

# Taken for a Ride by the Israeli Left

A Response to Uri Avnery

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Uri Avnery is a human rights crusader of venerable standing. He has fought, written, published and campaigned for Palestinian rights for some sixty years. He has stood on the political barricades and faced down bulldozers to defend Palestinians from Israeli military abuse. His articles, books, and magazine denounced Israel's seizure of Palestinian land before most of the "new historians" learned to write. He even denounces legalized discrimination against Palestinian Israelis in uncompromising terms and has called for Israel to become "a state of all its citizens", although still retaining a large Jewish majority (e.g., see his recent "What Makes Sammy Run?"). As a founder of the peace group Gush Shalom, he remains the recognized godfather of liberal Zionism and no one doubts his sincerity in insisting on a two-state solution.

Given all this, it may seem odd that many people working hard for a stable peace in Israel-Palestine find Mr. Avnery so immensely irritating. The reason stems from his moral contradictions, all too common to liberal Zionism: that is, while taking an unflinching moral stand against racist abuses of Palestinians, he somehow drops the same principles in assuming that Israel itself has a right to preserve its "Jewish character" at the expense of Palestinian rights. For it is all too obvious that sustaining an "overwhelming" Jewish majority in Israel, essential to preserving its "Jewish character," requires that Israel sustain a whole cluster of racist practices, such as giant Walls to keep people from mixing and not allowing Palestinian exiles to return.

Liberal Zionists who cling to Mr. Avnery's analyses consistently trip over this moral fallacy. They want the occupation to end and find oppression of Palestinians morally abhorrent, and some even believe that discrimination against Palestinian Arabs must end. But they don't want Israel's status as a state run for only one ethnic group to end. They must therefore endorse whatever discrimination is deemed essential to preserving Israel's Jewish majority, particularly in keeping those Palestinians expelled from what is now Israel from ever coming back. In this view, Israel itself is morally okay — a "miracle," as David Grossman recently put it — or it would be okay if its leaders hadn't stupidly stumbled into military occupation after the 1967 war.

The result of this conundrum is moral chaos. While bald ravings about ethnic cleansing by racists like Avigdor Lieberman are considered repellent, the earlier ethnic cleansing that gave birth to Israel is considered acceptable — a convulsion of war violence that has (it is never explained how) been morally transcended. The solution, in this view, is not to redress that founding sin but simply to stabilize Jewish statehood, which is understood mostly as relieving Jewish-Israeli fear of attack or annihilation. Recognizing that some modicum of justice is required to achieve this "peace", the liberal-Zionist goal is to create a Palestinian state next door (safely demilitarized, of course, and not necessarily within the 1948 green line).

It takes a special kind of denial to hold onto this worldview, especially in light of fresh histories like Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, which demolish the soothing fantasy that Israel's history of ethnic cleansing was an accident of war. This isn't surprising in itself: nationalist myths everywhere dismantle slowly. But Mr. Avnery does not fall into the classic category. He exposed

Zionist crimes before anyone else. Yet he has never lost his affection for Jewish statehood or his dedication to preserving Israel's Jewish majority in Israel. He knows that, in 1948, Zionist troops ruthlessly terrorized and expelled hundreds of thousands of defenceless Palestinians from their villages and threw them out of the country. But he believes that the agenda of preserving the Jewish-Israeli society that he treasures not only mandates but grants moral authority to not allowing them back.

It is from this muddle of contradictory tenets that Mr. Avnery approaches the "apartheid" charge, given new publicity by President Carter's recent book. In a recent *Counterpunch* essay, "Freedom Ride: Israel and Apartheid", he rejects any lessons the comparison suggests for a one-state solution in Israel-Palestine.

Mr. Avnery's argument against the apartheid analogy is not that Israeli state policies toward the Palestinians are not racist. He agrees that the occupation is racist and that the settlements and the Wall are creating a Bantustan Palestinian state. He endorses the term "apartheid" to describe Israeli policy in the West Bank. He also argues what is incontestably true: that many people treat the comparison of Israel with South Africa too casually and commit errors of logic. (His "Eskimo" comparison, about chewing water, is an uncomfortably antiquarian reference to the Inuit but makes the point). This care we endorse: genuine differences distinguish South Africa and Israel that do require careful consideration.

