

Against Israeli Apartheid

Desmond Tutu and Ian Urbina (07/02)

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The end of apartheid stands as one of the crowning accomplishments of the past century, but we would not have succeeded without the help of international pressure -- in particular the divestment movement of the 1980s. Over the past six months a similar movement has taken shape, this time aiming at an end to the Israeli occupation.

Divestment from apartheid South Africa was fought by ordinary people at the grassroots. Faith-based leaders informed their followers, union members pressured their companies' stockholders and consumers questioned their store owners. Students played an especially important role by compelling universities to change their portfolios. Eventually, institutions pulled the financial plug, and the South African government thought twice about its policies.

Similar moral and financial pressures on Israel are being mustered one person at a time. Students on more than 40 US campuses are demanding a review of university investments in Israeli companies as well as in firms doing major business in Israel. From Berkeley to Ann Arbor, city councils have debated municipal divestment measures.

These tactics are not the only parallels to the struggle against apartheid. Yesterday's South African township dwellers can tell you about today's life in the Occupied Territories. To travel only blocks in his own homeland, a grandfather waits on the whim of a teenage soldier. More than an emergency is needed to get to a hospital; less than a crime earns a trip to jail. The lucky ones have a permit to leave their squalor to work in Israel's cities, but their luck runs out when security closes all checkpoints, paralyzing an entire people. The indignities, dependence and anger are all too familiar.

Many South Africans are beginning to recognize the parallels to what we went through. Ronnie Kasrils and Max Ozinsky, two Jewish heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle, recently published a letter titled "Not in My Name." Signed by several hundred other prominent Jewish South Africans, the letter drew an explicit analogy between apartheid and current Israeli policies. Mark Mathabane and Nelson Mandela have also pointed out the relevance of

the South African experience.

To criticize the occupation is not to overlook Israel's unique strengths, just as protesting the Vietnam War did not imply ignoring the distinct freedoms and humanitarian accomplishments of the United States. In a region where repressive governments and unjust policies are the norm, Israel is certainly more democratic than its neighbors. This does not make dismantling the settlements any less a priority. Divestment from apartheid South Africa was certainly no less justified because there was repression elsewhere on the African continent.

Aggression is no more palatable in the hands of a democratic power. Territorial ambition is equally illegal whether it occurs in slow motion, as with the Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories, or in blitzkrieg fashion, as with the Iraqi tanks in Kuwait. The United States has a distinct responsibility to intervene in atrocities committed by its client states, and since Israel is the single largest recipient of US arms and foreign aid, an end to the occupation should be a top concern of all Americans.

Almost instinctively, the Jewish people have always been on the side of the voiceless. In their history, there is painful memory of massive roundups, house demolitions and collective punishment. In their scripture, there is acute empathy for the disfranchised. The occupation represents a dangerous and selective amnesia of the persecution from which these traditions were born.

Not everyone has forgotten, including some within the military. The growing Israeli refusenik movement evokes the small anti-conscription drive that helped turn the tide in apartheid South Africa. Several hundred decorated Israeli officers have refused to perform military service in the Occupied Territories.

Those not already in prison have taken their message on the road to US synagogues and campuses, rightly arguing that Israel needs security, but that it will never have it as an occupying power. More than 35 new settlements have been constructed in the past year. Each one is a step away from the safety deserved by the Israelis, and two steps away from the justice owed to the Palestinians.

If apartheid ended, so can the occupation, but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction.

[Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his work against apartheid. Ian Urbina is associate editor with the Middle East Research and Information Project.]