

by Ronnie Kasrils
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"The early Dutch pioneers, the Afrikaners, had used Bible and gun as colonisers elsewhere, to carve out their exclusive fortress bastion in South Africa's hinterland. Like the biblical Israelites they claimed to be "God's chosen people" with a mission to tame and civilise the wilderness; disregarding the productivity and industriousness of people who had tilled the soil and traded for centuries - claiming it was only they who would make the land flow with milk and honey. They invoked a covenant with God to deliver their enemies into their hands and to bless their deeds."

May I start by quoting a South African who emphatically stated as far back as 1961 that "The Jews took Israel from the Arabs after the Arabs had lived there for a thousand years. Israel like South Africa, is an apartheid state" (*Rand Daily Mail*, 23 November 1961). Those were not the words of Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Tutu or Ruth First, but were uttered by none other than the architect of apartheid itself, racist Prime Minister, Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd.

He was irked by the criticism of apartheid policy and Harold Macmillan's "Winds of Change" speech and the growing international outcry following the Sharpeville massacre, in contrast to the West's unconditional support for Zionist Israel.

To be sure Verwoerd was correct. Both apartheid South Africa and Zionist Israel were colonial, settler states created on the basis of the harsh dispossession of the land and birthright of the indigenous people. This is unblushingly documented in Israel's case from the time of Herzl through Jabotinsky, Ben Gurion, Menachem Begin, Moshe Dayan to Sharon et al. Both states preached and implemented a policy based on racial ethnicity; the sole claim of Jews in Israel and whites in South Africa to exclusive citizenship; monopolised rights in law regarding the ownership of land, property, business; superior access to education, health, social, sporting and cultural amenities, pensions and municipal services at the expense of the original indigenous population; the virtual monopoly

membership of military and security forces, and privileged development along their own racial supremacist lines - even both countries marriage laws are designed to safeguard racial "purity". The fact that the Palestinian minority within Israel is allowed to vote hardly redresses the injustice in all other matters of basic human rights. In any case those Palestinians allowed to stand for election to the Knesset do so on condition that they dare not question Israel's existence as a Jewish state.

The so-called "non-whites" in apartheid South Africa, indigenous Africans, others of mixed race or of Asiatic origin - like second or third class non-Jews in Israel itself let alone the military occupied areas - were consigned to a non-citizenship status of Kafkaesque existence, subject to all manner of discrimination and prejudice, such as the laws prohibiting their free movement, access to work and trade, dictating where they could reside and so forth.

Verwoerd would have been well aware of Israel's dispossession of indigenous Palestinian in 1948 - the year his apartheid party similarly came to power - of the unfolding destruction of their villages, the premeditated massacres and the systematic ethnic cleansing.

Within a few short years of coming to power in 1948 South Africa's apartheid regime was ruthlessly cleansing cities and towns of so-called "black spots" - where the "non-whites" lived, socialised, studied and traded - bulldozing homes, loading families

onto military trucks, and forcibly relocating them to distant settlements. Unlike the “native reserves” - soon to be reconstituted as Bantustans – these were not too far away from industrial areas because the economy thrived on a quota of cheap black labour.

Whilst Verwoerd did not live to see the division of Palestinian territory after the 1967 Six Day War, and the subsequent creation of miniscule Bantustans in the West Bank and Gaza, he would have greatly admired and approved of the machinations that enclosed the Palestinians in their own ghettoised prisons. This after all was the Verwoerdian grand plan, and the reason why Jimmy Carter could so readily identify the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) as being akin to apartheid. In fact the Bantustans consisted of 13% of apartheid South Africa, uncannily comparable to the derisory, ever shrinking pieces of ground Israel consigns to the Palestinians – where it is estimated that well over one-third of the OPT comprises the illegal settlement blocks and security grid system with their bizarre Jewish-only roads. The effect of this is that the 22% of pre-1967 West Bank territory is effectively a mere 12% of historic pre-1948 Palestine.

