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The unspoken alliance: Israel's secret relationship with apartheid South Africa

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The eulogies from Israeli leaders in response to the death of Nelson Mandela are pouring in. What goes unspoken in their remembrances is that Israel had a close relationship with the South African apartheid regime. Here's an excerpt from Sasha Polakow-Suransky's groundbreaking book that delves deep into the alliance. Titled "The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa," it was published in 2010.



On April 9, 1976, South African prime minister Balthazar Johannes Vorster arrived at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem with full diplomatic entourage in tow. After passing solemnly through the corridors commemorating those gassed in Auschwitz and Dachau, he entered the dimly lit Hall of Remembrance, where a memorial flame burned alongside a crypt filled with the ashes of Holocaust victims. Vorster bowed his head as a South African minister read a psalm in Afrikaans, the haunting melody of the Jewish prayer for the dead filling the room. He then kneeled and laid a wreath, containing the colors of the South African flag, in memory of Hitler's victims. Cameras snapped, dignitaries applauded, and Israeli officials quickly ferried the prime minister away to his next destination. Back in Johannesburg, the opposition journalist Benjamin Pogrund was sickened as he watched the spectacle on television. Thousands of South African Jews shared Pogrund's disgust; they knew all too well that Vorster had another, darker past.

In addition to being the architect of South Africa's brutal crackdown on the black democratic opposition and the hand behind many a tortured activist and imprisoned leader, Vorster and his intelligence chief, Hendrik van den Bergh, had served as generals in the Ossewa Brandwag, a militant Afrikaner nationalist organization that had openly supported the Nazis during World War II.

The group's leader, Hans van Rensburg, was an enthusiastic admirer of Adolf Hitler. In conversations with Nazi leaders in 1940, van Rensburg formally offered to provide the Third Reich with hundreds of thousands of men in order to stage a coup and bring an Axis- friendly government to power at the strategically vital southern tip of Africa. Lacking adequate arms supplies, van Rensburg's men eventually abandoned their plans for regime change and settled for industrial sabotage, bombings, and bank robberies. South Africa's British-aligned government considered the organization so dangerous that it imprisoned many of its members.

But Vorster was unapologetic and proudly compared his nation to Nazi Germany: "We stand for Christian Nationalism which is an ally of National Socialism . . . you can call such an anti-democratic system a dictatorship if you like," he declared in 1942. "In Italy it is called Fascism, in Germany National Socialism and in South Africa Christian Nationalism." As a result of their pro-Nazi activities, Vorster and van den Bergh were declared enemies of the state and detained in a government camp.

Three decades later, as Vorster toured Yad Vashem, the Israeli government was still scouring the globe for former Nazis— extraditing or even kidnapping them in order to try them in Israeli

courts. Yet Vorster, a man who was once a self-proclaimed Nazi supporter and who remained wedded to a policy of racial superiority, found himself in Jerusalem receiving full red-carpet treatment at the invitation of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

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Prior to 1967, Israel was a celebrated cause of the left. The nascent Jewish state, since its creation amid the ashes of Auschwitz, was widely recognized as a triumph for justice and human rights. Leftists across the world, with the notable exception of those in Muslim nations, identified with the socialist pioneering spirit of the new nation. Africans welcomed Israeli development aid and voted in Israel's favor at the United Nations. Europeans for the most part supported the Jewish state, often out of socialist idealism or sheer guilt. Even Britain, which fought Jewish guerrilla organizations until the eve of Israel's independence in 1948, recognized the state of Israel in January 1949. Although the South African Jewish community became the largest per capita financial contributor to Israel after 1948, relations between the two countries' governments were cordial but chilly for much of the 1950s.

In the 1960s, Israeli leaders' ideological hostility toward apartheid kept the two nations apart. During these years, Israel took a strong and unequivocal stance against South Africa. In 1963, Foreign Minister Golda Meir told the United Nations General Assembly that Israelis "naturally oppose policies of apartheid, colonialism and racial or religious discrimination wherever they exist" due to Jews' historical experience as victims of oppression. Israel even offered asylum to South Africa's most wanted man.

In addition to condemning apartheid, Meir forged close ties with the newly independent states of Africa, offering them everything from agricultural assistance to military training. Many African leaders accepted invitations to Israel and some, impressed with the Israeli army, decided to hire Israeli bodyguards. African states returned the favor by voting with Israel at the U.N. in an era when the Jewish state had few diplomatic allies. At the time, black American leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. were also outspoken in their support of Israel, likening criticism of Zionism to anti-Semitism.

