AFRICANS FOR PEACE

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

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All Faculty Chair on Student Government, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg (Wits)

Lesiba is a final year Bachelor of Education student at Wits University and aspires to be a science teacher. He is a social justice activist with a focus on student rights issues. At both the Humanities and Education schools, Lesiba has worked for greater responsiveness on issues affecting poor and black students. He also represents the interests of all academic student councils at the university as an elected member of the student government.

NKULULEKO NKOSI
Wits Branch Chairman of the African National Congress Youth League

Nkululeko hails from Kathlehong township in the city of Johannesburg where despite all odds, he became the first student from his high school to enroll at Wits University. He is pursuing a law degree and defends students summoned by the University Disciplinary Committee. He is the chairman of the university chapter of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), and has served as Secretary for the Model UN. He is a keen debater and represented Wits in the South African National Debating Championship and the Pan-African Debating Championship.

TSHEDISO MANGOPE
Human Rights Activist, South Africa

Tshediso was elected provincial member of the Congress of South African Students during his final year at university. He went on to lead the Young Communist League at the University of the Free State, and later headed the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) at Wits University for three years. He later led the ANCYL branch in his community, and was eventually elected Branch Secretary of the South African Communist Party for two consecutive years.

KLAAS MASIMO MOKGOMOLE
Former BDS Activist, South Africa

Klaas is a final year law student and has been involved in a number of service leadership activities at Wits University. He has sat on various university councils, including those dealing with recreation, law, and student accommodation. He has also been elected as a member of the student government. An avid athlete, he played volleyball for the Wits first team and earned his state colors from Mind Sport South Africa. He also coaches his own netball team (similar to basketball and handball), The Brainwashers.
Lesiba Bapela is a social justice activist from Polokwane in the South African province of Limpopo. Having been exposed to anti-Zionist activism on campus while advocating for the rights of students, Bapela decided to visit Israel to see the situation for himself. He spoke in July 2016.

Prior to going to Israel, were you involved in the BDS movement?

As much of an activist as I was, BDS was not something I was part of. I was not drawn to it because I didn’t understand what it meant to be part of BDS. I work on issues and with groups that, in our political circumstances, are strongly attracted to the BDS campaign, but personally, I just didn’t have interest in it.

What type of activism were you involved in on your campus?

My work as a social justice activist revolved around student rights and creating a more inclusive campus environment. That brought me into contact with the BDS activists who have emerged from the anti-Israel sentiment in South African politics.

So what sparked your curiosity about Israel?

I constantly heard the term “BDS,” especially at campus protests during Israel Apartheid Week. So I felt I needed to explore both sides of the story. I wanted to actually see what is happening, rather than being told what is happening, in Israel, in the West Bank, and in the Middle East.

How did you get to Israel?

A group of South African students from my university, Witwatersrand, went to Israel, and their comments when they returned boosted my interest. They went with the South Africa Israel Forum. I was part of the group that went in January 2016 to Israel.

Who were the other participants in your group?

The group was mostly made up of student leaders and activists. Some were Christian, and some were not religiously affiliated but more African traditional.

Where did you guys go in the region?

We went to the West Bank, where we visited Ramallah and Palestinian refugee camps like Kalandia. And in Israel, we went to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, where we visited the Israel Institute of Technology, the famous Technion.

What was your opinion of Israel before your trip?

I need to be honest with you. I did not know anything! All I knew was that there is a consistent fight between Israelis and Palestinians. So to go beyond mere curiosity, I needed to get my facts right and understand what the actual issues are.

When you arrived in the region, what did you see that really surprised you?

In South Africa, I had frequently heard the description of Israel as an “apartheid state.” As a black man coming from South Africa, where we actually experienced apartheid, I realized that this was not apartheid. This was not the same situation. The conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis seems to me to be religious in nature. There is a lack of tolerance between both communities. And the Palestinians are wrongly attributing their situation to “apartheid,” in order to express their frustrations.

Did other members of your group view the situation as you did, or did they have different opinions?
We all came to the same conclusion, based on the facts and our experiences. For instance, we saw that in the West Bank, the Palestinians were more hardline. They don’t believe in a two-state coexistence. They want to govern themselves according to Islamic law, and they don’t believe in Israelis having their own territories. However, on the Israeli side, I heard talk of cooperation. The Israelis have been inviting the Palestinians to create peaceful coexistence. But the Palestinian Authority has this all-or-nothing mentality and doesn’t truly believe in a two-state solution.

Did any of what you saw in Israel remind you of the bantustans, the “homelands,” which the apartheid regime created for black people in South Africa? That’s also a comparison that often gets made.

No. We need to differentiate between what apartheid was in South Africa and what the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians involves. There is nothing in this conflict that I can associate with apartheid. This is a religious conflict.

What were your experiences going through the Israeli checkpoints? Did the Israeli soldiers view a group of black visitors from South Africa with suspicion?

They were not that restrictive. I don’t know the criteria to check IDs, but we were never requested to produce our passports.

