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Israeli infiltration in South Africa

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Introduction

The year 1948 witnessed both the establishment of the state of Israel and the establishment of the 'Republic of South Africa', ruled from then until 1994 by the Nationalist Party, using the ideology of Apartheid. In 1953, South Africa's Prime Minister, Danie Malan, became the first head of government in the world to pay an official visit to Israel. This fact underlines the relationship that was later to develop between the South African Apartheid state and Israel, a relationship that would endure into South Africa's post-Apartheid era – albeit in different forms.

The relationship between South Africa and Israel developed because it was mutually beneficial to both. As negotiations took place in South Africa between the liberation movements and the Apartheid state, there was expectation from many quarters that the relationship would be severed with the ushering in of a democratic government in South Africa, controlled by liberation organisations which had close relationships with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Instead, while some areas of that relationship were downgraded, others were strengthened.

Early Israel-Apartheid South Africa relations

It seems surprising that the South African Nationalist Party had, over the period of a few years developed such close ties with Israel when its luminaries had, prior to 1948, been extremely Judeophobic and had supported Nazi Germany during the Second World War and offered to lead a coup in South Africa against the British on behalf of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, in 1976, one of those luminaries, John Vorster, then Prime Minister of South Africa, visited Israel with full diplomatic honours. Indeed, soon after its accession to power, the Nationalist Party had decided that South Africa and Israel had important commonalities and that close relations would be of mutual benefit. It was Israel which initially had maintained cool relations.

The close relationship did not exist immediately after the establishment of Israel. Indeed, for the better part of the 1950s and the 1960s, Israel shunned full relations with South Africa. Initially, relations were cordial, and it was in this period that South African Prime Minister Malan visited Israel. But Israel did not want to upgrade its relationship with South Africa. However, it received a shock when its invitation to a 1955 meeting of African and Asian states in Indonesia was withdrawn and, subsequently, when it was excluded from the second Internationalist Socialist Conference in India. Soon after, Israel began courting African nations in order to shore up its relations in the Third World. It could not do this, however, if it pursued relations with Apartheid South Africa, which African governments regarded as an enemy. Through the 1960s, then, Israel maintained a critical position towards South Africa. It offered African countries technical assistance, intelligence and police training and military aid. Many African countries also welcomed Israeli agricultural assistance. Their former liberation armies also required professionalism, which Israel readily provided. By 1966, paramilitary groups in 17 African countries were being trained by Israelis. Israeli had also started voting against South Africa at the United Nations from 1955.

Beginning of Israeli penetration into South Africa

Soon after Israel's 1967 war, however, relations began warming, and received a huge boost after the 1973 war, when African countries began severing relations with Israel. Israel's victory in the Six Day War excited the military establishment in South Africa, and defence representatives travelled to Israel to learn about Israel's successful military strategy. From 1968, defence cooperation between the two countries began, tentatively at first, but was soon pursued in earnest. Stronger relations emerged first between the defence establishments of the two countries, with Shimon Peres, controlling the Israeli Defence establishment, forging his own foreign policy within the defence ministry. South Africa also assisted Israel by importing Mirage fighter jets from France and reselling them to Israel after France refused to supply Israel with weapons.

In 1969, Israel appointed Itzhak Unna as its Consul-General in Pretoria. Tensions between policy-makers in Israel prevented the relationship from strengthening faster, and it was in 1972 that South Africa opened its official mission in Tel Aviv and appointed a Consul-General. By the end of 1972, the relationship between Israel and South Africa began to become more public. That year, the Israeli Foreign Office issued a directive that its representatives at the UN should not support sanctions against South Africa, and should reduce its rhetoric against the Apartheid state.

The Yom Kippur War in 1973 helped cement the relationship. At the outbreak of the war, South African Defence Minister P.W. Botha expressed solidarity with Israel in what he called "its struggle against forces supported by communistic militarism". He promised that South Africa would "find ways and means to prove our goodwill towards Israel." Soon thereafter, South Africa provided spare parts to Israel for its damaged Mirage aircraft. Scores of South African Jews also fought with the IDF, many dying in battle.

