

Comparable to South Africa?

“Within Israel, It Is Not Apartheid. But in the Occupied Territories, It Is”

Interview with Dr. Alon Liel, *former Israeli ambassador to South Africa from 1992-1994*

By Yizhar Be'er who runs the podcast “Parot Kdushot” (Sacred Cows).



Following is an excerpt from the episode “The Elephant in the Room - This Is How Apartheid From the Curse of South Africa Becomes a Nightmare of Israel,” an interview with Dr. Alon Liel by Yizhar Be'er on February 3 for the “*Parot Kdushot*” podcast. It was conducted following the publication of the Amnesty International report that accused Israel of maintaining an apartheid regime in both the occupied territories and the State of Israel. The full 90-minute podcast in Hebrew is available at Sacred Cows – Israeli Myths.

Yizhar Be'er: Experts in Israel estimated at the time that apartheid would not fall because the whites' relinquishment of their rule would be akin to collective suicide. Blacks would just slaughter them. These predictions did not come to pass, but a paradise has not been established in South Africa.

Alon Liel: As early as 1986, we told the Foreign Ministry that it would take five to seven years for a democratic revolution in South Africa. The security establishment, especially the Mossad and the Ministry of Defense and everyone involved in arms sales, said 30 years, if at all. In February 1990, Mandela was released, which was the beginning of the end of apartheid, and in April 1994, he was elected, and that was the end of apartheid.

Can you explain where the difference between the assessments came from?

Look, if you have a chicken that lays golden eggs every day, and some neighbor comes and tells you “close the coop because the noise of the falling eggs bothers us,” you will have a very hard time giving up the

golden eggs. The Israeli security establishment kept meeting with the white commanders, who told them “there is no way this is going to happen; we have atomic weapons, and we’ve stripped them even of their slingshots.” Our ambassadors read and heard what was going on there, however, and realized that international criticism was beginning and that our position was also damaging our image.

Can you describe the turning point that led to a change in Israeli policy?

The important turning point was when the U.S. State Department published the list of countries that sell weapons to South Africa. There were three categories. Three countries sold without the knowledge of the government, three countries sold with the knowledge of the government, and there was one country, Israel, whose government itself sold.

Then Congress made a decision that countries that sell arms to South Africa would not get foreign aid. I think that was the real turning point. Especially with Rabin. Until then there was only talk, but suddenly it was check against check. Get the money from arms sales to South Africa or get billions in foreign aid from the United States. Although there was no way the United States would totally halt foreign aid, we pushed that thesis because we thought it could make the difference within the system. And it did.

Did anyone from the defense industry or the security establishment come and say, “Listen, you're causing a disaster here?”

A representative of the Ministry of Defense said at the meetings every day:” We will have to lay off 20,000-25,000 workers who support 120,000-130,000 people. At your own risk! You will bring about the collapse of the economy, of our security.”

And it happened?

It did not happen, because we did not stop selling....

What do you mean by “we did not stop selling?”

"In March 1987, we decided not to sign new deals with South Africa in the field of defense. Only then did we in the Foreign Ministry find out that Israel was selling weapons to South Africa. Up to that point, we had lied on a daily basis, although most of us did not know we were lying. I was asked “Do you sell weapons to South Africa?” What the hell!?! With all my heart I answered “Whose coming up with these plots?” In Tel Aviv, they knew we were lying, but we did not know much.

Is it acceptable that staff within the foreign service lies or conceals critical information?

It's not just acceptable, it's institutionalized. We were totally isolated. In fact, when I was appointed ambassador and came to South Africa, I saw that 80% of the embassy staff consisted of members of the defense establishment and the defense industries.

In your book *Black Justice* you describe the embassy as a compound divided into two, and with no convergence between the parts.

At the entrance to the embassy we made two exits: right - to the civilian embassy, and left - to the independent security embassy. All the time I was ambassador, I did not step foot in that part of the embassy.

But did you have the authority to demand information if, for example, it was relevant to your work?

Maybe I could have demanded, but they would have dodged my request. No one in the defense establishment considered updating me at all.

You are basically reinforcing the myth that we have a security system that has a state rather than a state that has a security system.

When it comes to arms sales, it must have been like that.
If there's anyone connected to South Africa who makes Liel sound like a teenager in love, it's Nelson Mandela.

Let's talk about Mandela. How many times did you meet?

Dozens.

Can you outline his contours as a political figure?

Mandela was mega-charismatic. I knew almost all the leaders of Israel up to that point, and I saw their abilities and their limitations. In Mandela, there was something that when you entered the room -- I do not know how to explain it -- there was some aura around him. First of all, his appearance. He was handsome. He was tall, about 1.88 meters, something like that. He dressed in a very special way, and his body language radiated as if a fire had entered him.

