

ISRAEL/PALESTINE: LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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To draw up a parallel between two serious and recurring international crises is a hazardous bet. The situations are never the same, neither are the periods in which they take place. Nevertheless, even if history doesn't always repeat itself, nothing prevents us from learning some lessons from it. That is why I am taking the risk of seeing my statements criticized in turn by both parties involved in this conflict: Arabs and Jews. But we all are here, from what I can understand, to try to build bridges between the communities and to lay tracks that are likely to lead to peace.

Having followed the South-African question since the Seventies, until its outcome crowned by the multiracial elections of April 1994, I could perceive a certain number of similarities to the situation which has prevailed since 1948 in Israel/Palestine, although of course the situations are not perfectly transposable for obvious reasons.

If you allow me, I will first address these converging and diverging points; then in the second part of my analysis I will show how the crisis was untangled in South Africa and which lessons we can draw from it, in order to finally try to reconcile both parties in Israel/Palestine.

I - SOUTH AFRICA - ISRAEL/PALESTINE COMMON POINTS AND POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

What are the characteristics common to both situations? We are faced with two dominant regional powers in their particular geographical area, in terms of their economy as well as their scientific and military superiority. These powers, whose principal base is race for one and religion for the other are confronted with a generally hostile environment and a slower demographic growth than that of their neighbors. In addition, these two dominant States are helped to various degrees and more or less officially by the Occident, and the United States of America in particular. Facing these two regional heavy weights, the entities crushed by a dominating State, are often divided and are **practitioners of « la politique du pire », referring to the desperate battle which some call terrorism.**

Spiritually and philosophically, South Africa as well as Israel have had a Messianic vision of the world. They have regarded themselves as God's elect to whom He granted a mission and ordered them not to mix with the other groups. This belief gave rise to apartheid in South Africa and to the obsession to rid Israel of its Arab citizens, either through expulsion, as at the time of the first Israeli-Arab war, or by building a wall between the two communities.

From a demographic point of view, White South Africa and Israel are, or were confronted with one danger: the 4.5 million South-African Whites were an ultra minority, in their own country as well as in a completely black and often hostile sub-Saharan Africa. If the number of Jews in the current State of Israel is more favorable in contrast, it is important to point out that the rate of increase in its population is of 2.6 children per woman, while it is 4 for the Arabs; added to the fact that the Jews are an ultra minority in an area numerically dominated by Arabs. To mitigate this disadvantage, South Africa tried the option of the partition of the country between a Eurostan dominated by the Whites (87% of the territory) and 9 black Bantustans which were nominally independent. We all

know what a failure this policy was, and one can wonder whether the same type of experiment applied by the Jews in Palestine is not likewise condemned, just as were the partitions and the secession tried out in Pakistan; the corridor of Dantzig; Biafra or Katanga.

These two regional powers could maintain their supremacy only by the strength of their economic, scientific and military powers which give them a disproportionate advantage over their adversaries. These two countries were (for the RSA) and are (for Israel), nuclear powers, having Western-type armies, facing adversaries equipped only with hand-held weapons and bordering countries with eclectic armies, even when they own, as is the case in certain Arab countries, expensive and sophisticated equipment.

This qualitative superiority, (although not quantitative), could never have come into existence without some crucial external support. South Africa, for example, although theoretically under embargo, (be it on oil, technology, commerce or the financial markets), found, thanks to its strategic position (the famous Cape sea route), that Western States, primarily, were willing to transfer the needed know-how; be it France, for nuclear power stations; Great Britain, Italy or Germany for military equipment; not to mention the United States of course, which was quite happy to have this rampart against Communism at the height of the Cold War. As for Israel, we don't need to enter into detail about the continuous material, moral and diplomatic aid given by the USA, especially at the UN level, except perhaps in 1956, when America gave an ultimatum to France, Great Britain and Israel to withdraw from the Suez Canal.

The similarities that we have just mentioned should not however lead us to think that the South-African and Israeli-Palestinian situations are entirely comparable. The essential difference between the two crises lies simultaneously in the difference in International perception of the white South-Africans and the Jews of Israel on one hand, and in the time period on the other. Let me explain:

Whereas the apartheid regime was unanimously condemned by the International community, including by its Western allies, the Israeli government is not regarded in the same way even though some of its laws are not so different from those of White South Africa. One can suggest two explanations for this distortion. First of all the Jews were the victims, sixty years ago, of the abuses which we are all familiar with, which seems to put them beyond any criticism in regard to the treatment of minorities. The United States has given its unconditional support to Israel, whereas white South Africa never received a comparable support. In addition, the Jewish diaspora, particularly in the USA, made it possible for the Hebrew State to establish bases in numerous countries. There was a joke that circulated in the South-African white government circles which went something like: "If we had a lobby in Washington as powerful as that of Israel, we would remain in power for a very long time".