When Israel crossed the Suez Canal, it dealt the death knell to relations between the Zionist state and most African states. In March 1974, Israel established a mission in South Africa at ambassadorial level. Although South Africa did not immediately reciprocate, intelligence and propaganda relations between the two states had blossomed, and the rest of the world saw a strong alliance forming.

Military Cooperation

Most significantly, military cooperation between Israel and South Africa increased dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. Cabinet level meetings between the defence and intelligence counterparts of the two states were held at least annually, and intelligence was regularly shared. South African generals visited Israel's front-line in Lebanon, and Israeli generals similarly visited South Africa's front-lines in Namibia and Angola. When the UN imposed arms' sanctions against South Africa, Israel came to the rescue, supplying the Apartheid state with or cooperating with it in the production of arms ranging from aircraft to rifles. By 1983, export of arms to South Africa constituted 10 percent of Israel's total exports.

By the beginning of 1975, the intelligence relationship had also been formalised and South Africa assisted Israel with various intelligence gathering operations. It was also in 1975 that Israel offered nuclear-capable Jericho missiles to South Africa. In April of that year, the two countries' defence ministers – Shimon Peres and P.W. Botha – signed a comprehensive defence agreement.

By 1979, South Africa had become the largest purchaser of Israeli arms, accounting for 35 percent of Israel's military exports. In 1984, South Africa had requested, and was given, training by the IDF on anti-terrorism techniques. This followed a visit by a senior SADF official to the Occupied Palestinian Territory – as a guest of the IDF – to witness Israel's anti-riot equipment and methodologies.

In that year, South Africans and Israelis also collaborated on the building of the Cheetah fighter jet. While these contacts between the two countries saw South Africa gain the most in terms of capacity and technological know-how, the Israelis benefited economically. It must be remembered, however, that military relations between Israel and South Africa were not simply about economic gain or technological progress; it was also based on a common understanding that their predicament as pariah states was similar, and that they faced enemies which were part of what they regarded as the same global terrorist formation (a contention which was borne out by the close relationships between the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress on the one hand, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation on the other). In short, they shared a common struggle for survival.

At a joint intelligence conference in 1986, the focus on military cooperation included a new dimension: the development of chemical and biological weaponry.

The Nuclear Partnership

On the 22 September 1979, the American surveillance satellite, VELA 6911, detected a double flash over the South Atlantic Ocean, close to Cape Town, South Africa. It is widely believed that this was a joint nuclear weapons' test conducted by South Africa and Israel. The nuclear partnership between the two countries was mutually beneficial: Israel was able to lay its hands on large amounts of South African uranium (by the late 1970s, Israel had already stockpiled about 600 tons of South African yellowcake), and South Africa was able to access Israel nuclear technology.

By the mid-1980s, Israel and South Africa were cooperating on the construction of medium-range ballistic missile based on Israel's Jericho-2, which South Africa's arms manufacturer, Armscor, believed would be an appropriate delivery mechanism for nuclear warheads. Israeli assistance to South Africa's nuclear programme ensured that the latter became a nuclear power by 1980, despite global – including U.S. – opposition. Both countries operated outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The nuclear partnership had its roots in the 1968 visit to South Africa by Dr. Ernst David Bergmann, regarded as the father of the Israeli atom bomb. He encouraged cooperation between nuclear scientists in the two countries. But it was only after a military cooperation agreement was signed in 1975 that there was a movement of scientists between them. Relations existed at the highest levels. Among the institutions involved were the Israeli Office for Scientific Liaison, Israeli Defence Research Institute, Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Soreq Nuclear Research Centre, the South African Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research and the South African Atomic Energy Board.

Trade

Trade has been an important part of the Israel-South Africa relationship. Even during the 1980s, when sanctions against South Africa began to become effective, Israel played an important role in sanctions-busting. For example, by the mid-1980s, half of the diamonds imported into Israel originated from South African company De Beers. The total value of rough diamond imports into Israel from South Africa rose from \$400 million per annum in

1974 to over \$3.2 billion per annum in 1994. Further, during the height of sanctions in the 1980s, almost all South Africa's polished diamond exports reached the world via Israel. Adding the diamond and arms trades, Israel imported more than \$700 million per annum (on average) from South Africa between 1975 and 1994, and exported about \$600 million per annum to South Africa in the same period.