When former deputy foreign minister Aziz Pahad and I visited Yasser Arafat in his demolished headquarters in Ramallah as part of a South African delegation in 2004, he pointed around him and said “See this is nothing but a Bantustan!” No, we responded, pointing out that no Bantustan, in fact not even our townships, had been bombed by warplanes, pulverised by tanks. To a wide-eyed Arafat we pointed out that Pretoria pumped in funds, constructed impressive administration buildings, even allowed for Bantustan airlines to service the Mickey Mouse capitals in order to impress the world that they were serious about so-called “separate development.” The Bantustans were not even fenced-in.

What Verwoerd admired too was the impunity with which Israel exercised state violence and terror to get its way, without hindrance from its Western allies, increasingly key amongst them the USA.

What Verwoerd and his ilk came to admire in Israel, and seek to emulate in the southern African region, was the way the Western powers permitted an imperialist Israel to use its unbridled military with impunity in expanding its territory and holding back the rising tide of Arab nationalism in its neighbourhood.

After the Six Day War, Verwoerd’s successor John Vorster, infamously stated: “The Israelis have beaten the Arabs before lunchtime. We will eat the African states for breakfast.” He added the latter warning in the face of the independent African states support for the armed liberation struggles growing in our region.

But it was not only the racial doctrine of Israel that excited apartheid’s leaders, it was the use of the biblical narrative as the ideological rationale to justify its vision, aims and methods.

The early Dutch pioneers, the Afrikaners, had used Bible and gun as colonisers elsewhere, to carve out their exclusive fortress bastion in South Africa’s hinterland. Like the biblical Israelites they claimed to be “God’s chosen people” with a mission to tame and civilise the wilderness; disregarding the productivity and industriousness of people who had tilled the soil and traded for centuries - claiming it was only they who would make the land flow with milk and honey. They invoked a covenant with God to deliver their enemies into their hands and to bless their deeds. Until the advent of South Africa’s democracy, the racial history books generally taught that the white man arrived in South Africa more or less as the so-called “Bantu tribes” from the north as they were wandering across the Limpopo River - and that they were pioneer settlers in a land devoid of people.

Such a colonial racist mentality which rationalised the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australasia, in Africa from Namibia to the Congo and elsewhere, most clearly has its echoes in Palestine. What is so shameless about this latter-day colonial sham is that Zionist Israel has been permitted by the West to aspire to such a goal even into the 21st Century.

It is by no means difficult to recognise from afar, as Verwoerd had been able to do, that Israel is indeed an apartheid state. Verwoerd's successor, Balthazar John Vorster visited Israel after the 1973 October War, when Egypt in a rare victory regained the Suez Canal and later in a peace agreement the Sinai from Israel. After that Israel and South Africa were virtually twinned as military allies for Pretoria helped supply Israel militarily in the immediacy of its 1973 setback and Israel came to support apartheid South Africa at the height of sanctions with weaponry and technology - from naval ships and the conversion of supersonic fighter planes to assistance in building six nuclear bombs and the creation of a thriving arms industry.

For the liberation movements of southern Africa, Israel and apartheid South Africa represented a racist, colonial axis. It was noted that people like Vorster had been nazi sympathisers, interned during World War II - yet feted as heroes in Israel and incidentally never again referred to by South African Zionists as an anti-semite!. This did not surprise those that came to understand the true racist nature and character of Zionist Israel.

It is instructive to add that in its conduct and methods of repression, Israel came to resemble more and more apartheid South Africa at its zenith - even surpassing its brutality, house demolitions, removal of communities, targeted assassinations, massacres, imprisonment and torture of its opponents and the aggression against neighbouring states.

Certainly we South Africans can identify the pathological cause, fuelling the hate, of Israel's political-military elite and public in general, giving rise to more and more extreme racist postures from its elected representatives – as evidenced by the outcome of its most recent national elections. Neither is it difficult for anyone acquainted with colonial history to understand the way in which deliberately cultivated race hate inculcates a justification for the most atrocious and inhumane actions against even defenceless civilians - women, children, the elderly amongst them as recently

witnessed in Gaza. It is from such unbridled racism that genocidal wars and holocausts are fuelled.

It can be claimed, without exaggeration, that any South African, whether involved in the freedom struggle, or motivated by basic human decency, who visits the Occupied Palestinian Territories are shocked to the core at the situation they encounter and agree with Archbishop Tutu's many observations, including his most recent, that such things happen in Israel, "including collective punishment", that never happened in apartheid South Africa. (London Guardian, 28 May, 2009).

