

Criticizing South Africa: Israel Should Clean Up Its Own Act

I FIRST encountered the charge that Zionist racism makes Israel comparable to South Africa in the early 1970s, while I was chief representative of the International Student Movement for the United Nations. I protested vehemently in a personal letter to an assistant of Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. Officials of the American Zionist Youth Foundation sent copies of that letter to Jewish university students in the United States and Israel, and then commissioned me to write monthly articles on Zionism for their newsletter.

I next confronted the Israel-South Africa comparison at Princeton University while obtaining a master's degree in international affairs. Professor Richard Falk, himself Jewish, repeatedly linked the situations of the two countries in his course on international law. I remember sharing the outrage of my Israeli student colleagues. Once again I protested.

In my subsequent work for the American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress, and on unrelated journalistic assignments, I traveled widely in the Middle East. My perspective broadened.

I provide my own history to make clear that for years I aggressively challenged comparisons of South Africa and Israel. Now I have come to conclude that the similarities between them outweigh the differences.

Tragically, Israel today has become precisely what many of its liberal founders feared — a besieged, divided, polarizing country whose methods of repression against the Palestinians parallel those of white South Africa against the blacks.

Analogies are always imperfect an-

alytical tools. Historically and culturally, conditions in Israel and South Africa are replete with differences. I leave those to be catalogued by others, who will no doubt be eager to challenge my conclusion.

Here are what I view as the important points of similarity:

- Both states are practicing militarism, intimidation and brutality.

- In both cases, self-determination is being sought by a mistreated, oppressed, abused ethnic group — the blacks of South Africa, the Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 war.

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

- Both oppressed groups have resorted to defiance and violence.

- In both cases the potential for escalating conflict is growing.

Riots and strikes are spreading in South Africa, and there is a state of emergency. The results of Israel's policies are being reaped in a degenerating economy and a descent toward anti-democratic attitudes germinating amid anti-Arab sentiments.

Responding to these conditions and to the continued Palestinian struggle for an independent state, the government has further stepped up a campaign against its Palestinian sub-

jects that over the years has included deportation, imprisonment, collective punishment and, occasionally, documented torture. Emergency regulations left over from British mandate days in what used to be called Palestine, similar to those imposed in South Africa, are enforced by Israel in the occupied territories.

Looked at historically rather than through the obscuring lens of day-to-day headlines, the white minority of South Africa and the Jewish minority in the Middle East are both coming up against their own inescapable contradictions. In an era of nondiscrimi-

nation and secularism they are ideologically wedded to principles that many in the world term racist.

For South Africa there is no solution in sight. The white minority seems destined to raise the level of oppression until the society boils over in rage, as it has begun to do. The time for compromise may be past.

The situation is more confused in the case of historic Palestine, a land

that the world community voted to partition in 1947 between the same two nationalist movements that are in conflict today. Jewish ethnicity and chauvinism in combination with Zionist nationalism have created a mix that is discriminatory in spirit if not in actual laws.

The greatest distinction between Israel and South Africa is that while Zionism is legally nondiscriminatory, apartheid is legally racist. And yet, if we are to be honest, in practice the results are comparable.

The most hopeful difference between the two may be that an acceptable solution is still conceivable for Israel and the Palestinians — peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition of both peoples' national rights. However, increasing attacks of Jewish settlers on the West Bank and rising Israeli support for extremists are signs that time may also be running out in the Middle East.

In the past few months a number of major American Jewish organizations have spoken out against South African repression. Jewish leaders have been arrested picketing the South African Embassy.

More recently the Israeli government said that it "unconditionally objects to the policy of apartheid in South Africa," although it took no steps to alter the substantial trade, arms and security relationships that exist between the two countries. Prime Minister Shimon Peres condemned apartheid as "completely contrary to the very foundations on which Jewish life is based."

But around our world today people who speak in one way and act in another have little credibility. To protest against apartheid while acquiescing in Israel's continuing campaign to intimidate the Palestinian people into submission is hypocrisy.

LETTERS I HIT Aug 22, 85 Oppression by Racism

I respect the thoughtful and courageous criticism of two U.S. allies made by Mark A. Bruzonsky in his analysis of oppression in Israel and South Africa ("Criticizing South Africa: Israel Should Clean Up Its Own Act," Aug. 22). This is in marked contrast to the elitist mishmash of examples irrelevantly presented on the same page by George F. Will ("Alight From the Tiger and Be Eat-en?") that gloss over the singular oppression of legalized racism in South Africa and mock the efforts of Bishop Tutu for swift and peaceful change.

MARGARET WARD.
Bielefeld, West Germany.

The writer was Washington associate of the World Jewish Congress from 1977 to 1983. He is co-editor of "Security in the Middle East," which is being published for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. He contributed this comment to the Los Angeles Times.