Based on your personal experiences, you don’t believe that Israel is an apartheid state. So why do you think Palestinian leaders and political factions compare their situation with black South Africans living under apartheid?

I think it’s part of seeking sympathy and solidarity from the international community. If you can tell a black South African about racism and apartheid, you are too quick to evoke their emotions and their sense of sympathy toward anything related to racism and apartheid. The Palestinians think that this sympathy or solidarity from South Africans will help them win international solidarity more widely.

And do you think that strategy is working?

It’s working for people who are misinformed, because it’s so easy to convince someone who hasn’t seen and experienced the situation for themselves.

How does it make you feel that the BDS movement compares the situation of the Palestinian people with the plight of black people under apartheid?

It upsets me a lot! A lot! Because it’s misleading! The situation cannot be compared to apartheid because it’s not apartheid. Those people involved with the BDS movement need to go to Israel and the West Bank to see the situation for themselves. They need to see and experience the truth, not merely act on what they have been told. I mean, it’s easy for you to tell me and convince me of what is happening in New York. But it takes me coming to New York and exploring the city to properly understand what is happening at the moment. Let the BDSers go and see Israel and Palestine for themselves, rather than making these misinformed generalizations.

It’s an eye-opening experience for us social justice activists especially, because our activism on other issues often involves supporters of the BDS and anti-Israel movements. It’s easy to blindly support movements that your peers also support. However, just because your peers support something, doesn’t mean it’s true. This is a very complicated situation. It’s one that we need to see and experience for ourselves in order to fully grasp the truth and the reality.

When you returned to South Africa, did you tell people about your experiences? How did they react to you? How did your pro-BDS colleagues react to you?

After my return to South Africa, I wrote a piece for our national newspaper, The Sowetan, in which I talked about the worrying views we heard from many Palestinians. I also paid tribute to the Palestinian Christians I met, all of whom rejected violence. My analysis got good feedback from my friends and colleagues. They came to understand rather than just heard about it. Many people were convinced by my arguments and were curious to know more about the dynamics of Israel and Palestine. Some are now eager to make the trip themselves.

What are your hopes for the future of Israel and Palestine?

Coexistence and democracy. There is nothing that inspired me more than Israel’s universities, especially the Technion in Haifa. It’s about diversity there. It’s about Arabs and Jews working together. It gave me a sense of hope because there was a spirit of tolerance. That’s where you could see coexistence. For the Palestinians, I would like to see a democratic Palestine, with freedoms and rights for the people, like we now have here in South Africa and in many other countries. Of course, things are not going to change overnight. It’s going to be a process.
For nearly a century, “apartheid,” an Afrikaans word meaning “separateness,” defined South Africa by instituting racial segregation as the foundation of our political system.

For our parents and grandparents, the apartheid years were the source of deep personal trauma. Their generations were compelled to live under that viciously discriminatory system. Those of us who have grown up in post-apartheid South Africa, can clearly sense this legacy of racism even today.

Precisely because we South Africans know intimately what apartheid involved, we have a duty to question whether it is an appropriate term to be used in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Put simply, because nobody knows the pain of apartheid better than we do, we are able to guide the rest of the world on when to describe a situation using that term and when to avoid doing so.

Apartheid Revisited

Apartheid in South Africa involved the enshrining of racism as a system of laws and regulations. It was a legal means for the white minority, who made up less than 10 percent of the population, to stabilize their economic and political supremacy. At the same time, apartheid degraded both the identity and dignity of the black population: blacks and other non-white population groups were denied land, the right to vote, freedom of speech, and critically, the right to self-determination.

The roots of apartheid go back to 1913, when the Land Act was passed. This legislation, which came into being three years after Afrikaner and British colonists led the country to independence, forced the black majority to live in what were called “native reserve” areas.

In 1948, in the wake of a world war that pushed South Africa into a grave economic crisis, the National Party won a general election – in which only white voters participated – with a pledge to formalize and deepen racial segregation. The word “apartheid” was introduced for the first time. The main architect of the system, future Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, was candid that apartheid was designed to reinforce the country’s already dramatic racial inequalities. “What is the use of teaching the Bantu (black) child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?” Verwoerd famously asked. “That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live.” For Verwoerd and other racists, blacks belonged “naturally” at the bottom of the social pile.

Over the following decades, several major laws were passed that cemented apartheid’s grip on South Africa by preventing whites and blacks from living in the same areas and marrying each other. Among these laws were:

- **Population Registration Act (1950)** – The basis of apartheid, this legislation classified South Africans into three separate and unequal racial groups: “whites,” “blacks,” and “coloreds.”
- **Group Areas Act (1950)** – This legislation compelled blacks to live in separate areas from whites. Forcible removals of black people from areas designated for whites were legally permitted by the legislation.
• **Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949)** – This legislation banned marriages between people from different racial backgrounds.

• **Sexual Offenses Act (1957)** – Extending the provisions of the 1949 ban on mixed marriages, this legislation prohibited sexual relations between whites and non-whites. Homosexuality was also prohibited.

• **Suppression of Communism Act (1950)** – This legislation segregated. During the apartheid years, more than 1,000 anti-apartheid activists were “banned” by the courts, meaning they were not allowed to appear in public, publish articles, or travel.