Things began to change with Israel's stunning victory over its Arab neighbors in the Six-Day War of 1967, which tripled the size of the Jewish state in less than a week. The post-1967 military occupation of Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian territory and the settlement project that soon followed planted hundreds of thousands of Jews on hilltops and in urban centers throughout

the newly conquered West Bank and Gaza Strip, saddling Israel with the stigma of occupation and forever tarring it with the colonialist brush.

Israelis did not take kindly to the colonial label. After all, Zionism had in many ways been an anti-imperial movement. The World Zionist Organization may have mimicked European colonial settlement tactics in the early 1900s, but by the 1940s Zionism's more extreme proponents were fighting to oust the British Mandate government in Palestine. Consequently, many Israelis saw their independence as a postcolonial triumph akin to the successful liberation struggles of newly independent African and Asian countries and they bristled at any attempt to equate Zionism with European colonialism.

Conquest and expansion had not been part of the IDF's (the Israel Defense Forces) strategic planning for a war that it perceived as a defensive struggle for survival. Even Israel's leaders were shocked by the extent of their territorial gains in the Six- Day War. Indeed, before the shooting stopped, the first internal military memos proposed withdrawing almost completely from the newly acquired territories in exchange for peace with the Arab states. Yet, as Arab negotiating positions hardened and religious Zionists and socialist idealists alike sought to redeem and settle the land, the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Sinai Peninsula slowly transformed Israel into an unwitting outpost of colonialism.

Aided by a healthy dose of Arab and Soviet propaganda, Israel's image as a state of Holocaust survivors in need of protection gradually deteriorated into that of an imperialist stooge of the West. As criticism of Israel mounted and Arab states dangled dollars and oil in the faces of poor African nations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Third World countries increasingly switched allegiance. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, all but a few African countries severed diplomatic ties with the Jewish state, and the Israeli government abandoned the last vestiges of moral foreign policy in favor of hard-nosed realpolitik.

It wasn't long before Israel initiated defense cooperation with some of the world's most notoriously brutal regimes, including Argentina's military dictatorship, Pinochet's Chile, and apartheid South Africa.

At its core, the Israeli-South African relationship was a marriage of interests and ideologies. Israel profited handsomely from arms exports and South Africa gained access to cutting-edge weaponry at a time when the rest of the world was turning against the apartheid state. For the next twenty years, a Janus- faced Israel denied its ties with South Africa, claiming that it opposed

apartheid on moral and religious grounds even as it secretly strengthened the arsenal of a white supremacist government.

Israel and South Africa joined forces at a precarious and auspicious time. The alliance began in earnest after the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, and shared military and economic interests drove the relationship for the next three years. Though both countries were receiving varying degrees of support from the United States, neither enjoyed a defense pact with Washington and both were wary of relying too heavily on the Americans for their survival— especially in the early 1970s, when unconditional U.S. support for Israel was by no means assured. This alliance exposed Israel to great risks in the realm of public relations, especially when the Jewish state's legitimacy was already under attack at the U.N. from pro-Palestinian groups and aligning itself with the hated apartheid regime threatened to tarnish its reputation further.

Rabin's Labor Party government, which ruled the country from 1974 to 1977, did not share the ethnic nationalist ideology of South Africa's rulers, but Israel's war-battered industries desperately needed export markets and the possibility of lucrative trade with South Africa was hard for Defense Minister Shimon Peres to resist. As Rabin, Peres, and a new generation of leaders inherited the party from David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, the conviction that compromising certain values was necessary for survival gained sway and socialist idealism gave way to realpolitik. During the Rabin years, South African arms purchases breathed life into the Israeli economy and Israeli weapons helped to reinforce the beleaguered and isolated apartheid regime in Pretoria.