I want to recall here the words of an Israeli Cabinet Minister, Aharon Cizling in 1948, after the savagery of the Deir Yassin massacre of 240 villagers became known. He said: "Now we too have behaved like Nazis and my whole being is shaken." (Tom Segev - "The First Israelis")

The veteran British MP, Gerald Kaufman, long time friend of Israel, was reported as remarking that a spokeswoman of the Israeli Defence Force, talked like a Nazi, when she coldly dismissed the deaths of defenceless civilians in Gaza - many women and children amongst them. We dare not allow what is chillingly obvious to be excluded like some elephant in the room from our discourse: the inexorable rise of fascists like Avigdor Lieberman to powerful positions in Israel; the threat of the expulsion of the 1948 Palestinians; the implementation of Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall." The Knesset has voted by a large majority a law threatening imprisonment for anyone denying that Israel is a Jewish and democratic state; a law prohibiting anyone from advocating a bi-national state is under discussion; so too a bill that seeks to imprison for three years anyone mourning the "nakba." None other than Tsipi Livni argues in tandem. These have been described as "a factory of racist laws with a distinct fascist odour", by Uri Avnery (Israeli writer and peace activist).

It needs to be frankly raised that if the crimes of the Holocaust are at the top end of the scale of human barbarity in modern times, where do we place the human cost of what has so recently occurred in

Gaza, the numerous bloodstained milestone since 1948 or the crimes in Lebanon in 1983 and 2006?

How do we evaluate the inhumanity of dropping bombs and blazing white phosphorous on civilian



White phosphorus bombs burning people alive

populations, burning people alive, roasting and gassing them in a Gaza ghetto under relentless siege with no place to run or hide. For 22 days relentless bombardment whole families vaporised before the horrified eyes of a surviving parent or child.

Guernica, Lidice, the Warsaw Ghetto, Deir Yassin, Mai Lei, Sabra and Shatilla, Sharpeville are high on that scale - and the perpetrators of the slaughter in Gaza are the off-spring of holocaust victims yet again, in Cizling's words, behaving like Nazis. This must not be allowed to go unpunished and the international community must demand they be tried for crimes of conflict and crimes against humanity. For the lesson is that if the perpetrators are not stopped in their tracks such crimes will get greater and spread not only to engulf the entire Middle East and Iran, but beyond. And of course with Israel a key ally in the USA's national interests, there will be no end to this bloody saga - with the Palestinians targeted to go the way of the extinct peoples of the former colonial era.

But such a fate must not be allowed to happen. Dare we believe that an America led by Barak Obama will make a difference? Some raise the hope that after 15 years the stalled Road Map might spring back to life and with it the chimera of a Two-State solution. One notes that President Obama only calls for a freeze in settlement construction – and precious little else. Can 12% or a few percent

more in horse- trading provide for a viable Palestinian state? One doubts it. We await with interest the results of this conference's deliberations. May I remind you of Edward Lear's "Alice in Wonderland", where a lost Alice asks a caterpillar seated on a toadstool the way. He asks her where does she want to go but the bewildered Alice does not know. "Well", answers the caterpillar, "If you do not know where you are going any road will do."

Are we naïve to believe that academics can help us find our bearings and point out the correct direction? I want to believe that those worth their salt can help. May your deliberations here be productive. Bear in mind the work of Justice Richard Goldstone's UN investigative team that has been met by Israel's point-blank refusal to co-operate into the Gaza bloodbath. Dozens of survivors have been interviewed in Gaza, one of whom watched Israeli soldiers shoot his elderly mother and sister dead as they fled their home waving white flags. "The committee was just like all the others who have come," said Majed Hajjaj. "There are lots of reports written, but there's nothing more than ink on paper." Those could be lines straight from Edward Lear.



I began this address by quoting Dr. Verwoerd. I conclude with this quote from Nelson Mandela who famously stated in 1997: "The UN took a strong stand against apartheid; and over the years an international consensus was built, which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system. But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians." (Pretoria, December 4, 1997). Just as a united, national movement of a determined people, reinforced by international solidarity actions embracing the peaceful weapons of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) – including many academic initiatives - won freedom for all South Africans, so too can this be the case in the Holy Land.