These and similar laws demonstrated the tyrannical and evil nature of apartheid. Its primary aim was to establish white supremacy by denying fundamental human rights to non-whites. Power laid entirely in the hands of the white minority – there were no black parliamentarians and no black judges.

As a social system, apartheid was completely invasive, recognizing neither privacy nor individuality. Who one associated with, lived next door to, went to work with, became friends with, developed a loving relationship with – all this was determined by the apartheid laws, rather than personal preference. In that sense, apartheid can be interpreted as a form of totalitarianism.

What apartheid needed most from black people was their labor – as cheap as possible. In keeping with Verwoerd’s view that blacks were racially inferior to whites, an education policy was designed to prevent blacks from improving their lot. The Bantu Education Act (1953) forced black students to learn in Afrikaans, a language they did not speak or understand. The majority of black schools didn’t have plumbing or electricity. Indeed, the schools which black children attended educated them not to expect anything better.

Of course, black people did not take this persecution lying down. There were many protests and uprisings against the injustice of the authorities, with the most significant occurring on June 16, 1976. On that day, thousands of school students in Soweto, a sprawling black township near Johannesburg, took to the streets to protest against the compulsory education in Afrikaans. The Soweto uprising, which claimed the lives of nearly 600 people and wounded more than 3,000 after the police shot demonstrators with live ammunition, sparked an uprising across the country that culminated in the dismantling of apartheid almost twenty years later.

With Soweto in flames, the apartheid regime ratcheted up the persecution, particularly against resistance publications like *Drum* Magazine and *The Daily Dispatch*, which were banned for exposing a cover-up in the murder case of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko (the authorities had claimed that Biko committed suicide, but an investigation from a *Daily Dispatch* journalist found that Biko was actually murdered). The suppression of media freedom in South Africa was a deliberate attempt by the apartheid regime to not only hide the truth from its own subjects, but from the people of the world too.

**Can Apartheid South Africa Be Compared with Israel?**

The comparison between Israel and apartheid South Africa has been around for more than 50 years. Its originators were not black South Africans or even Palestinians, but the Soviet Union, which backed the Arab states against Israel for geopolitical reasons. That is why the 1975 UN General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism explicitly mentions apartheid South Africa in the same breath as Israel. Although this resolution was formally rescinded by the UN General Assembly in 1991, the comparison is still being made through events like the annual Israel Apartheid Week. We therefore need to establish whether it contains any truth.

Apartheid was about race, not religion or nationality. It is well known that the conflict between Israel and Palestine encompasses both religious and territorial disputes. In South Africa, the primary issue was race; specifically, the domination of one race over another.

By contrast, Arab citizens of Israel enjoy the same rights and freedoms as Jewish Israelis. On my last trip to Israel, I found that unlike apartheid South Africa, there is no deliberate effort by the government to segregate a specific group in Israel. In day-to-day discussions with ordinary Israeli citizens, I learned from Arabs and Jews, and I sensed their burning desire to live together as harmonious neighbors. In apartheid South Africa, Afrikaners disdained black South Africans, and these sentiments are still in evidence today.
Some argue that a comparison can be drawn between the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority and the so-called bantustans in South Africa. The bantustans were “homelands” for blacks created by the apartheid regime, which then tried to fool the rest of the world into thinking that these poverty-stricken lands were independent states.

But the idea that the West Bank can be compared to the bantustans is absurd for many reasons. By the 1970s, around four million blacks were living in the bantustans, and the intention of the apartheid regime was to eventually deport the entire black population to these impoverished locations. Nothing remotely similar has ever been proposed by Israel, which has made clear that it does not want to rule over the Palestinians indefinitely.

Additionally, living conditions were much worse in the bantustans, one reason being that foreign governments refused to recognize them in any way, which meant that economic aid was withheld. Conversely, the Palestinian Authority is intended to become a sovereign state and has accordingly received billions of dollars in aid from international governments.

**In Israel, unlike apartheid South Africa, the truth is not suppressed.** The ability of the censored media to tell the whole world of what was happening in South Africa was vital to the liberation struggle. The apartheid regime’s response was to ban independent thinking and, of course, dissent. In Israel that is not the case. The rights of journalists and media outlets are protected by the law and courts. For example, in September 2014, Israel’s Supreme Court ruled that journalist Ilana Dayan was protected from libel claims by a former military officer, who objected to his portrayal in an investigative television program concerning the 2004 killing of a Palestinian girl near the Gaza border. In apartheid South Africa, there was no similar legal recourse for any journalist. Banning orders and other intimidation methods were embedded in the law and therefore final and legally enforceable.

