THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI PROBLEM

Diplomatic relations between South Africa and Israel varied altered with the new political dispensation. Israel established a legation in South Africa in 1952 which was upgraded to an embassy in 1974. South Africa established a Consulate General in Tel Aviv in 1972 and upgraded this to an Embassy in December 1975.

Following the democratic transition in South Africa and the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Palestine, South Africa adopted an approach favouring a resolution of the Israel – Palestinian conflict through peaceful negotiations, on the basis of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. In September 1995, after the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Palestine, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfred Nzo undertook an official visit to Israel signing an agreement establishing a Joint Commission of Co-operation between the two countries.

The first meeting of the Joint Commission negotiated five agreements for co-operation in the fields of agriculture, tourism, culture, environment and science and nature conservation. In a further effort to smooth the re-engineering of South African-Israeli relations, former Foreign Minister Nzo reassured the South African Jewish community in 1995 that: "Jews in South Africa should be able to practice their Zionism, religion and culture without hindrance or questions being raised about their patriotism and love for South Africa. Jews are free to love South Africa, their homeland and also to love Israel, the Jewish State, and to manifest freely their support for the well-being of the peoples of South Africa and the Jewish people of Israel". (Hughes 2004 : 152).

In spite of the belligerence on both sides, South Africa has continued to attach high importance to the resolution of the conflict by making it into a presidential initiative. Thabo Mbeki personally took the lead. The high status accorded to this conflict was understandable. The conflict in the Middle East bore a semblance to what the majority population had to endure under apartheid especially in respect of:

1. Racism and discrimination;
2. Human rights denial; and
3. National identity.
   (Hughes : 2004)

Due to the above similarities (perceived or factual) the world looked upon South Africa as an example from which practical lessons in conflict resolutions could be learnt and applied to other divided societies such as Israel/Palestine. Hughes noted that South

Africa's engagement with the Israeli – Palestinian conflict was shaped to an extent by its commitment to multilateralism and its membership and its position as the then Chair of Non-Alligned Movement (NAM) from 1998 to February 2003.

Tensions naturally arose between South Africa and Israel because of the modality of the country's international engagement. In 2001, for instance, South Africa hosted the World Conference against Racism, Xeophobia and Discrimination (WCAR) in Durban. While some participants embarked on legitimate protests against racism, xenophobia and discrimination, others however, caused the protests to degenerate into racist discourse and anti-Semitism. This resulted in the Israeli delegation withdrawing from the conference. Similarly, the United States sent only low level delegation in this conference. The results of this conference did not contribute to the improvement of bilateral relations between Pretoria and Jerusalem.

South Africa has at times been forced to explain its foreign policy actions in relation to its multilateral obligations, as distinct from its bilateral engagement. Hughes observed that one such occasion was during South Africa's chairing of NAM. In that position it was expected to lead a NAM delegation to Ramallah and express solidarity with Palestinian President Arafat. Again, this called for explanation by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, as this incident was interpreted as lack of even-handedness on the Middle East conflict by South Africa.

Relations between South Africa and Israel cooled when the Likud Party led by Ariel Sharon came into government as South Africa, in common with many other countries in the world, held that Sharon was responsible for not preventing the atrocities and massacres by the Christian Phalange against Palestinians in the Lebanese Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982 (Hughes : 2004).

The South African government, led by President Mbeki, initiated the Spier Peace Initiative. Both Israel and Palestine were invited to contribute to finding a solution to the Middle East conflict. Mbeki's efforts at mediation, however, were increasingly hampered by Israeli distrust and displeasure at the perceived pro-Palestinian bias within the DFA. Matters improved somewhat after the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General Yoav Biran visited Pretoria in 2003 and signing a number of outstanding protocols. Yet according to Hughes (2004 : 158), this progress has to some degree been off-set by the resignation of the Israeli ambassador to South Africa and the subsequent closure of the closure of the Israeli Trade Office in 2004.

South Africa's foreign policy in respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also has to take into cognisance domestic constituencies with competing interests, pressures and imperatives. For this reason historical, religious and ethnic disputes must be taken into

account in addition to all other pertinent issues. Within South Africa one must give consideration to the Jewish and Muslim perspectives as well as party political affiliations. In addition to these, the stance of Cosatu in the matter also bears consideration.

These domestic influences are dynamic. They exist simultaneously in a state of tension, peaceful coexistence and flux. The sensitive management of these processes is crucial in order to create a coherent and consistent political relations atmosphere that is conducive to the intractable nature of the problem being properly untangled to help effect a lasting resolution.

Ethan Bronner in an article published in the World on January 27, 2012, reported that "Israeli negotiators were telling their Palestinian counterparts that their guiding principle for drawing the borders of a future two-state solution would be for existing settlement blocks to become part of Israel, an approach that the Palestinians rejected as unacceptable".

The issue of the occupation of the West Bank on the one hand and the guarantee of non belligerent behaviour on the part of both parties have long been the sticking points over the last 20 years.

The fact that the parties are talking, under Jordanian sponsorship, is a positive development. The question of whether the talks will last and develop into something substantial is another matter. Thus far Jordan had "played host to five meetings for Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in an effort to get them back to full-blown peace talks after a break of more than a year"
In the roadmap agreed to by the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States both sides were required to present their approach to borders and security by the end of January 2012. It now appears that the deadline has been shifted to April.

Mr. Abbas is pursuing three tracks to Palestinian statehood simultaneously: the Jordanian-sponsored talks, unity with Hamas, which rules in Gaza, and seeking statehood recognition at the United Nations. What complicates the issue is that since 1967 Israel had settled hundreds of thousands of its Jewish citizens in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The Israeli government is seeking to keep some of the territory gained from the war for ideological and strategic reasons and on the other hand it is also keen "to uproot as few of the settlers as possible".

COPE takes the view that it is imperative to push ahead with the two state solution in a manner that achieves a win-win settlement for both sides. The issues that need to be dealt with are:

1. Border determination;
2. International law;
3. Cessation of belligerence;
4. Political compromise; and
5. Ongoing Joint Dispute Resolution.

It does not accord anyone any comfort to see this tragic and intractable problem being dragged on for ever only to complicate what was already enormously complicated before. South Africa cannot distance itself from its own history and because of that history it will understand the compelling necessity for both parties to find common ground because the gains will outweigh the losses.

The dynamics of politics in the Middle East are changing rapidly and democracy, human rights and justice must infuse the debate as much as the carry over items from earlier negotiations. At the domestic level constituents must be encouraged to focus on the solution rather than continuing a debate that encircles itself endlessly.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict needs an even-handed approach in order to encourage negotiations leading to a speedy and lasting resolution by both parties. COPE supports an intensive drive towards the creation of a two party state with an umbrella structure to allow for disputes to be settled as they occur. This will entail some kind of a confederal arrangement.