But Mr. Avnery's own analysis includes glaring logical and factual errors, stemming partly from a fundamental misunderstanding of what apartheid was and how it worked. He seems to think apartheid was an extreme version of Jim Crow, in which blacks were subordinated while being incorporated into a white society. In fact, apartheid was a system of racial domination based, crucially, on the notion of physical separation. The doctrines, policies, and collective psychologies of the Israeli and South African systems were much more similar than he recognizes and it is vital to spell these out.

Mr. Avnery's main argument stems from his most profound misconception. He warns that a campaign for South African-style unification in Israel-Palestine would only trigger new ethnic cleansing, because brooding Jewish anxiety about the "demographic threat" (too many non-Jews) would inspire Israeli reactionaries to forcibly expel the entire Palestinian population. Yet he considers this risk special to Israel, on grounds that it didn't exist in South Africa: "no White would have dreamt of ethnic cleansing. Even the racists understood that the country could not exist without the Black population." Yet a key feature of apartheid was forcible population transfers. Celebrated books have been written about the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and lands in an attempt to create a "white South Africa" in which blacks would be allowed only as "guest workers". So widespread was the policy of "forced removals" in order to "whiten" South Africa that we will probably never know how many people were really moved; the campaigns were far more systematic attempts at "ethnic cleansing" than anything attempted in Eastern Europe. If Mr. Avnery thinks apartheid had nothing to do with population transfer, he does not even vaguely understand apartheid.

Mr. Avnery supports this flawed analysis by offering four reasons why the apartheid comparison should not guide a solution in Israel-Palestine. First, he says that consensus on a one-state solution was already in place in South Africa. Blacks and whites, he argued, "agreed that the state of South Africa must remain intact — the question was only who would rule it. Almost nobody proposed to partition the country between the Blacks and the Whites".

This is a fundamental misunderstanding. Territorial separation of blacks and whites was the central plank of official apartheid policy at least until 1985 — that is, for almost four decades. Central to the

policy was the claim that 87 percent of the country's land mass belonged only to whites and that blacks were allowed into it only under sufferance and without rights. In the late 1970s, for example, a senior Cabinet Minister told the South African Parliament that eventually "there will be no black South Africans". Part of this policy was the creation of phoney "black homelands" which were given sham "independence" to make the point that their "citizens" were no longer South African — just as Israel's "two state" policies promise a "homeland" for Palestinians today. The acknowledgment that South Africa should remain intact was a consequence of apartheid's defeat, not a feature of the system.

Second, Mr. Avnery argues that, while racial separation in South Africa was a white agenda universally rejected by blacks, in Israel-Palestine both peoples want separate states. "Our conflict is between two different nations with different national identities, each of which places the highest value on a national state of its own." He affirms that only a radical micro-minority on both sides wants a single state. On the Jewish side, he says, these radicals are the religious zealot settlers who insist on retaining all of the West Bank. On the Palestinian side, the rejectionists are "the Islamic fundamentalists [who] also believe that the whole country is a "waqf"(religious trust) and belongs to Allah, and therefore must not be partitioned."

These sweeping assessments of either case do not hold up. First, black South Africans were not so monolithic in their own views. The ANC supported unification and democracy but factions of South Africa's black population bought into the "homelands" concept. Best known for this was the Inkatha Freedom Party in KwaZulu, but other groups also embraced the homeland policy for the power and patronage it allowed them — much as Fatah is embracing the truncated "state" offered by Israel today. Yes, the vast majority of black opinion rejected separate "homelands". But the small section of black society that felt it had something to gain from the "homelands" did not.

Palestinian views are not so monolithic, either. Polls conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre from 2000 through 2006 have shown Palestinian support for a two-state solution (understood as an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip) running at only around 50 percent. Adherence to the vision of one Palestinian state in all of Palestine has waffled between 8 and 18 percent. But notably, support for a single "bi-national" state in all of Israel-Palestine has hovered stubbornly between 20 and 25 percent — a strikingly high figure given that the one-state option is not under public debate among Palestinians. (The reason for this silence is not that unification is unpopular, but that its discussion would undermine the premise for the Palestinian Authority's "interim" existence and is therefore politically very sensitive.) If a quarter of Palestinians support a one-state solution even under these daunting conditions, it is not unreasonable to propose, as do veteran Palestinian activists like Ali Abunimah (author of the new book, *One Country*), that wider Palestinian support for unification would quickly manifest under more conducive ones.