**In Israel, suffrage is universal.** Unlike black people in apartheid South Africa, Arabs in Israel are entitled to vote in national elections, elect their own representatives, and have their interests represented in political deliberations. In 2015, the predominantly Arab party, the Joint List, won 15 parliamentary seats. This party is known to be one of the harshest critics of the Israeli government. The point here is that Israeli policy and law allow dissent and opposition without instilling fear of banishment or imprisonment. As already discussed, South African law under apartheid did not afford non-white South Africans the right to vote or have political representation. Unlike the bantustans, Palestinians have their own independent government which they themselves elect, whereas in apartheid South Africa, representatives for non-whites were appointed by, and accountable to, the central
government in Pretoria. That was why one of the main slogans of the anti-apartheid resistance was “one person, one vote.”

**In apartheid South Africa, blacks could not even dream of equality.** Apartheid was so petty. It was unimaginable that a black judge could preside over a matter involving a white man. Apartheid introduced laws and practices to ensure that non-white South Africans could not use the same amenities, such as buses, parks, bathrooms, and public benches. The apartheid government would not have allowed a person of color to hold any position of influence, while in Israel, Arabs are found in the highest ranks of political, civil, and even military life.

**Israel protects both freedom and diversity.** Arabs in Israel enjoy more freedom than those living in Palestine, particularly in Gaza, where the Islamist Hamas movement rules by promoting fear. The rights of women in Palestine are not respected, as was the case under apartheid, where a black woman could not own or administrate her own property without the patronage of a man. Under the apartheid regime, homosexuality was punishable by a jail sentence or a fine. Israel was one of the first countries to recognize the rights of the entire LGBT community.

**Please - don’t steal the word “apartheid!”** For black South Africans, apartheid was more than just systematic discrimination against our people. It was a project that aimed to rob a specific race of its history, culture, dignity, and humanity. Those who apply the term “apartheid” to the Israeli-Palestinian impasse are guilty of perpetuating that same theft, by denying the uniqueness of the racism and hatred that we faced, and which we have overcome with much blood and tears. While the challenges that face Israel and her neighbor Palestine may result in one group feeling discriminated against by the other, it is very different from the legally-blessed racism, based on the discredited idea of white supremacy, that once reigned in my country.
As a black South African and member of the ANC, I have often heard the accusation that Israel is an apartheid state – and therefore a just solution has to be based on a single state of Palestine, between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. So I recently made a trip to Israel and the West Bank in order to understand the issues and the prospects for resolving the conflict.

Traveling through the country encouraged me to reflect upon the suggestions by some sections of the Palestine solidarity movement, particularly those advocating for BDS, that it is possible to establish one country between Israel and Palestine based on a “one-state” solution, like the one we established here in South Africa.

Though supporters of this solution claim it is democratic, the rejection of a Jewish State is in fact a modern way of institutionalizing antisemitic posturing.

First and foremost, my visit to the region confirmed for me that there is no meaningful comparison between the State of Israel and the former apartheid regime in South Africa. I grew up under apartheid. I saw my parents being humiliated under apartheid. The scars of apartheid still live with us to this day and are strongly embedded in the psychology of my people. Therefore, in considering what a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves, I reject both the analysis that Israel practices apartheid and the demand that Israel should be dismantled and replaced with a single state of Palestine.

It appears that those who compare the State of Israel to apartheid South Africa do not understand the fundamentals of apartheid, nor have they experienced it. Let me explain.

I grew up during an era in South Africa when there was structured, state-imposed organization of black lives. The apartheid regime created conditions that were exclusive to black people. Colonialism and apartheid had deliberately made poverty, bad education, landlessness, and cheap labor part of what it meant to be black. Under apartheid, our legal status was that of an inferior people.

South Africa was divided into two distinct worlds: one white and wealthy, the other black and poor. The mines, factories, and farms all depended on black workers forced into wage labor through government legislation. Accordingly, white-owned businesses did not hesitate to support a racist government that denied blacks the vote, especially low wages.

Blacks lived in townships and slums, and whites lived in comfortable suburbs. Blacks earned subsistence wages and whites were their masters. The black maid took care of the master’s children in the suburbs, but only saw her own children once or twice a year. The black security worker guarded the rich white areas for white comfort, but had to travel back to violent townships after each shift. This was apartheid and everything it represented.

I recall witnessing the humiliation of my parents and watching the persecution of our political leaders on the news. It became hard for me to continue having conversations without actually doing something. So I joined the liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), to end the humiliation of our parents and the suffering of black children.

I was elected chairperson of the Young Communist League, the
Upon entering law school at the University of Witwatersrand, I was elected to the South African Students Congress (SASCO), and as branch chairperson of the ANC Youth League.

During this time, we called for a radical economic program of land expropriation and reparations, as well as the nationalization of mineral resources in order to expand the economy and undo the apartheid legacy. It was also at this point that I joined the BDS movement with similar enthusiasm.

However, after actually visiting Israel, my views on BDS have changed drastically. I am no longer involved in the BDS movement and don’t believe it to be a legitimate cause.

For me, learning about the history of the region and trying to separate the truth from lies was a life-altering moment.

First, studying the history was crucial in terms of fully grasping the truth of the situation. I learned that Jewish people are indeed indigenous to the land from which they were forcibly removed. Following this expulsion from their homeland, Jews suffered the indignity of being the skunk of the world.

