

June 29, 2010 Tuesday 17 Tammuz 5770 8:52 IST  Print

THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: Richard Millett

Radioactive thinking

By EMMANUEL
NAVON
28/06/2010

Sasha Polakow-Suransky's new book argues that there is an ideological similarity between Zionism and apartheid.

Sasha Polakow-Suransky's new book *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa* has a clear agenda: to argue that there is an ideological similarity between Zionism and apartheid, and that today's Israel is the heir of yesterday's South Africa. The book has been celebrated as a welcome eye-opener by Israeli journalists, scholars and politicians such as Akiva Eldar, Shlomo Ben-Ami, Yossi Beilin and Avi Shlaim.

In truth, however, the book contains no historical revelation (not even the alleged nuclear cooperation between Israel and South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s). Nor is there anything new about the attempt to make a case for the ideological similarity between Zionism and apartheid: Arab propagandists and European leftists have been playing that tune for over three decades.

The story goes like this: Starting in the mid- 1950s, Israel built diplomatic relations with the new African states, offering its know-how and help to those who had suffered from oppression just like the Jews. But then Israel became a colonial power itself in 1967, thus alienating its African friends. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel was broke and couldn't think of a better way of making ends meet than by selling weapons to South Africa. From alienated, African countries became furious and broke their ties with the Jewish state. Today, Israel is itself an apartheid state and the only desirable outcome is for the Jews to follow the example of their Afrikaner brothers by rescinding power to the autochthonous and oppressed majority.

THE TRUE story, of course, is very different. The fact that Israel extended its borders in June 1967 as a result of a defensive war was not a source of outrage in sub-Saharan Africa – on the contrary. Africans are still resentful of their former Arab enslavers. While they have no sympathy for the Arabs (including for the secluded Lebanese who control entire swaths of Africa's economies), African Christians are staunch admirers and supporters of Israel.

Africa is not exactly a continent where no territories are acquired by force (think of Muammar Gaddafi's attempts to conquer northern Chad). Africans were not "outraged" by Israel's 1967 victory. They rejoiced at the Arabs' humiliation, and could hardly preach the "unacceptability of the acquisition of territories by force" without looking silly.

So why did Israel and its African friends become estranged in the 1970s? Because of the Soviet Union's diplomatic indents, and because of Arab blackmail. Many African states became Marxist and pro-Soviet in the 1970s, and they toed the Soviet anti-Israel party line.

In addition, Libya and Saudi Arabia proactively lobbied the African continent, buying the goodwill of its leaders with petrodollars. By the end of the Yom Kippur War, all but four African countries (Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius and Swaziland) had severed diplomatic relations with Israel under heavy Arab pressure.

So it is not that African countries became mad at Israel because of its cooperation with South Africa. Rather, the Israel-South Africa relationship developed as a result of Israel's international isolation, which itself was an outcome of the African betrayal. Because the Arab world managed to isolate Israel internationally after the Yom Kippur War, it was compelled to develop diplomatic ties at almost any cost and to favor realpolitik over ethics. Even Haaretz argued in 1973 that Israel should normalize relations with South Africa in light of the betrayal of its former African allies.

Moreover, economic and military ties with South Africa after 1973 were not more significant, proportionally, than the economic and military ties between South Africa and countries such as the US, Britain or France. In the 1980s, both the Reagan and Thatcher administrations led a "constructive engagement" policy with the apartheid government, vetoing the imposition of UN sanctions. In the early 1980s, more than half of South Africa's military equipment was provided by France. The West did business with apartheid South Africa because it has abundant mineral resources (such as uranium) and because it was seen at the time as a stronghold of anti-communism. If anything, Israel had better reasons than France or Britain to be Machiavellian.

This is the bottom line of my criticism: Singling out Israel on its ties with apartheid South Africa is hypocritical, and doing so now is perverse.

POLAKOW-SURANSKY'S book comes at a time when Iran is defying and deceiving the international community with its nuclear program, and when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deadlocked. Polakow-Suransky has managed to switch many people's attention from Iran to Israel, making them wonder if it is not hypocritical to ask the world to stop Iran's nuclear program when Israel developed its own nuclear program 40 years ago. Of course, it developed nuclear weapons to protect itself from relentless enemies, while Iran is seeking to achieve regional hegemony and is openly calling for Israel's destruction.

Shortly after the book's publication (and favorable review among the usual Israelbashers), the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for Israel to expose its alleged nuclear arsenal to international supervision. I don't know how much credit Polakow-Suransky should get for that, but if having an impact was his purpose, he certainly did a good job.

Polakow-Suransky is insinuating that Israel and the Palestinians should follow the postapartheid South African model. His true intentions become clear in the book's epilogue, where he "warns" that Israel may face South Africa's fate if it does not change its behavior toward the Palestinians. This also is sheer hypocrisy. The two-state solution/ partition has been accepted by the Jews and rejected by the Arabs six times: in 1937 (Peel Commission), in 1947 (UNSCOP), in 1979 (Camp David agreements), in July 2000 (Camp David summit), in December 2000 (Clinton parameters) and in September 2008 (Ehud Olmert's proposal to Mahmoud Abbas).

While the present Israeli administration has declared its commitment to the twostate solution, announced an unprecedented settlement freeze and removed dozens of checkpoints, the PA has refused for the past year to negotiate, setting conditions it never demanded in the past and naming streets after mass-murderers. So Israel doesn't have to be "warned" about the need to recognize the long-term dangers of the current stalemate.

Were Israel to become binational it would indeed turn into an apartheid state, because most Arab-dominated countries are. Which is why it is reasonable to forecast that Israel will eventually pull the rug under the Palestinians' feet by completing the construction of the security fence and by creating a de facto double polity (like in Cyprus). The Palestinians will not be able to enact the South African precedent, but at least they will have a chance to create another failed Arab state and to collaborate with enlightened countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

The writer is the founding partner of the Navon-Levy Group Ltd., an international consulting firm, and a lecturer at the Abba Eban Graduate Program for Diplomacy Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of A Plight among the Nations: Israel's Foreign Policy between Nationalism and Realism and he blogs at www.navon.com.