The impact of their tryst was felt across the globe. As the Cold War spread south in the 1970s, Africa became an ideological battleground, pitting Angolan government troops and their Cuban allies against South Africa's formidable military machine, which owed its prowess in no small measure to Israel. The U.S. government feared that South Africa's white minority regime, driven by a siege mentality and militant anticommunism, might resort to the nuclear option when faced with Soviet proxies on its borders. The U.S. government had by 1970 accepted that Israel was a member of the nuclear club, but Washington worked tirelessly in the late 1970s to prevent South Africa from joining it. As hard as officials in Jimmy Carter's administration tried, their nonproliferation policy failed to prevent South Africa from acquiring the bomb soon after Carter left office, and subsequent U.S. administrations couldn't stop Israel from helping the apartheid state develop more advanced components of its nuclear arsenal.

These two isolated states formed an alliance that allowed South Africa to develop advanced nuclear missile technology and provided Israel with the raw material and testing space it needed to expand its existing arsenal of missiles and nuclear weapons. All of this occurred in the face of intense international criticism, surveillance by U.S. and Soviet intelligence agencies, and constant condemnation by the United Nations General Assembly.

This mutually beneficial relationship was forged outside the jurisdiction of international conventions such as the Nuclear Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the cornerstones of Western efforts to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The two countries developed and improved their respective weapons systems under such secrecy that not even American intelligence agencies knew the full extent of their cooperation.

The Israeli–South African relationship was not only about profit and battlefield bravado, however. After Menachem Begin’s Likud Party came to power in 1977, these economic interests converged with ideological affinities to make the alliance even stronger. Many members of the Likud Party shared with South Africa’s leaders an ideology of minority survivalism that presented the two countries as threatened outposts of European civilization defending their existence against barbarians at the gates.

Indeed, much of Israel’s top brass and Likud Party leadership felt an affinity with South Africa’s white government, and unlike Peres and Rabin they did not feel a need to publicly denounce apartheid while secretly supporting Pretoria. Powerful military figures, such as Ariel Sharon and Rafael (Rafael) Eitan, drew inspiration from the political tradition of Revisionist Zionism—a school of thought that favored the use of military force to defend Jewish sovereignty and encouraged settlement of the biblical lands of Greater Israel, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Sharon, Eitan, and many of their contemporaries were convinced that both nations faced a fundamentally similar predicament as embattled minorities under siege, fighting for their survival against what they saw as a common terrorist enemy epitomized by Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) and Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The ANC may have never employed indiscriminate violence to the extent that the PLO did, but in the eyes of the generals in Tel Aviv and Pretoria, Mandela and Arafat were one and the same: terrorist leaders who wished to push them into the sea. And for the top brass in both countries, the only possible solution was tight control and overwhelming force.

Foreign Ministry officials in Israel did not always approve of close ties with South Africa, but it was the defense establishments— not the diplomatic corps— that managed the alliance. The military's dominance was so complete that the Israeli embassy in Pretoria was divided by a wall through which no member of the diplomatic corps was allowed to pass. Only when opponents of apartheid within the Israeli government sought to bring down that wall in the late 1980s did the alliance begin to crumble.

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The research for this book took place in a world where information and disinformation are equally important. Even decades after the fact, Israel remains extremely sensitive about keeping secret the details of its collaboration with a regime that is now universally condemned as immoral. Journalists and scholars who wrote on the Israeli–South African relationship during the 1980s suffered from a lack of access to key participants and official documents. As a result, the story they told, though partially accurate, was incomplete.⁸ For the past six years, I have struggled to fill in the gaps by prying open bureaucratic doors, accessing highly restricted archives, and interviewing more than one hundred key players in both countries.

In Israel, dozens of people initially refused to speak with me. I traced former ambassadors to desert kibbutzim and elderly South African Jewish émigrés to designer apartments in the posh northern suburbs of Tel Aviv. From the offices of defense contractors to assisted living communities, I was treated to battlefield tales and old photo albums offering glimpses of a relationship that until now few government officials have dared to talk about.

In South Africa, retired military intelligence officials asked for my U.S. passport number and ran background checks before inviting me to their homes for interviews. Tracking down the key protagonists led me to sprawling rural farms and gated retirement communities. I met former defense ministers and generals for coffee in strip malls and over shots of brandy in Pretoria's bars. A Soviet spy who had sent some of South Africa's and Israel's most sensitive military secrets to Moscow invited me to his home on the windswept coast of the Cape Peninsula, where he now lives comfortably among the retired naval officers he once betrayed. Former employees of the arms industry giant Armscor and the nuclear scientists involved in building South Africa's atomic weapons were the most reluctant of all, but several eventually opened up. My family's roots in South Africa helped ease the suspicions of several octogenarian generals, who instantly became candid in the presence of someone they regarded as a fellow white South African in the hope that I would share their nostalgia for the old days. Some saw the interviews as an

opportunity to secure their place in history and were self-aggrandizing to the extreme; others guarded their secrets closely. I have therefore not relied exclusively on oral history.