The oppression and mass murder of Jewish people did not only take place in Nazi Germany, as many people falsely believe, but in many parts of the world, wherever Jews sought to live among other nationalities. From the time of the Seleucid Empire, when all cultural and religious practices of Jewish people were banned by law without cause; to the persecution at the hands of Christians, who were taught by the Church that Jews were collectively responsible for the murder of Jesus; and from the massacres of more than four thousand Jews in Granada during the tenth century; to the mass murder of about six thousand Jews in Morocco around the same time, the suffering of Jewish people in many parts of the world is recorded fact. It is not surprising, fervent critiques of Israel erase this history and declaration of a Jewish state in 1948. Those who butcher the history of Israel in this manner are themselves guilty of causing and perpetuating the conflict. They deliberately do this to conceal the truth, which to them is an inconvenience.

However, this is not too difficult for me to grasp as a black man, whose painful past is always used as a footnote by others. Don’t get me wrong, there are many things that, in my view, Israel should have handled differently, but it is grotesque naiveté to reduce Israel to an apartheid state. The insistence of the Arab world on denying Jewish people, the indigenous people of Israel, the right to sovereign existence is a main reason this conflict has lasted for so long.

The argument by BDS supporters that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be solved with a one-state solution, following the South African model of democracy, is false and dangerous. This assessment is heavily supported by my experiences in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, as well as my experiences as a black South African who experienced apartheid.

Let’s start with the lessons we learned from the peaceful transition into a democratic, single state in South Africa following the CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) negotiations.

First of all, Israel’s struggles are not the same as South Africa’s. Apartheid in South Africa was designed by white settlers who had moved from the Netherlands and Britain to conquer African land and turn the indigenous people into virtual slaves.

However, Israel is not a settler state. The Jewish people are indigenous to Israel, including the contested West Bank and the holy city of Jerusalem. These are descendants of Jewish refugees who were displaced centuries ago and they are back to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination. There is no self-respecting, sober intellectual who will argue that returning to your ancestral homeland from whence you were displaced makes you a settler.

Secondly, the oppressed black people in South Africa were the overwhelming majority and could, therefore, still mobilize themselves even after suffering multiple defeats. We could also rely on the support of other neighboring African countries, which had gained independence before us and helped us to the democratic victory of 1994.

Jewish people, on the other hand, are a religious and cultural minority in the middle of the Arab world. All neighboring countries have fought against the state of Israel in one way or another since 1948. Each of these countries has at some point vowed to wipe Israel off the map.

Thirdly, the oppressed black majority of South Africa made it expressly clear that the content of our struggle was not to annihilate the white minority, who designed and were profiting from apartheid. The
history of all black struggles in South Africa is the striving for peace and reconciliation. From the beginning of the twentieth century, all petitions and representations we made to Britain were rooted in the best traditions of peace and cooperation. We refused to kill white people, particularly women and children, who are the most vulnerable in society. We even declared in 1955, when the machinery of apartheid was at its most repressive, that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.”

In South Africa, the ANC’s armed wing, the Umkhonto we Sizwe, understood that the conventional rules of war prohibited the attack and killing of innocent civilians. Any transgression, intentional or otherwise, was punishable in the Umkhonto we Sizwe camps to prevent a recurrence. We sent a message to the world that, as blacks, we were fighting against an unjust system and that we were not engaged in a terrorist enterprise.

However, the situation is different in Israel. Despite the fact that Jewish people have a legitimate claim to Jewish land, most Palestinians refuse to recognize Israel’s right to exist. They have essentially supported the call for the genocide of Jewish people – and, indeed, a single state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River could only be achieved by killing and expelling the majority of Jews currently living there.

It is quite apparent that the conflict has escalated to a point where peaceful coexistence within one border is impossible. The younger generation in Gaza and the West Bank, many of them influenced by the Islamist Hamas movement, are angrier and more determined to wipe Israel off the map, as urged by Hamas.

During my visit to the Palestinian Authority, I made two important observations that further underline the fact that Israelis and Palestinians cannot live harmoniously in a single state.

The first concerns a young female entrepreneur, in her mid-twenties, who, by her own admission, has been working with Israeli companies to grow her businesses. Although she supported cooperation with Israeli businesses in order to boost the local economy, which is frowned upon by most of her people, she told us that she too was not prepared to live with Jews in one state.

When asked if Palestinians would be willing to allow Jewish people already living in the West Bank to have citizenship, she responded, “They (Jews) would have to accept that they will be treated like second-class citizens.”

Out of shock, our Palestinian tour guide, who until now was sitting and listening to her presentation, stood up to make a point. He objected that this viewpoint was against their concessions in the 1995 Oslo accords, to which she responded, “It was foolhardy of you to make such concessions when we are treated like this.”

The second concerned two young Palestinian boys, aged 14 and 16, who had been shot by Israeli soldiers a week earlier after they stabbed two young Jewish women to death, one of them seven months pregnant. Entering Ramallah, we were welcomed by huge posters of these young boys. And what was more horrifying was that those boys were celebrated as martyrs.