Military, intelligence, nuclear, trade and propaganda links between Israel and South Africa continued until close to the end of Apartheid in South Africa. By the late 1980s, however, Israel was facing pressure from the U.S. (which, nevertheless, had no clue of the extent of cooperation between the two countries) to cut ties with South Africa. Eventually, in September 1987, the Israeli cabinet decided to reduce contact with South Africa, not to sign further defence contracts, and a range of other low-level sanctions. Apart from U.S. pressure, however, it is also possible that Israel had read the writing on the wall and foresaw the end of Apartheid. Secret low-level negotiations between South African intelligence agents and ANC leaders had begun in 1987. Israeli intelligence agents might have had knowledge of this, and had begun planning a new strategy for a post-apartheid government. Despite the cabinet decision, and despite the fact that Israel had started courting South African Black resistance leaders and inviting them to Israel for workshops and training programme by the mid-1980s, there was no dramatic change in relations between the two countries.

Continued Israeli penetration in post-Apartheid South Africa

As indicated above, by the mid-1980s Israel used various guises to start courting Black resistance groups in South Africa – even meeting with people such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. After liberation movements were unbanned and political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela were released in 1990, the Israeli charm offensive towards these movements took on a new urgency. Predicting a political victory for the ANC, Israel set about courting the organisation and individuals within it.

The result is a situation where, 15 years after South Africa's first democratic election, Israel and South Africa have excellent diplomatic and trade relations – even if the military and nuclear relations do not exist as they did during the apartheid era. Although the ANC government professes support for the struggle of the Palestinian people, and despite the close relations between the ANC and the PLO in the past, relations between the two countries have grown strongly over the past 15 years.

From 1999, when Thabo Mbeki became president of South Africa, he pursued a policy which, he believed, would facilitate South Africa's playing a mediating role between Israelis and Palestinians by sharing the experience of the South African transition. This was a doomed policy, mainly because the Israelis had no interest in having an African mediator when it had the superpower on its side. Nevertheless, the Israelis and the Zionist lobby in South Africa, having correctly read Mbeki's objectives, continued repeating that South Africa will not be able to play a mediating role if it criticised Israel.

In attempting to meet this objective, Mbeki took a number of measures. He began the so-called Spier Initiative – named after the wine farm where the meetings took place – in 2002. This initiative brought together members of the Palestinian Authority, such as Yasser Abed Rabo, and former Israeli politicians such as Yossi Beilin. As a result, a flurry of diplomatic activity between Israel and South Africa took place until 2005. The initiative achieved nothing – mainly because the Israeli participants were unable to deliver on anything

discussed, and because the Israelis regarded it as a good delaying and placating tactic while they pursued their primary objective – increasing their economic benefit through South Africa. For as long as Israelis pretended that they were willing to allow some South African intervention in the Palestinian-Israeli issue, they could soften South Africa's criticism of Israel and could continue strengthening trade ties. The Spier initiative collapsed in the wake of the Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006.

As part of this sharing-of-experiences initiative, Mbeki also hosted a senior Likud delegation – the first time a delegation of this nature had visited South Africa. In October 2004, his government also hosted Ehud Olmert – then Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade, Industry and Communications – and a large Israeli trade delegation, amidst national protests. Olmert and South African Minister of Trade and Industry, Mandisi Maphlwa, also signed the Agreement on Protection and Promotion of Investments during this visit. As a result of protests and lobbying by civil society groups leading up to the visit, even the South African Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) was willing to consider cancelling Olmert's trip. They were overruled, however, by the President, who saw the visit as a way of entrenching his bona fides with the Israelis. The following month, the new Israeli Minister of Trade, David Ratzon, also visited South Africa. A number of other delegations from both sides crossed over the African continent in an attempt to strengthen ties.

In 1994, South Africa's exports to Israel were worth just over ZAR 1 billion, and imports from Israel amounted to about ZAR 620 million. By 2008, those figures had risen to ZAR 6,8 billion and ZAR 3.5 billion respectively.