Once he agreed to receive you, you were his brother. I have never seen anything like it in my life. When we came to the first meeting, even though some of the things he said were harsh and poignant, he treated us like equals. He radiated a lot of human warmth. His ability for human touch made you

fall in love with him. It is difficult for an ambassador to fall in love with another politician, but his people fell in love with him. The moment we first met he asked me “what are your children's names?” and I told him.

And you melted?

You melt. Listen, I've worked with a lot of Israeli leaders, and we're always divided into IQ (level of intellectual intelligence) and EQ (level of emotional intelligence). He had a very high EQ. He just loved people and knew how to give you the feeling that once you are by his side, there is no person more important than you in the world. And in my case, he had every reason to hate us. After all, he knew exactly what we did with South Africa 20 years earlier.

That is on the personal level, but on the general public level, how did he win the hearts of the people and become so revered?

There were wonderful people around him. By the way, when we talk about corruption today in South Africa, a shred of blemish is not stuck to any of them. The entire leadership in Mandela's generation was made up of modest people who dedicated their lives to the struggle. He was surrounded by good people, but no one approached the magnitude of his charisma.



South Africa during the Apartheid era, circa 1981

The apartheid leaders immediately realized that they were up against a mega-charismatic leader with a rare verbal communicative ability, with an ability to excite. Therefore, they banned him from attending political meetings with more than five people even before he was imprisoned. It was forbidden to mention Mandela's name or show his picture, but he became known through word of mouth. Parents told their children “we have a great leader in prison, and his name is Nelson Mandela.”

Was it actually a prison or was he held under house arrest?

For 15 years he sat in a small cell in solitary confinement on Robin Island, a small island a few miles outside of Cape Town. In the morning they would be taken out to a rocky mountain 90-80 meters from the prison and told to strike the mountainside with hammers. No purpose. You work from morning until tonight, you knock against the wall, you spend many hours on your knees, with things splashing into your eyes. His most serious health problems were in his knees and eyes, from hard work.

After 15 years it was impossible to keep it up, and he was released from solitary confinement. He was still imprisoned, but in an apartment in Cape Town. For the last two years of their negotiations with him, he was in a villa in Cape Town. They told him “You are the chief's son. Your father is no longer alive. If we release you, you're the chief. Be the chief in Transkei.”

In negotiating a change of government, he maintained the principle of not taking revenge on whites. He prevented what the whites had warned would happen. Could one imagine different results with a different personality?

Certainly. In the 1950s there were two currents in the black public: the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). The difference between them was that the ANC spoke of a Rainbow Nation (a term coined by Desmond Tutu and expanded by Mandela as a vision for post-apartheid South Africa) that says South Africa belongs to everyone. The PAC and the more radical currents affiliated with it said “No, when we come to power we will do to them what they did to us.”

Let's talk a little about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is interesting not only in itself but also in relation to the question of whether such a thing can exist in our conflict. One of its amazing aspects was that it was geared not to convict but only to acquit.

When Mandela came to power, he set up a team to travel the world and see where the most successful Truth and Reconciliation Commission

was. There were already some at that time. He concluded that the Chilean Commission was the most successful, and he copied many things from it.

It dealt with the period of Pinochet?

Yes, with the abductions and disappearances during the Pinochet period. He immediately realized that it had to be demarcated in time, and the key was: “If you were part of the fighting forces and you give me information, you will not be convicted.” He defined the fighting forces as people who were mobilized into the army, the police, the ANC and the MK (uMkhonto we Sizwe), its military arm. These were not hooligans who went out to rob banks; these were people who took action in the struggle between blacks and whites.

But you describe, for example, the chemist, the general, who produced toxins and sent people to kill political opponents. Can such a man come out unscathed?

None of the 21,000 people who appeared before the commission were convicted, and they did not go to jail. Him, too. According to Mandela's thesis, he was a general but above him was a major general, and a defense minister, and a prime minister who gave him orders and a budget. He was part of the fighting forces.”

A soldier?

He was a soldier. He had more knowledge; he knew how to apply some chemical ointment on the underwear that would kill you when you put them on in some hotel in Paris, but the soldiers had other equally bad tasks. After killing some blacks in some town they would place a gun in their hand. But that did not change who they were. In Chile, they came to the conclusion that almost everyone who did terrible things did it out of ideology. And if you did it out of ideology, and you were within a framework, you were no longer guilty.

And those upstairs? Were they subject to the possibility of conviction and punishment?

Mandela did not hesitate for a second. He had the option to go to Nuremberg or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Nuremberg trials take all the leaders, present all the evidence against them, and put them in jail. Mandela did not go in that direction. He said “I want a rainbow; I want the whites here. It was their country. In their crazy, racist way, they

fought for this country. Someone convinced them that this is the way to save the country — that apartheid is the way.