The suggestion that it is possible to establish one country, based on a one-state solution, is just not possible. Expecting people with a bitter history of persecution like the Jewish people to abandon the idea of a Jewish state, the only state that has guaranteed them freedom and security, is not only unreasonable, but also unfair.

The only true and possible solution to this conflict is a two-state solution. A two-state solution is important, not only to ease tensions between the two sides, but also to ensure that the Jewish state is protected. The only way to protect Jewish people from all the hardships they have suffered the world over is to defend their inalienable right to self-determination.
Growing up in South Africa, I became involved in politics at a young age. When I began studying for a law degree at the University of Witwatersrand – known locally as Wits – I joined both the South African Students Congress (SASCO) and the youth league of the African National Congress (ANC), the liberation movement whose most well-known representative was Nelson Mandela, our late president.

I became involved because, quite simply, I believed in advocating for the rights of the poverty-stricken, marginalized black majority in our country.

My activism with the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement started when I was elected to the Student Representative Council at Wits. I didn’t have much seminars and movie showings that aimed to educate us about movement because I didn’t think any other people should suffer the injustices imposed on black people during the apartheid era in South Africa.

As time went by, I studied the strategy of the BDS movement more closely. I noticed that BDS activists would target student leaders, like those serving on the Student Representative Council at Wits. I didn’t have much information on hand about the conflicts in the Middle East, specifically the conflict between Palestine and Israel. So I attended seminars and movie showings that aimed to educate us about the conflict. I was proud of my involvement with the BDS movement because I didn’t think any other people should suffer the injustices imposed on black people during the apartheid era in South Africa.

As time went by, I studied the strategy of the BDS movement more closely. I noticed that BDS activists would target student leaders, like those serving on the Student Representative Council, in order to garner support for their annual Israel Apartheid Week activities. These leaders would then be fed a stream of false information about the conflict with the Palestinians in order to turn them into BDS activists. For example, BDS South Africa declares that a “just peace” would be “similar to what occurred in South Africa and brought about a democratic country for all our people.” This is code for the elimination of Israel as an independent nation, whereas a truly democratic solution would recognize the legitimate national rights of both Israelis and Palestinians.

The key point about these activists is that they believe they are doing the right thing. In 2013, I was one of the BDS protestors who disrupted a piano recital at Wits, hosted by the South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS), which featured the Israeli pianist Yossi Reshef. All of us were convinced that our action was morally justified, and that a representative of an oppressive country like Israel should not be allowed on our campus. But the authorities at Wits took a different view, charging us with misconduct and ordering us to attend a disciplinary hearing.

Eventually, the experience of that protest and the ups and downs of the resultant disciplinary hearing brought me to a stark realization: we were pushing an agenda that we knew very little about. We regarded the situation in Israel as equivalent to apartheid in South Africa. This conviction was what influenced my decision not just to protest the piano recital, but to protest the University of Johannesburg’s decision to grant U.S. President Barack Obama – whom the BDS movement views as a dedicated supporter of Israeli racism – an honorary doctorate.

The reality is that the two situations are very different. I came to understand that the analogy of apartheid in Israel was an abuse of the memory of apartheid, just as it is possible to abuse the memory of the Holocaust or slavery in a similar manner.

Where does all this propagandizing lead? In the case of the BDS
movement in South Africa, it led to a boycott of Woolworth, one of the country’s biggest food and clothing retail stores. In hindsight, the targeting of Woolworth seems to be a tokenistic gesture. If the BDS movement was really serious about boycotting goods produced in Israel, they wouldn’t touch consumer technology, because many parts are either developed or manufactured in Israel. Instead, they focused on causing damage to Woolworth, without a thought for the black workers who could lose their jobs because of this false agenda.

The BDS campaign wasn’t going to find alternative employment for these workers. Their only concern was to hypocritically denounce Woolworth for supposedly ignoring “the principle of responsible citizenship” by “importing products from Israeli companies in violation of the international boycott of Israel called for by the indigenous Palestinians” – insinuating that the Jews, who have maintained an uninterrupted presence in that same land for three thousand years, despite numerous attempts to eliminate them, are trespassers and not indigenous.

It was troubling issues like these that persuaded me to visit Israel and Palestine in 2015. I expected that I would arrive in a country exactly like South Africa during the long years of apartheid. To my surprise, I did not find any signs or boards separating Arabs and Jews, nor did I find any Jew or Arab-only buses, schools, colleges, or beaches like we had in South Africa. It was even more shocking to find out that the Arabs and Jews are all entitled to vote and to serve in government and the judiciary. In South Africa under apartheid, such a situation was unimaginable.

So the question arises, why claim that Israel is an “apartheid” state? The BDS campaign uses this terminology to attract South African blacks. BDS understands very well that any black South African who knows the anti-apartheid struggle will be attracted to a campaign that combats apartheid elsewhere in the world.