It's also relevant that, in these same polls, Palestinian support for an Islamic state has run at about 3 percent. Clearly, 25-percent Palestinian support for a unified state can't be reduced, as Mr. Avnery suggests, to Islamic radicalism.

Third, Mr. Avnery points to the different demographics of the two conflicts. In South Africa, a 10-percent white minority ruled over a 78-percent black majority (as well as "coloreds" and Indians), while in Israel-Palestine the Jewish and Palestinian populations are roughly equal, at about 5 million each. But this point leaves the argument hanging — so what? Any idea that it somehow makes the comparison inapplicable fails in two ways. First, it fails morally. Does oppression change qualitatively if the population distribution between the oppressor and oppressed vary? Would apartheid not have been apartheid if whites were half the population? Second, it fails in its political logic. Surely the black "threat" perceived by a 10-percent white minority in South Africa was far

greater than the Palestinian Arab “threat” now feared by a Jewish-Israeli population standing at roughly 50 percent. Not surprisingly, the fear of being “swamped” by a large black majority was frequently cited by apartheid’s supporters as a rationale for continuing to deny black rights. Yet Israeli Jews are far better positioned to retain political and economic power in Israel than were whites (especially Afrikaners) in South Africa.

Finally, Mr. Avnery holds that unification in South Africa was driven by racial economic interdependency. “The SA economy was based on Black labor and could not possibly have existed without it”. In its initial phases, apartheid did try to minimize any dependence on blacks, by trying to relegate blacks only to menial labour. Black Africans were not permitted to do work reserved for whites (or for Indians and “coloreds”). There was, for example, a strict ban on blacks working as artisans outside the segregated homelands. The system started unravelling in the late 1960s when the economy ran out of whites in some semi-skilled and skilled occupations and the government was forced to allow blacks in. That change gave black workers greater bargaining power and, with other factors, provided a base for more effective organised resistance. Whether the Israelis will be forced at some point to let Palestinians back into the labour market is hard to know. But even here the differences are not as stark as he claims.

In his conclusions, Mr. Avnery argues that the apartheid comparison also fails on the question of an international boycott. “It is a serious error,” he insists, “to think that international public opinion will put an end to the occupation. This will come about when the Israeli public itself is convinced of the need to do so.” This argument suggests that Mr. Avnery does not understand how apartheid fell, either. White South Africans did not change their minds about apartheid simply because the moral and political case was finally brought home to them by black street demonstrations and labour strikes. They did so when a strategic campaign of hard and bloody domestic struggle was supported by concerted international pressure, which included boycotts of South African products and the currency as well as artists and sports teams.

The economic effects of these sanctions against South Africa are still debated. But the psychological effect of international isolation on South African whites’ willingness to change was immense and became one of the key levers which ended apartheid. As late as 1992, when whites were asked to endorse a negotiated settlement in a referendum, media interviews with voters showed that whites’ desire to “rejoin the international community” persuaded many who might have voted against a settlement to endorse it.

To attribute the “lack of bloodshed” in that transition to “wise leaders” like de Klerk and Nelson Mandela is to misunderstand how those historic figures were able to play their vital role precisely because of this far larger and historical collective effort. Just as it was impossible to imagine a negotiated end to apartheid without international isolation of South Africa, so it is hard to imagine that a political solution to the Palestinian conflict will be achieved unless substantial pressure is exerted on Israel by the world.

But an even deeper mistake underlies Mr. Avnery’s pessimism about a one-state solution on the South African model: he seems to confuse the South Africa that everyone saw at the 1990 negotiations with the South Africa that existed before then. This all-too-common error holds that the factors which led to a settlement were immutable parts of the South African reality. In fact, political consensus about the need for national unity crystallized only after a long and bitter struggle, whose successful outcome had seemed just as implausible to most commentators as a shared society in Israel now seems to Mr Avnery. Forgetting this history indeed erases from it those courageous campaigners who fought for decades for the principle of national unity, sometimes at the cost of their lives. In fact, South Africans were never united in the view that the country had to be shared — many whites still reject the notion today. This is partly why, as late as the 1980s, much scholarship

and “expert” commentary on South Africa continued to assume that the conflict was intractable and that a shared society was impossible, citing many of the same arguments that are repeatedly cited in the Palestinian case.

It clearly suits those who believe that partition is the only solution to act as though the world never changes. But it does — and did under apartheid. It will change also in Palestine.

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**P.S.**

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