In 2004, Mbeki appointed Major-General Fumanekile Gqiba ambassador to Tel Aviv. For almost five years, Gqiba worked tirelessly to strengthen trade relationships between the two countries. On at least four occasions, he also attempted to take South African defence delegations to Israel. After 1994, South Africa had continued fulfilling defence contracts she had with Israel, supplying the latter with weapons components until 1998, whereafter the contracts were not renewed. Gqiba hoped to revive that previous relationship. His attempts in this regard were largely prevented by the DFA, which insisted that he was acting contrary to South Africa's foreign policy. Mbeki, however, kept Gqiba in his position because the former military chaplain (and, some solidarity activists insist, Christian Zionist) was well-liked by the Israelis. In 2005, one of those delegations did go to Israel and visited Israeli defence industries.

Israel and the pro-Israeli lobby in South Africa have always been effective in lobbying South African politicians. One method of doing so – which had started in the early 1990s, before South Africa's first democratic elections – was to identify influential politicians and influential members of political youth groups, and take them for visits and 'leadership training' programmes to Israel. Beneficiaries of these programmes included youth leaders from the ANC and the Black Consciousness Movement. Similar programmes are also targeted at Church groups. Another method is personal lobbying of politicians. An example is the lobbying by Zionist groups in South Africa of the ANC's Treasurer-General Matthews Phosa, who is a regular guest at Zionist and Jewish functions, and who promised – at one such function – that the ANC would ensure that trade with Israel would increase, and that South Africa would serve as Israel's gateway to the rest of Africa.

There are a number of South African companies that have strong trade relations with Israel. A number of these – some owned by South African Zionists – supply products that are used in activities which South Africa considers illegal. One example is Cape Gate, which built the

Israeli fence around Gaza, and supplies wire mesh for the building of settlements and Israel's Apartheid Wall. Israeli companies have penetrated quite deeply into the South African economy, supplying the South African population, and the public and private sectors, with products ranging from settlement fresh produce to hi-tech security equipment. Even certain parastatals have become clients of such Israel companies. For example, the Israeli firm Orsus supplies Transnet – the parastatal that owns South Africa's port and rail infrastructure – with security solutions, and Israeli company NICE – a large Israeli firm also engaged in wire-tapping and surveillance systems for both private and government clients – provides Transnet with IP video surveillance equipment.

Security in South Africa is a huge growth market for Israel in South Africa – at the level of households, corporates and state-owned enterprises. Another method of Israeli penetration into the security sector in South Africa is the development of private security companies who receive equipment and training from Israel. Currently, these companies serve mainly Jewish neighbourhoods. However, such private security companies are increasingly taking over policing operations. This can have negative long term consequences for South Africa's security and sovereignty.

Conclusion

Despite initial coolness between Israel and Apartheid South Africa, relations between the two countries warmed up by the end of the 1960s, and developed at various levels – especially military, intelligence, trade, and nuclear. Both countries found that they were, in some respects, pariahs in the international community. South Africa was increasingly becoming isolated, and Israel had battled unsuccessfully to develop good relations with Third World countries. The relationship of common interest became an extremely close one, with mutual benefit. When, however, Israel saw the signs of an impending new dispensation in South Africa, it began courting what it believed would be the new political leadership, ensuring for itself a friend – even if it is a friend that supported Palestinian. Israel thus began aggressively cultivating relationships with the African National Congress, which became the ruling party in 1994. Consequently, Israel has succeeded in strengthening economic ties with South Africa, to the extent that, on average, trade between the two countries increases by 15 percent year-on-year in both directions. Israel has also cultivated strong friends in the ruling party, and continues to cultivate friends in civil society – especially through some of its agricultural and other projects. The pro-Israel lobby in South Africa – the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and the South African Zionist Federation in particular – play an effective role in this regard.

There is no indication yet what the Middle East policy of the new South African president, Jacob Zuma, will be. He has, thus far, focussed more on domestic issues than international ones. It seems unlikely that Zuma has any illusions about being a mediator. But it also seems unlikely that his government will, in any way, curb Israel's penetration into the South African economy and society. While Mbeki's administration regarded the Palestine-Israeli question as one of its high priority areas in terms of foreign relations, Zuma's might not. An indication of this is the paucity of statements from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (formerly DFA) regarding Israel. The former DFA issued, on average, a statement on Palestine-Israel at least once every fortnight. If the priority of Palestine-Israel is downgraded, and Israel is treated like any other country, there will be much less monitoring of Israeli activities in South Africa, and this could open the door for a quiet but more successful Israeli penetration into South Africa.