Anyone who takes a different view of Israel is subject to intimidation. It was difficult for me to even visit Israel because of the threats I received from BDS prior to leaving, such as a July 2015 email, which threatened anyone traveling to Israel with “serious disciplinary action” and accused participants of being “complicit in the bloodshed of our Palestinian counterparts.” What is it that the BDS campaign is hiding? Why can’t they let people visit Israel as they please, without harassment? Why do they deem it wrong to visit Israel? Surely, anyone interested in this issue should actually travel to Israel and Palestine to learn more, if they receive the opportunity to do so.

As in North America and Europe, BDS has been an extremely divisive presence on South African university campuses. During Israel Apartheid Week, Student Representative Councils (SRCs) are prevailed upon to issue statements in support of this campaign. Most of the SRCs are controlled by the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA), itself composed of supporters of the ANC, the Communist Party, and the Muslim Students Association. The involvement of this latter group means that much greater attention and support is given to the BDS campaign.

The results of this strategy illustrate the thin, perhaps invisible, line between antisemitic activity and BDS advocacy. During the most recent Israel Apartheid Week, three Jewish students were beaten up in a shopping mall in Johannesburg. In another notorious incident, the SRC at Kwazulu Natal University demanded that the rector expel Jewish students from campus. The Secretary of the SRC, Mqondisi Duma, said: “As the SRC, we had a meeting and analyzed international politics. We took the decision that Jewish students, especially those who do not support the Palestinian struggle, should deregister.”

Rightly, the university authorities dismissed this demand as “totally unacceptable,” but the problem of antisemitism embedded in BDS campus activities remains.

I know this to be the case, because I had the same attitude when I was part of the BDS movement. BDS encourages you to hate every Jew in the world, see the worst in them, and label them as oppressors, killers, and land thieves. An organization that pushes such ugly indoctrination clearly wants to intimidate the Jewish community.

BDS in South Africa sustains itself by pushing lie after lie. The history they provide of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is woefully inadequate. Israel is cast as a state born in 1948 in “original sin.” The centuries before 1948 are never mentioned. The complex history of Jews and Arabs, along with the sacrifices made by oppressed Jews from Europe and the Middle East who returned to their homeland, is ignored completely.

In terms of today’s conflict, Hamas terrorism against Israeli civilians is portrayed as “resistance,” rather than an attack against a peaceful solution. During Israel Apartheid Week, the BDS campaign falsely presented horrifying pictures of children killed in Syria as Palestinian children killed in Gaza. The deception continues.

BDS feeds hatred, and what we need in South Africa is an organization that educates for peace. South Africans involved in BDS need to be given the opportunity to understand that this is a conflict in which both sides have legitimate rights. If we South Africans expect people who comment about our country to know the history of apartheid, then we must apply the same standards to ourselves.

In the end, there is no substitute for one’s own careful research. As a former BDS activist, I encourage those involved in BDS to not blindly believe everything the movement says – because if you accept their propaganda uncritically, you are not contributing to peace, but to further needless bloodshed.
AFTERWORD

Ashley Daniel Bell, Esq. is the Founder, Chief Executive Officer, and Chairman of the 20/20 Leaders of America, LLC, the nation’s most influential black and bi-partisan coalition of elected officials, legal professionals, and civic and business leaders.

Ashley Bell

Reading the experiences shared by the other authors in this publication, I am reminded of the struggles of those within the African-American community who, like myself, are dedicated to criminal justice reform. Some of these activists erroneously conflate the struggles our people face with police brutality with the Palestinian cause. Some have even gone so far as to claim that the Palestinians are subjected to a special Israeli version of Jim Crow. Such comparisons are dangerous and deeply flawed.

I grew up in the shadows of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains in Gainesville, Georgia. As a child in the 1980s and 1990s, I vividly recall the casual, albeit suffocating, presence of Klansmen around my schools and community. The fingerprints of Jim Crow’s effects on my parents were on everything I saw and touched. Even now, I can’t claim to know a single black man that hasn’t been stopped by the police as a result of racial profiling – whether they are a pedestrian in Baltimore or a United States Senator in South Carolina. Being a black man in America in and of itself presents a unique challenge and a struggle that I bear, my father bears, my grandfathers bore, and my nine year old son will bear also. And yet for me to in any way equate this with any other struggle of a people or cause for equality in world history or the present minimizes the uniqueness of each one. It is one thing to be inspired by someone else’s cause, quite something else to uncritically and unthinkingly adopt the slogans and goals of that cause.

As Nkululeko Nkosi astutely acknowledges, “Apartheid was about race, not religion or nationality.” South African apartheid shares this fact with the Jim Crow South. But the significant difference with Israel is that the Israeli Arabs who make up 20 percent of Israel’s population share the full rights and freedoms of their Jewish fellow-citizens. They can vote, they can live and work where they choose, and they can spend time with their families and loved ones anywhere they desire to go. As the authors here attest, these basic human freedoms didn’t exist under apartheid. And as I and any African-American can attest, the right to vote was reluctantly granted less than 60 years ago, after countless people, both black and white, sacrificed everything to grant me and others the gift of full citizenship. Even today, we are still fighting an uphill battle against efforts to deny many their full measure of America’s promise.