Obviously, the commonalities between the two crises are more important than the points of divergence. We ought now to analyze to what extent the factors which made it possible to resolve the crisis in South Africa are relevant in finding a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian question.

II CONDITIONS NECESSARY TO COME OUT OF THE CRISIS

Whatever the crisis, a certain number of conditions must necessarily be combined: The first has to do with the time period. The fall of the Berlin Wall at the very moment when South Africa ended its mandate of South-West Africa (Namibia) announced a new era. The end of the bipolarity and the hope of a multipolar World had lifted the threat of an East/West conflict and rendered futile any argument relating to the Cape sea route and the strategic supply of raw materials. It was this climate of appeasement, which made the maintenance of the white regime

unnecessary, that forced them to take the black majority into account. As for Israel, it was not affected by the consequences of this time period and thought that it could maintain its supremacy in spite of the upheavals which we have just mentioned. Moreover, the Iraq war carried out by the “coalition” and the attacks of September 11 only reinforced the importance of Israel as an ally for the USA, which sees its existence as a barrier against militant Islam and in fact not necessarily as a justification for all extremism. Consequently, Israel is not yet ripe for any search for peace, or only on its own terms. This is unacceptable to the Palestinians, as well as to the remainder of the International community, except the United States.

The second condition is related to the domestic situation:

In South Africa, although the conflict did not have the same intensity as in the Middle East, the Whites and the non-Whites for the most part wished to live in peace. This aspiration resulted in the marginalisation of the extremes, CAP and AZAPO on one side, the Conservative Party and the Freedom Front on the other. In Israel/Palestine, on the other hand, it is the extremists who make progress. Moreover, in South Africa, the role of the Churches was of primary importance in channelling and neutralizing the fears. They served as referee and a guarantee to both parties which had been in opposition to one another for decades. In Israel/Palestine, the confrontation between Judaism and Islam, exacerbated by the ultra-orthodox elements on both sides, only exacerbates the conflict.

Lastly, even when the conditions are met for a constructive dialogue to begin, it is imperative that this hope of peace be carried out by providential men: in South Africa, it was Frederik De Klerk and Nelson Mandela, in Israel, that could have been Rabin and Arafat; but there is a saying that states that: “History does not present the same dish twice”. In simple terms, that means that it will probably take a long time before two leaders of the same caliber as those who we have just mentioned can hope for a “window of opportunity” to present itself. Unfortunately, in the current state of affairs, the situation seems hopelessly blocked.

The third and last condition is related to the international environment: South Africa had been fortunate to make its first steps in terms of crisis resolution at the time of the negotiations on Namibia. During the final years which preceded independence, the historical enemies learned to speak to each other and to trust each other. As for the United Nations, they accompanied the peace process, and switched from total opposition to the apartheid regime, to a more positive attitude of collaboration in order to support negotiations until the end. In Israel/Palestine, since 1948 the gap between the warring factions has been forever widening, and the little mutual trust that existed then, has completely disappeared today.

In the resolution of the South-African deadlock, the process was the same as that of Namibia: The UN passed from an attitude of exclusion from the international community to that of functioning as an “honest broker” in the transition. As for the United States, finally free from the Soviet threat, they did not have any problem accepting the idea that they must give up their support for the white regime, especially since it alleviated at the same time some domestic pressures, by appeasing the African-American minority. The most beautiful gift that the United States could make today towards World Peace and to the combatants, would be to cease its unconditional support of Israel in order to bring it to the negotiation table, thus reducing the feeling of invincibility given by American protection. The more the Israelis and the Americans delay this moment of truth, the heavier will be the price to be paid by their protégé, namely the State of Israel.

It would, however, be false to think that only the cessation of this massive American aid would be sufficient. Other countries also keep the fires of conflict burning by giving their moral, diplomatic and logistical support to the opposing party: the Palestinians. Only an effective line of truce established by the International community could put an end to it; however the small U.N.

contingent deployed at the Israeli-Lebanese border is not by any means dissuasive to the foreign supporters.

One can note that while the conditions for a resolution of the crisis were met in South Africa they are far from being met in Israel/Palestine in the current circumstances.

Only a drastic change in the mentalities of the Israelis and the Palestinians could give a glimmer of hope. The Jews must give up their dream of hegemony and the Palestinians that of booting them into the sea. The future does not lie in two completely separate entities, but on the contrary, in the construction of a common State, on a Federal or Confederal basis, and neutral on the International level. I know very well that this suggestion may sound today like a Utopian dream, but who, in 1989, would have bet on a peaceful resolution of the South African question?