One of the first things Mandela did after he was elected was to go to some godforsaken town and have coffee with Hendrik Verwoerd's wife, who was the founder of apartheid, to say: "I want you all here. You are all South Africans. You were all patriots. You did terrible things. Difficult, but there were circumstances, there was war, there was ideology." Shocking, but he would be pardoned."

In the polls held at the end of the Commission's work, there was not much support for it as a successful idea.

"It was the whites who did not like the Commission very much." Especially de Klerk. What was the Commission? I saw how it worked. It was like a tribunal. People sat on the stage like at a theater. The witnesses appeared, there was an audience, and everything was televised. De Klerk said: "This is terrible from our point of view." Because people were pardoned but after all of South Africa saw what they had done — their children, their neighbors — and after everyone saw what they had done, they could no longer function. They were free men, they were pardoned, but after everyone saw that they had murdered black men, burned their bodies, and planted guns in their hands they told Mandela, "You are tearing families apart. We will not stand for it." But there was an element of catharsis.

Is there any scenario where such a commission could arise at some point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was after there was an agreement. That is not the case with us.

Is Israel becoming an apartheid state, as some accuse it of being? Is it even possible to make an "objective" comparison between Israel's policy in the territories and South African apartheid?

This is the trap everyone falls into. In South Africa, black and white could not sit on the same bench. Here, if you go to Jaffa you will see a Jew and an Arab on the same bench. It's true, we are really something else. But the most significant thing is that we do not recognize the other side's narrative. We do not recognize its collective rights, we say the West Bank is ours and question what they are doing there, and so on. That's the heart of the matter. The Irish called it parity of esteem (partnership on the basis of mutual appreciation and respect). You cannot make peace if there is no parity of esteem. Without it, there will never be equality. We are richer and

stronger than them, but it would be worthwhile for us to grant them esteem, show them personal respect and recognize their narrative. If you do not have equal rights, you will not be able to make peace.

Within Israel, we do not trample the narrative of the Israeli Arabs. We let them speak their language, and it's a fact that today they are in parliament and even in the coalition. I do not think the situation within Israel is comparable to South Africa. But in the West Bank, it is comparable in the nominal, demographic sense. The settlers make up 15% of the West Bank population, and in South Africa whites were about 15% of the population. Our control over what happens in the West Bank is total. Control over who goes in and who goes out.

Therefore, to answer you clearly, I would say that within Israel of 1967 there is no apartheid, although there is discrimination and inequality. The thing that comes closest to apartheid within our borders is the nation-state law. With it, we downgraded the Arab population in law. We should recall that with apartheid, there were 300 laws that created separate living systems by color. In the West Bank, inequality is institutionalized, so there is apartheid in the West Bank.

Have you changed your mind since your days in the Foreign Ministry?

When I served in Turkey in the early 1980s, Gush Emunim and Peace Now were more or less equal in power. I remember sitting in the embassy and crying over every settlement that was established on the ground. I realized we were doing something wrong and enabling the creation of a time bomb. But, you build a system of justifications. You say: There is a government that is allowing this to happen, but it is talking about a trade-off. We will remove them when there is peace. I always believed that the governments I was serving wanted peace. Some of them even made peace. However, at a certain point, about 20 years ago, the government eliminated the idea of a two-state solution from the coalition agreements. From that moment, I could no longer live with it.

Could you represent Israel today?

No!

How do you explain that except for a few cases of people who said “I can't any longer” - like Ilan Baruch, who was also ambassador to South Africa - I do not remember cases of ambassadors or senior Foreign Ministry officials saying “I can no longer represent Israeli Government policy?”

This situation pains me. Look at all those retirees from the defense establishment, look at those officers and what they are saying today.

That's an interesting phenomenon. Where were they beforehand?

Right. I live within a diplomatic circle. Former ambassadors meet, start talking, tell the truth. Many of us did not believe we would get to the point where we want to annex and want one state. I give officials, both security and foreign, the benefit of the doubt that they really believed that we are ultimately striving for two states and that there are things that need to be done in the meantime, and they are not very nice things. In addition, people build careers over 40 years, and even when they start to see that they don't support the policy, they have responsibilities to their families. They are not like lawyers who can simply move to another firm.

What is your position on the issue of external pressure, boycotts? After all, you participated in all kinds of initiatives with the European Union calling for a change in policy toward the settlement enterprise.

My position is that we must never ignore what is happening in the territories and must not abandon the Palestinians. It stems from my recognition that if we swallow the Palestinian people within us, we will cease to be a democratic state and cease to be a Jewish state. The situation is such that the solution cannot come from within.

Therefore, even based on the South African experience, if the world abandons the Palestinians, we will grind them down to nothing politically. We are so strong and they are so weak that they will put up with almost anything we do, provided they have food and health, education, and so on. I am haunted by nightmares that what we will get to is exactly South African apartheid. It will not be apartheid only in the West Bank but will become apartheid throughout Israel.