

Israel-Palestine Conflict: Declaration of Conscience

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Speech by Ronnie Kasrils

1. In just six weeks a statement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict issued by Max Ozinsky and myself has attracted 220 signatories – from South Africans of Jewish descent.

Some of us are fully practising Jews and others like Max and I, not so, but we are all proud of our Jewish origins, and feel compelled to speak out, in the name of justice and as an act of conscience, against Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territory and cruel suppression of the Palestinian's struggle for national self-determination – which we cite as the fundamental cause of the conflict.

2. Our signatories include veteran activists who fought against Hitler, and who continued to fight for South Africa's freedom throughout their lives.

Our signatories include several generations of South African Jews who were heroically involved in the struggle against apartheid from the 1950's through to the early 1990's

Our signatories are veteran activists who have retired from public life but remain activists; and later generations of writers, journalists, artists, film makers, economists, educationalists, researchers, analysts, social and political scientists, labour organisers, government officials, politicians and business people, who in one way or another are making a dynamic contribution to the life of our newly democratic country.

Amongst us is a Noble prize-winner and one of our country's foremost writers Nadine Gordimer; a popular satirist and cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro); a Cabinet Minister and Members of Parliament; a number of the 1956 Treason Trialists; a Rivonia trialist Dennis Goldberg sentenced to life imprisonment with Nelson Mandela; and Arthur Goldreich, an escapee from that Rivonia saga who settled in Israel but joins us as a signatory; and many younger signatories who experienced detention and imprisonment in apartheid's prisons.

What is most significant of this list of conscience is that virtually all our signatories have participated in the struggle against apartheid over the years leading to our country's freedom in 1994.

Then as now we represented a tiny minority of whites who as a matter of conscience broke ranks with our supposed blood ties and pigmentation to protest against the brutal violation of human rights in the name of our tribe and race. Then and now we could not lend our names to the oppression of other human beings on the grounds that survival of our kith and kin was at stake, and that our unquestioning support and unity was necessary regardless of the methods used.

Then and now we saw that as morally shameful and an abrogation of the lessons of anti-Semitic persecution down the ages, and the ghastly nightmare of the Holocaust. We grew up with the question: why had the German people remained silent at the evil being implemented in their name? The eternal answer of humanity has always been: to remain silent in the face of evil is to condone evil. We by no means equate Hitler and Israel but Israel's measures to oppress the Palestinian struggle are an intolerable abuse of human rights, so we raise our voices as Jews and cry – out "Not in my name," and we join with all those in the world demanding justice for Palestinians and peace and security for all in the Holy Land – Christians, Jews Muslims, and non-believers.

In so doing we do not turn a blind eye to Israel's suffering and agony and sense of vulnerability. We are equally concerned that both Israelis and Palestinians should live in peace and security. We decry the loss of innocent lives on both sides. We unreservedly condemn terrorism in all forms, be this the state terrorism of the Israeli Government or the individual acts of suicide bombers or the killings carried out by Jewish settlers. We agree with the President of our country, Thabo Mbeki, in defining terrorism as the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians irrespective of the cause of such acts are meant to serve.

Our position is that the only answer to this bitter and bloody conflict is through the so-called two-state solution in terms of the various United Nations resolutions. Palestine must be accorded its full independence and sovereignty as a contiguous, territorial state and the existence of both Israel and Palestine must be internationally recognised and guaranteed. We stress that this must include recognition of both by the Arab states.

To effect this Israel must withdraw its troops from Palestinian territory and both sides must commit themselves to peace talks in terms of the Oslo process. Ours is therefore hardly a radical position but almost a universally adopted one. (In fact our argument has not been countered by our detractors in South Africa who have concentrated on personal vilification instead.) To break out of the cycle of violence requires good faith by

both sides but we say that Israel, as a virtual colonial power, and with overwhelming resources, should show magnanimity and take the moral step of leading the way.

Time is running out and Israel must pull back from its present perilous stance of ignoring the Oslo process and proclaiming, as Sharon does, that there can only be a military solution. This has failed time and time again, not only in the Middle East, but in every other colonial style situation in history including South Africa.

As Jews we are deeply concerned that this military path, will in the long run imperil the very existence of the State of Israel, whatever its short term tactical gains might be. History shows that the violent repression of a people only breeds more intensive resistance. And that is exactly what has led to the often desperate measures of Palestinian resistance.

The just struggle of the Palestinians for human rights and national independence has brought the Holy Land to the point of truth. As Yitzhak Rabin stated “enough of blood” in advocating the “peace of the brave”.

As South African Jews we support such a courageous initiative which was tragically cut short by a Jewish terrorist and urgently needs to be rekindled.

Our stance is neither anti- Israeli or anti- Jewish. We call for justice and fairness for both Israelis and Palestinians.

We may be a minority of South African Jewry at present, but throughout history change has come about by the conscience of a minority seeking the truth; a minority often ridiculed and ostracised but never cowed into silence. South Africa’s history is proof of that.

So where to for the two hundred and twenty who have signed thus far?

Firstly: Our signature campaign continues and will grow. We have just begun. Our actions thus far and today’s events in Cape Town and Johannesburg are the beginning and will grow. Our raised voices are reaching many other members of the community who are deeply disturbed by Israel’s action, and who are not being assisted by their spiritual leaders who themselves are insensitive and out of touch with the challenges. We will reach those fellow Jews and our list of signatures will grow.

Secondly: we will engage with the members of the community but not in an environment of hostility – not as party to emotional and pointless slanging matches, but rather in the spirit of honest and critical debate which was once the hall-mark of a vibrant Jewish life in South Africa but which has sadly withered away under the stifling leadership of conservatives and reactionaries. We will build up our support essentially through workshops and house meetings and will debate under civilised rules.

Thirdly we will link with the peace movement in Israel and struggling Palestinian organisations, and we will join hands with the like-minded groups in the Diaspora. Our vision is that of an international movement calling for justice for Palestine and peace and security for Israel and Palestine.

Fourth: as South Africans we will not confine ourselves to the Jewish community. We will join forces with all our countrymen and women and mobilise for a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in the Holy Land.