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The Arab Peace Initiative



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Different Lessons from the South African Experience

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The end of apartheid in South Africa and 13 years of peaceful transition have lessons for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the many political, economic, sociological and military differences between the situation in Israel-Palestine and that in the apartheid regime dictate that the South African experience cannot be replicated in Israel-Palestine. Benjamin Pogrund pointed this out in his article “South Africa Is Not a Model for Us” (Vol. 14. No. 2, 2007, pp. 20-26). Despite the differences, there are enough similarities that useful lessons may be learned. That was the approach of Lindsay Talmud in “Six South African Lessons” (Vol. 14. No. 2, 2007, pp. 96-99) in which he pointed out the characteristics that might be applicable to Israel-Palestine.

Pogrund and Talmud both point out the key roles of F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela in assuring a peaceful end to apartheid and assuring a vigorous and peaceful transition. In the following paragraphs I seek the political drivers that constrained and drove each leader’s actions, and suggest how they may apply to the Israel-Palestine situation. I seek the political drivers that we must establish to resolve the conflict.

What Drove de Klerk to Negotiate? What Will Drive Israeli Leaders to Negotiate?

F.W. de Klerk was a loyal supporter of the apartheid policies of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party. As minister of national education, he supported segregated universities. He was not known to advocate reform. Yet when elected president in 1989, he abruptly pointed South Africa in a new direction by opening negotiations with previously outlawed anti-apartheid organizations. In February 1990 he released Nelson Mandela from prison

after 27 years. He restored to legality the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan-Africanist Congress, the South African Communist Party and other opposition groups. These moves thoroughly revolutionized the political landscape of South Africa.

There is a similarity between apartheid South Africa and the Israeli-Palestinian situation in that the political leaders and elites of the militarily stronger party virtually all support the status quo. In Israel, the leadership supports the occupation of the West Bank and the settlement project, some because they believe that Jews have a right to the West Bank, others because they feel that the occupation is a necessary evil to protect Jewish Israelis from Palestinian terrorists. Yet the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will never be resolved as long as Israel maintains the occupation and continues expanding settlements.

The key questions are: why de Klerk abruptly abandoned his apparent commitment to apartheid and started negotiations with Mandela and the ANC; and what will make an Israeli leader abandon the occupation, pull back on the settlement project and seriously negotiate with the Palestinians.

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The South Africans I spoke to (about 100 from all races and walks of life) ascribe de Klerk's change to several factors: 1) fear of black violence and labor stoppages, that is, fear of something like what is now happening in Zimbabwe; 2) international pressure — sanctions and boycotts, especially the sports boycott; and 3) pressure from progressive whites (members of the Nationalist Party and others) who were unhappy with apartheid or its excesses.

Clearly the fear of black violence and labor stoppages was the most important driver. In fact, with time the regime became more repressive, and protests grew stronger. Labor stoppages were a significant drag on the economy. The apartheid regime was becoming untenable, and de Klerk recognized as much.

The importance of sanctions and boycotts was mixed. The economic sanctions seemed to have had little effect, because South Africa developed an independent economy and there always seemed to be routes and sources to get around the sanctions. Some people said the economic sanctions played no part in convincing de Klerk that apartheid was untenable, but others thought that economic sanctions were starting to take a toll on day-to-day life. Boycotts were a different story. Almost every person I spoke to felt that the sports boycott played a role in ending apartheid. Apparently South

Africa is quite sports-minded (rugby, football and cricket) and the sports boycott was an important contributor to ending apartheid. The cultural boycott was unimportant.

It seems that the overall effect of progressive whites was small. The sports boycott and progressive whites did not drive de Klerk to negotiate with Mandela; rather, they promoted a willingness and acceptance among the public to support negotiations.

It can be argued that Israeli leaders have never negotiated in good faith with the Palestinians, and Israel has rejected many peace offers from the surrounding Arab states. For example, in the lead-up to the Annapolis meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert talked about serious negotiations, but his personal actions and his government's actions worked to stifle negotiations. While Olmert talks peace, the occupation intensifies as the separation wall continues to close in, settlements continue to expand and the military confiscates land from Palestinian villages to build a Jerusalem-to-Jericho road to route Palestinians around the future E-1 area.

What drivers will convince Israeli leaders to seriously negotiate with the Palestinians? The major driver will parallel, but not be identical to, the fear of the apartheid regime becoming untenable in the face of violent protests or work stoppages. There are not enough armed Palestinians to existentially threaten Israel, and the Palestinians are not integral to the Israeli economy. The obvious weakness in Israel's continuation of its policies is that these are contingent upon "automatic" diplomatic, military and financial support from the United States. If the U.S. withheld a portion of that support, Israeli leaders would quickly be forced to re-evaluate their policies. I cannot predict what specific policy changes the leaders would make, but I can predict that they would stop perpetuating the policies of the past 40 years that have not provided the Israeli people with either peace or security.

I don't know when the U.S. will change its Israel-Palestine policy, but it surely will when it becomes a geopolitical necessity. The Israel lobby will not roll over and relinquish its influence; rather, it will eventually be overwhelmed by circumstances.

