descendants form the backbone of anti-Arab hostility. These voters for right-wing parties deeply resent their double discrimination by Ashkenazi insiders and Arab outsiders. If there ever is return of or reconciliation with or compensation for displaced Palestinians, an acknowledgment of displaced Jews must be part of the new justice. Similarly, the social base for right-wing Afrikaner parties was predominantly rural people, the lower echelons of the civil service, and the remnants of the Afrikaner working class—all sections that were dropped from state protection by an increasingly self-confident bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war are equally mistreated in Arab countries. Particularly Lebanon has created a foreign underclass by not allowing them to put down roots, acquire citizenship, or improve their life chances. The Palestinians are herded into camps, fed by a UN agency, and treated as outcasts. Under the pretence that Arab states do not want to solve Israel's problems or absolve it of its legal responsibilities, several generations of Palestinians were made into victims. Instead of harnessing the potential and talents of unwelcome newcomers, the shortsighted policy radicalized many of the permanent victims. On the other hand, Palestinians in southern Lebanon also have to blame themselves for their unpopularity. When the PLO formed a semistate within a dependent state in Lebanon in the 1970s, they did not endear themselves to their Shiite neighbors. As Adam Shatz has observed: "The Shiites may despise the Israelis, but they have no love for the Palestinians, who ruled southern Lebanon harshly in the 1970s and often treated Shiites with contempt."<sup>25</sup>

In the ideological battle for legitimacy, most Jewish analysts view their relationship with the Palestinians not as a colonial one, but as a conflict between two competing national entities. In their self-concept, Zionists are simply returning to their ancestral homeland from which they were dispersed two millennia ago. Originally most did not intend to exploit native labor and resources, as colonizers do. As is well known, deep splits about the trade-offs for peace and security, religious notions of sacred places, and the nature of national identity divide Israeli society. Similar deep cleavages occurred when Afrikaner nationalists were confronted with the pressure for reform. Inexplicable perceptions may be labeled false, mythical, irrational, or illegitimate. However, because people give meaning to their lives and interpret their worlds through these diverse ideological prisms, the perceptions are real and have to be taken seriously. People act on the basis of their belief systems.

Probably the only unifying conviction across a deeply divided political spectrum in Israel concerns the preservation of a Jewish state as a response to historical anti-Semitism. Such endorsements of an official ethnic state defy many prescriptions of multicultural citizenship in a liberal democracy. As a perceived sanctuary and guarantor of ethnic survival in a hostile neighborhood, however, it is based on the trauma of collective victimhood. The legacy of the Holocaust cannot be compared with Afrikaner anxieties. From the experience of horrific victimization emanates the tendency to reject any criticism of Israeli policy by outsiders as anti-Semitism.

Understandable outrage about the Israeli occupation and Likud's hard-line policies may well have also triggered latent anti-Semites to express their bigotry openly. Anti-Jewish attitudes sometimes hide under the guise of pro-Palestinian empathy. Therefore, the clear distinction between despicable anti-Jewish sentiments and legitimate criticism of Israeli policy has to be made and underscored. The robust debate among the global Jewish community itself about Israeli policies demonstrates this distinction. Outside commentators should be sensitive about fueling anti-Semitism, which often reveals itself in the almost automatic ascription of negative features to Jewish activities. Jewish names are automatically associated with conspiracies or powerful lobbies. When the Jewish state as a collective is singled out as the only violator of human rights among dozens of ruthless dictatorships (as happened during the UN Durban conference on racism in 2001), this appears as yet another variation of anti-Semitism. Even the Czarist forgery "The Protocol of the Elders of Zion," together with medieval-style blood libels, is frequently resurrected in the discourse of the Arab world. Government-controlled television in Arab countries regularly broadcasts inflammatory sermons in hundreds of mosques praying, "to destroy tyrannical Jews, humiliate infidels, give victory to the *mujahidin* everywhere and liberate the Al-Aqsa mosque from the hands of the usurpers." Shlomo Avineri has asked:

When suicide bombers receive official state burials by the Palestinian Authority, with a Palestinian police guard of honor, are declared national heroes and their biographies are taught in Palestinian schools as role models—what exactly should the liberal intelligentsia's politically correct response be?<sup>26</sup>

Avineri's rhetorical puzzle raises several strategic questions. More than six hundred prominent Palestinians who signed an appeal against such counterproductive "military operations, which target civilians in Israel" point out that they "kill all possibility for the two peoples to live in peace side by side in two neighboring countries."<sup>27</sup> Answering Avineri can perhaps be best expressed in what morally aware intellectuals should not do: Reinforce the mutual cycle of violence by supporting a policy of escalating revenge, demonize opponents without understanding the historical context of

the conflicts, or abandon communication and negotiations until the antagonist surrenders to enunciated conditions.