Accessing government and military archives was even more difficult. The South African authorities repeatedly rebuffed and then delayed my requests. But after sixteen months of waiting for documents, I managed to get my hands on over seven thousand pages of records from the South African Defense Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, and the defense contractor Armscor, including the Israeli side of the correspondence— but not before Israel's government did its utmost to prevent me from getting them.

In April 2006, the Israeli Defense Ministry intervened to block South Africa's release of a 1975 agreement outlining the planned military cooperation between the two countries, which is signed by Defense Ministers Shimon Peres and P. W. Botha. The Directorate of Security of the Defense Establishment (known by its Hebrew acronym Malmab) insisted that declassification of the 1975 document or any others would endanger Israel's national security interests. Fortunately, the South African Defense Ministry disregarded these protests. This is due in no small measure to the fact that the people whose records I sought are no longer in power in Pretoria. While the ANC government has not fully thrown open the doors to the apartheid government's archives, it is far less concerned with keeping old secrets than with protecting its own accumulated dirty laundry after sixteen years in power.

Israel, of course, is a different story. There, intense secrecy surrounding this relationship remains in force. The actions of Israeli administrations from the 1970s and 1980s are still regarded as state secrets, and many of the architects of the Israeli–South African alliance—including Israel's president as of this writing, Shimon Peres— remain in powerful positions. Even so, South African records pieced together with the oral testimony of retired high-level officials in both countries provide a startlingly clear, if incomplete, picture of the relationship.

This book does not equate Zionism with South African racism, as a 1975 United Nations resolution infamously did. Rather, I contend that material interests gave birth to an alliance that greatly benefited the Israeli economy and enhanced the security of South Africa's white minority regime. Yet ideology was a factor, too: while the relationship was driven by concrete economic interests, it would have begun far earlier and ended much sooner had it not been for the influence of ideology.

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict festers and the prospects for peace appear gloomier each day, it has become increasingly popular to compare the situation in Israel to the dying days of the apartheid regime in South Africa. This is not a new argument, but it is gaining traction in some circles as hopes fade for a two- state solution. During the 1980s, both the Israeli and South African governments were the targets of vicious criticism and international condemnation. In the end, apartheid South Africa collapsed while Israel survived, albeit as a fortress state mired in war. This was not surprising. As two leading South African academics wrote in 1979: “Israel solicits empathy because she stands for the minority right to live after experiencing the most systematic genocide in history. Israel can offer the Western world the continuous exorcism from fascism.” Apartheid South Africa, by contrast, had no such moral standing. The government’s overt racism offended Western political sensibilities far more than Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land, and American and European policymakers did not believe white South Africans deserved protection in the same way Jews did after the Holocaust.

Yet today, left-wing activists are attempting to paint Israel as a latterday South Africa, erode its claim to a unique moral position, and question its legitimacy. By calling for boycotts and divestment from Israel, these activists are following the script that proved so effective for the anti-apartheid movement during the 1980s. And to their own detriment, Israel’s leaders are playing their parts by building Israeli- only access roads, erecting countless military checkpoints, and expanding settlements in the West Bank.

Of course, Israel’s leaders have a responsibility to protect their citizens, but the Israel they have created is a far cry from the “light unto the nations” that was once revered by the African liberation heroes and American civil rights leaders.

Countless authors have chronicled, with varying degrees of fairness, how the Jewish state betrayed its founding ideals, abandoned socialist Zionist principles, and saw its democratic soul corrupted by occupation after 1967. But Israel’s domestic policies are only part of the story; its foreign policy, especially its ties with some of the world’s most reviled regimes, also contributed to its moral decay and the rise of anti-Israel sentiment abroad. Israel’s intimate alliance with apartheid South Africa was the most extensive, the most lucrative, and the most toxic of these pacts. Just as expanding settlements in the West Bank and Gaza eroded Israel’s democratic values at home, arms sales to South Africa in the early 1970s marked the beginning of an era in which expediency trumped morality in Israeli foreign policy and sympathy for the conquered gave way to cooperation with the conqueror.