The Israeli people will support their government when it finally starts to negotiate seriously. Polls show that about two-thirds of Jewish Israelis are in favor of negotiations with the Palestinians and a land-for-peace deal that allows a Palestinian state to emerge. There is a persistent peace camp in Israel — e.g., Peace Now and Gush Shalom — that will be cheerleaders for serious

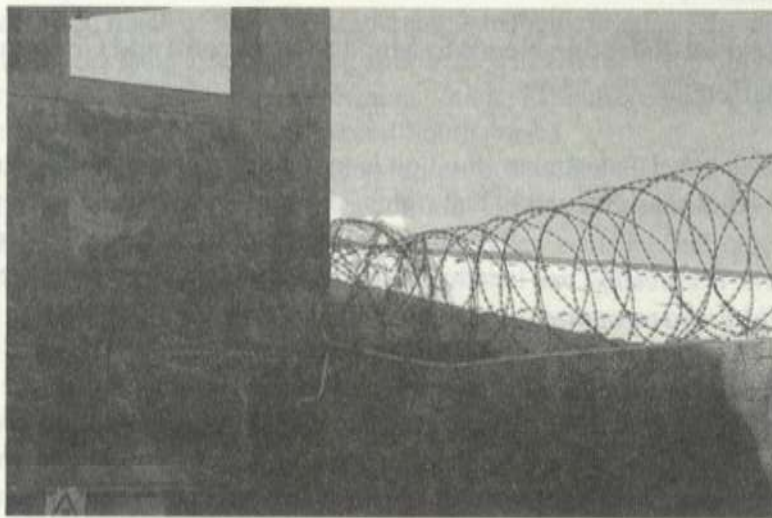
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negotiations, and the majority of the people will approve. An actual move by the Israeli government toward real negotiations will strengthen and encourage the peace camp, as they gain active support from the majority of Israelis who want peace but have been discouraged by years of a stagnant peace process.

Another factor that could increase support within Israel for real negotiations is a cultural boycott, e.g., the Israeli Philharmonic not being allowed to play in major world capitals, and Israeli academics cut off from international conferences and collaborations. I believe that a cultural boycott would be as disturbing to Israelis and the sports boycott was to white South Africans.

How Did Mandela Manage a Peaceful and Constructive Transition?

Nelson Mandela was an anti-apartheid leader from the early 1940s when he and Oliver Tambo were partners in a law practice. During his 27 years in prison, Mandela became the most widely known figure in the struggle against apartheid, a cultural icon as a proponent of freedom and equality, while the apartheid government and nations sympathetic to it condemned him and the ANC as communists and terrorists. He developed a theory of reconciliation and negotiation while still in prison, and developed that theory into policy when he was released. Mandela won a national election to succeed de Klerk as president in 1994.



Nelson Mandela was held for 18 years in Robben Island Prison in Table Bay, South Africa. (Photo: Steffan DeClue)

Mandela's policies of reconciliation and negotiation, developed in conjunction with Bishop Desmond Tutu, were critical for a peaceful and constructive transition from apartheid to a multiracial democracy in South Africa. He believed that the Afrikaners had a right to be in South Africa, and never threatened to drive whites from the country. Mandela recognized the Afrikaner "story" — he recognized their humanity. He understood the difficulty of the *voortrekker* great treks in the mid-19th century and their victories and losses in battles with the Zulu; he commiserated with Afrikaner suffering in concentration camps during the Boer Wars at the end of the 19th century. Most important was Mandela's appreciation of the economic accomplishments of the Afrikaners — he recognized that they were necessary for the South African economy to grow and raise the living standards of blacks.

Mandela's acceptance of whites as South African citizens facilitated a peaceful transition and guaranteed that "white flight" was minimized.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission followed from Mandela and Tutu's idea of reconciliation. It was a way to bring some justice to blacks harmed during apartheid and whites harmed by violent anti-apartheid protests, without destroying South African society. It is important to remember that both whites and blacks confessed to apartheid crimes; Whites confessed to police brutality and collective punishment while working with police or the army, and blacks confessed to terrorist acts against civilians while working with militant groups. Punishment was limited to the worst offenders.

What Israel-Palestine Needs to Manage a Peaceful and Constructive Transition

The Israel-Palestinian situation is in dire need of mutual recognition of the other side's humanity and rights, and some process to allow injured

people to get a sense of justice. Leaders are needed on both sides who recognize that the other has rights within mandate Palestine.

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PLO leaders accept Israel's right to exist, as formally expressed by changes in the PLO charter in the late 1980s and explicitly stated by Yasser Arafat in the early 1990s. It was this acceptance of Israel's existence by the PLO that led to the Oslo agreements. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, renewed in 2007, goes further and offers Israel recognition from all 22 Arab nations. But this recognition is

asymmetrical, because as yet there is no formal acknowledgement by Israel of the Palestinian's right to a viable state in mandate Palestine. It is true that Prime Ministers Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon and Olmert have talked about a Palestinian state, but there are two problems. First, a Palestinian state that they would apparently allow to emerge would not be economically viable, for it would lack East Jerusalem, its borders would not be under its control, and it would be divided into disconnected segments that Sharon called Bantustans. Second, as noted above, while Israeli leaders talk about negotiations, they maintain the occupation and continually act to weaken Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), their nominal peace partner.

At the same time, some Palestinians, led by Hamas, do not recognize Israel's rights in mandate Palestine. Good leadership, real progress toward a Palestinian state and the accompanying economic growth can overcome this problem.

More troubling than lack of state acceptance is that in both camps, many people, including the leadership, do not accept the other's humanity. It is indeed puzzling why Israeli leaders refuse to recognize the humanity of Palestinians. Don't they understand that European Anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust, flowed from the Christians' refusal to recognize the humanity of Jews?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was founded on Mandela and Tutu's determination for the nation to move beyond hatred — to forgive. This was part of the recognition of the Afrikaners' humanity. It relied on Mandela and much of the ANC leadership's recognizing that Afrikaners as well as blacks had suffered during apartheid. The Commission did not bog itself down in attempting to determine which side suffered more. Its goal was to pave the way for a multiracial South Africa.

The key is enlightened leadership on both sides that will recognize the humanity and rights of the other. South Africa was lucky that de Klerk gained power while Mandela was active. When such leaders emerge in Israel and Palestine, they should be encouraged and supported.

