

# **RACISM and ANTI-SEMITISM in SOUTH AFRICA**

**Report: April 2019**

## **1. Introduction**

*“Jews are not a race, and categorising people according to race is wrong and dangerous. Even so, some people still believe in the concept. If it is the basis for their hatred of Jews, it is undoubtedly racist.”*

And there you have it: the undeniable link between antisemitism, both the oldest hatred in the world and the oldest conspiracy theory in the world, and racism.

Political analyst Professor Alan Dershowitz recently wrote of “... *the disproportionate hatred directed against the only nation-state of the Jewish people and the disproportionate silence regarding the far greater imperfections and deserved criticism of other nations and groups including the Palestinians.*”

There is an almost inexplicable, incomprehensible increase in anti-Semitism and irrationally virulent anti-Zionism in Western Europe, manifesting in many cases as racism as well.

## **2. The South African situation**

In South Africa, until very recently, these two hatreds were quite separate, as the racism vitriol was seen to be purely based on colour: black against white and white against black. Today, however, they are being conflated, with white Zionist (aka ‘loving Israel’) Jews being accused of being the cause of so much that is wrong with the country in its 25<sup>th</sup> year of democracy and independence.

The lines between these two ‘ism’s’ are becoming a little more blurred and a little less clear; and while crime in the country is also rising, there are definitely Jewish families who feel that if they are targeted by criminals, it’s not only because of their perceived wealth but also because they are Jews and therefore worthy of slander, vitriol and threatening attacks. Families are beginning to question whether they should leave SA for other shores, including Israel. The subsequent loss of intellectual capital from the country will not bode well either for the remaining Jewish community or for the development and stabilisation of South Africa in general.

The next general election in South Africa takes place this May. The country is seething with both unexploded and mushrooming anger around poor service delivery, lack of housing, corruption at the highest levels, falling educational standards and other sources of dissatisfaction. Incumbent President Cyril Ramaphosa, who took over the reins after 10 destructive and disastrous years under the baton of Jacob Zuma, has a tough job to do: and if the ruling ANC party comes in, but not with Ramaphosa as its leader, the situation could be greatly exacerbated.

And yet, there are positive signs amongst the negative. The 15<sup>th</sup> Israel Apartheid Week was held on our university campuses recently. These have always been aggressive, heated, ugly and openly hostile, and have caused SAUJS (South Africa Union of Jewish Students) and Jewish students to anticipate with fear the inevitable verbal and physical acts of hatred with which they have been confronted over the years. However, this year was different. The annual hate-fest was low-key, quiet, almost boring, with no incidents worth noting; and while there were individual confrontations between a few students, in the main the week came, and went, and has gone. No-one is questioning that – only breathing sighs of relief.

### **3. Downgrading the South African Embassy in Israel**

At the ANC National Congress held at the end of 2017, one of the items under discussion was that of downgrading South Africa's embassy in Israel to that of a consulate. This has created huge dissension across the country, with the pro-Palestinian factions cheering the government while the Jewish and many Christian bodies are challenging it on all fronts. It has been like a yo-yo – up and down and no-one knew for certain what the end result would be.

It was inevitable, given the overt hostility to Israel's policies by the SA government, that it would be negative – and it was. In April this year South Africa's Minister of International relations, Lindiwe Sisulu, stated publicly that the government's *"Ambassador is back in South Africa and we will not be replacing him. Our liaison office in Tel Aviv will have no political mandate, no trade mandate and no development cooperation mandate. It will not be responsible for trade and commercial activities. The focus of the Liaison Office would be on consular and the facilitation of people-to-people relations"*. SA has 'no relations with Israel'.