Under Jim Crow, African-Americans in the South couldn’t eat in the same establishments as whites, couldn’t patronize the same businesses, couldn’t live or work where their abilities would allow, and couldn’t even satisfy their thirst for water or freedom at the faucet or ballot box. Watching a young African-American woman, Simone Manuel, make history in the swimming contests at the 2016 Rio Olympics, I was reminded that it was as recently as the 1950s that white management drained all of the water out of a hotel pool because the famous African-American actress Dorothy Dandridge defiantly stuck her toe in after being told she couldn’t go in (even though she was performing there).

Living in the Jim Crow South meant that you couldn’t walk on the same sidewalk as whites; if you “got out of your place,” there was no law, order, or treaty that recognized your right to exist. This denial of a right to peaceful existence is what the State of Israel faces from many of its neighbors and enemies – despite the obvious advantage to their narrative that the Jewish people are indigenous to the land where their state was finally established.

As a result of my two visits to Israel, my love of history, and my observation of the facts, I fully appreciate that nothing remotely like Jim Crow exists in Israel. Non-Jewish Israelis and Palestinians share all the same rights, namely the right to vote. Blacks in the Jim Crow South had no form of government representing them, yet never engaged in acts of terror against anyone. The leaders of the civil rights movement founded their opposition on non-violence and preached for the equal existence of everyone peacefully.

If anything, the incredibly destructive BDS movement is the only thing that comes close to conveying the hatred of another people that radical extremist whites had towards blacks during that time. The BDS movement advocates for discrimination against Jews everywhere in the world, doesn’t believe Jews have any right to exist in Israel, and inflicts harassment and intimidation on anyone who doesn’t support their views. Most recently, factions within the Black Lives Matter movement here in America adopted a platform including BDS demands and accusing Israel of genocide. When American Jewish organizations that have long supported civil rights for African-Americans reacted with hurt and disappointment, elements within BLM responded that they wanted nothing further to do with them.

Those who hate Israel, and seek to co-opt other struggles into their hate campaign, must be exposed. There is an incredible dishonesty in telling a story that isn’t yours, that shares no real resemblance. Those who fight against police brutality and an unjust criminal justice system here in America deserve better. The legacy of all those who fought and endured Jim Crow likewise shouldn’t suffer politically-charged, historically dishonest comparisons with the Palestinians. As in South Africa, to do so is to wrongly abuse the memory of the African-American experience.
HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Want to help make peace? Then get going!

Get to the grassroots...
The Peres Center – a non-profit, non-governmental, non-political organization – develops and implements a wide range of projects, bringing together a diverse spectrum of participants: Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians, old and young, professionals, and agents of change. Programs are designed to empower ordinary people to actively engage in peacebuilding through three core fields: Medicine & Healthcare, Peace Education, and Business & Environment.

www.peres-center.org

Get to Congress...
The Alliance for Middle East Peace is a network of organizations that conducts civil society work in conflict transformation, development, coexistence, and cooperative activities. They work on the ground with Israelis and Palestinians. Their goal is to secure a just and sustainable peace where all people share equal rights and freedoms. The alliance lobbies national legislatures to pass bills that fund peace-building activities.

www.allmep.org

Get Eating...
Peace Oil is produced by Jews, Arabs, Druze, and Bedouin in the Galilee region of northern Israel. The olives are grown in the foothills of the Carmel Mountains and pressed within hours of picking to produce extra-virgin olive oil.

www.peaceoil.org

Get Coding...
Founded at MIT in 2004, Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow (MEET) harnesses the power of technology to educate and empower tomorrow’s most promising Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

misti.mit.edu/mit-meet

Get Greening...
The Arava Institute is home to five transboundary research and development centers focusing on key environmental concerns — water management, renewable energy and energy conservation, sustainable agriculture, ecology, and sustainable development. The research centers enable critical cross-border exchanges of knowledge and technology by providing young Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, and international researchers the opportunity to work together and advance solutions to the region’s pressing environmental issues.

www.arava.org

Get Educated...
The Coexistence in the Middle East (CME) program at The Hebrew University offers a unique opportunity to experience the challenges and complexities of coexistence in Israel.

Extensive field trips and first-hand interaction with government officials, religious leaders, professional experts, and political and NGO activists enable students to gain exposure to a wide variety of people, narratives, and perspectives.

Through dialogue, students uncover numerous issues, realities, resolution proposals, and peace initiatives that highlight the human dimension of the conflict and its complexities.

overseas.huji.ac.il/coexistenceme

Get Praying...
The Interfaith Encounter Association is dedicated to promoting peace in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study.

www.interfaith-encounter.org

Get Informed...
Africans for Peace provides regular updates from around the world with an African perspective on conflict resolution and dialogue insights.

www.africansforpeace.com
Africans for Peace - About Us

Africans for Peace is a collective of independent students, scholars, and activists who bring an African lens to the global debate on peace and stability on our continent and around the world. We publish articles and reports, give media interviews, and participate in speaking tours, workshops, and one-on-one engagement. Our mission is to be a force for independent civic dialogue and conflict resolution. Our goal is to help heal the world from the ravages of conflict.

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