In positive terms, liberal intellectuals can demystify collective stereotypes about the enemy. They can question their own mythologies of justified action and moral self-righteousness. They can learn realistic lessons from conflicts elsewhere without falling into the trap of uncritically emulating strategies by adopting simplistic comparisons. This danger is exemplified by the calls for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions, or Desmond Tutu's advice to repeat against Israel as a whole the "divestment movement of the 1980s" against apartheid. This falsely assumes that the end of apartheid resulted largely from international pressure. A similar problematic optimism is contained in Judt's exhortation: "Following fifty years of vicious repression and exploitation, white South Africans handed over power to a black majority who replaced them without violence or revenge. Is the Middle East so different?"<sup>28</sup> Yes, it is. The difference is vast and lies specifically in South Africa's economic interdependence, which contrasts with separation in the Middle East; in religion as a moral unifier, which contrasts with religion as a divisive force for competing claims; in moral isolation and erosion, which contrast with international support; in a mutual perception of stalemate, which contrasts with a conviction of victory; and in the utter illegitimacy of institutionalized racial discrimination, which contrasts with the more legitimate ethnic maintenance. After all, most of those who advocate U.S. pressure on Israel wish to preserve the Jewish state, in contrast to the anti-apartheid movement, which rightly aimed at abolishing the whole system of racial governance.

Without abandoning moral judgments or even outrage, intellectuals can propagate painful realism, eschew wishful thinking, and discern a politically feasible compromise solution rather than some morally desirable utopia. Informed by the particularities and uniqueness of each conflict, policy advisors and opinion makers need to be wary of the trap of uncritically emulating recommended strategies. In their political support they could show critical solidarity, rather than follow a "correct line" unquestioned. If this is the lesson to be drawn from analogies with South Africa, then Buruma is wrong when he states, "The comparison with South Africa is intellectually lazy, morally questionable, and possibly even mendacious."<sup>29</sup> Despite the earlier-noted differences, probing the Israel-South Africa analogy does furnish insights into conflict resolution and obstacles to a negotiated settlement, while at the same time revealing the limits of such comparisons.

## **The Relevance of the Middle East for South Africa**

Because much has been written about the important U.S.-Israel relations and the role of the Jewish diaspora in influencing policy, we will use the lesser known South African case to illuminate the relevancy of the

Middle East beyond its borders. The South African discourse may well be representative of other multiethnic societies with Muslim and Jewish communities.

Apart from the moral and political issues at stake, developments in the Middle East affect South Africa for three main reasons. The first reason is that increased polarization in Israel/Palestine could potentially spill over into intergroup relations in South Africa. Traditionally, strong identifications with Israel by the 80,000 anxious Jewish South Africans is resented by the eight times stronger Muslim community that champions—with equal fervor—the Palestinian cause. Such conflicts could threaten South Africa's hard-won social cohesion. Whatever progress has been made in harmonious race relations, reconciliation, and national unity could be undermined by new partisan stances triggered from the outside.

In this vein, a respected mainstream religious body, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), announced in March 2002 that it had abandoned its conciliatory stance on the Middle East conflict and now supported the Islamic groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, although the MJC also notes it does not support terrorism. “We recognize those groups as legitimate freedom fighters for the liberation of Palestine. We view them in the same light as people view the role of the ANC and PAC in the liberation struggle of this country,” the MJC's deputy president, Moulana Ighsaan Hendricks, is quoted as saying.<sup>30</sup> In response, Philip Krawitz, chairman of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies' Cape Council, pointed out that the supported organizations “by their words and deeds have made it clear that their aim is not to come to any final status agreement with Israel but to destroy Israel altogether” by any means necessary. The Hamas rhetoric of eliminating the Jewish state as well as the organization's sectarian anti-Semitism also runs counter to the widely accepted South African government policy that peace in the Middle East necessitates creating a Palestinian state, existing side by side with the state of Israel in security with its neighbors. “The Board believes that the conflict in the Middle East should remain there and not negatively impact on the good relations between Muslims and Jews in South Africa.”<sup>31</sup>

With instant global communication, however, political emotions cannot be confined to one place. They easily jump borders, as dozens of placard demonstrations, protest marches, and prayer sessions in South Africa have shown. In such a charged atmosphere, the more violent methods of Middle East confrontations may also find emulators in South Africa. These prospects were somewhat diffused by the publicity surrounding a manifesto, “Not in our name,” initiated by Minister Ronnie Kasrils and ANC MLA (Member of Provincial Legislature) Max Ozinsky. The initiative demonstrated that those of Jewish ancestry maintain diverse positions in a wide spectrum of opinion.<sup>32</sup> With its direct criticism of Israeli policy, however, it disturbed the supposed Jewish consensus and led to a robust debate within