This is a bitter blow for the South African Jewish community, which has been counting on tacit support for Israel coming from the President. It is racist, antisemitic and creates even more uncertainty in a community which has over the centuries contributed enormously to the growth and development of all sectors of South Africa. While strongly Zionist, the community is also strongly patriotic to its homeland; this move has shaken the foundations of the community. In the words of Zev Krengel, Vice-President of the SAJBD, *"This is the single biggest issue to affect South African Jewry in modern times ... We live at a time where there is a Jewish state, so to live without diplomatic relations is like going to shul and not having a Torah in the ark."*

Sara Gon of the Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) said, *"The position seems to be that on the one hand, the ANC is going to sever all and any relationships with Israel and has no desire to play a conciliatory role in the Middle East conflict. On the other, the ANC wants Israeli and South African Jewish money, and Ramaphosa will flatter the community to deceive. The ANC is nothing if not pragmatic – Jews can contribute economically, but they have nothing to offer electorally."*

At the time of writing this report, the status quo remains as is.

### **4. Further antisemitic incidents in South Africa**

\*\* The University of Cape Town attempted to achieve an academic boycott of Israel and would have been the first tertiary institution in the world to do so. The UCT Council declined to adopt a Senate resolution that UCT impose an academic boycott against Israel and referred the matter back to the Senate for further discussion. But that too failed thanks to the untiring efforts of and lobbying by the university's SAUJS committee, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), community members protesting and writing letters to the papers and commenting on social media.

\*\* A lesser but equally destructive incident took place at one of the senior schools during a Public Speaking Festival. The presentation argued that Nazi medical experiments were ultimately beneficial for humanity because of the resulting advancements in medical knowledge.

\*\* Students of one of the local universities displayed a swastika while being taken on a guided tour of the JHB Holocaust & Genocide Centre.

\*\* A Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions South Africa (BDS-SA) board member compared Israelis to Nazis, and demonised Israeli soldiers by portraying them as calculated mass murderers and child killers.

\*\* At a conference held at Stellenbosch University last year, it was suggested that Israeli academics be removed from the speaking programme in response to BDS intimidation. The university later issued a press statement reiterating its commitment to academic freedom and emphasizing that all academics, including Israeli ones, were welcome there.

\*\* Antisemitic graffiti which were daubed on the road near the Pretoria synagogue were later removed by the Pretoria City Council.

\*\* The recent brouhaha involving South African comedian and satirist Deep Fried Man, aka Daniel Friedman, was an ugly wake-up call for many in the community that hardcore neo-Nazi sentiment is rearing its sinister head for all to see on social media platforms. Friedman was falsely accused of making fun of farm murders in a video he produced which was later altered and distorted by someone – an Afrikaner-rights activist – allegedly bearing a grudge against him. This ignited a loathsome flurry of right-wing anti-Semitism online, which led to the Jewish performer fearing for his life and taking himself off social media. Among the many comments sent to Friedman, one read: *“You are Jew scum and like 99.9% of you oxygen thieves don’t belong on this planet. Hope you get lynched by a hoard of black savages and your balls cut off and placed in your mouth. SIEG HEIL!”*

## **5. Conclusion**

South Africae has become fertile ground for the resurgence of anti-Jewish conspiracies as people look for someone to blame. There is a renewed sense of anger and paranoia across the country with the unravelling of the post-1994 spirit of inclusivity, reconciliation and anti-racism.

We can only hope that the May elections will set in motion a new trajectory for the people of South Africa. When life returns to normal, when citizens are given hope that the future will bring the much-needed change, when housing and education and health are seen to be the priorities of the government, blaming the Jews for all the ills of society will, we trust, be laid to rest.

*“Anti-Semitism is best understood as a virus. It has no logic. Jews were hated because they were rich and because they were poor; because they were capitalists and because they were communists; because they held tenaciously to an ancient faith and because they were rootless cosmopolitans, believing nothing. Hate needs no logic. It is a sickness of the soul.”*  
**(Lord Jonathan Sacks)**

*“Antisemitism is unique among religious hatreds. It is a racist conspiracy theory fashioned for the needs of messianic and brutal rulers, as dictators from the Tsars to the Islamists via the Nazis have shown.”*  
**(Nick Cohen).**

Truer words never spoken.

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