

*The Unspoken Alliance:*  
*Israel's secret relationship with apartheid South Africa*  
Sasha Polakow-Suransky  
London: Vintage Books, 2011, £16.00

One of the striking features of the apartheid years was the courageous determination of many South African Jews to bring down a regime significantly sustained through close alliance with Israel. In part this was a relationship of mutual economic and military interests. But as the author of this excellent book points out there was more to it than profit and battlefield bravado:

'After Menachem Begin's Likud Party came to power in 1977, these economic interests converged with ideological affinities to make the alliance even stronger. Many of the leaders of the Likud Party shared with South Africa's leaders an ideology of minority survivalism that presented the two countries as threatened outposts of European civilisation defending their existence against barbarians at the gate.'

Sasha Polakow-Suransky is well placed to throw light on this still largely hidden history. With family roots in both South Africa and Israel, he worked up the book in what reads like a labour of love from his Oxford doctorate. His investigative methods are a model combination of historical perspective, extensive archival research in an area 'where information and disinformation are equally important' and interviewing many of the key players in both countries.

'I traced former ambassadors to desert kibbutzim and elderly South African Jewish émigrés to designer apartments in the posh northern suburbs of Tel Aviv,' he writes. 'From the office of defence contractors to assisted living communities, I was treated to battlefield tales and old photo albums offering glimpses of a relationship that until now few government officials have dared to talk about.'

Along the way 'a Soviet spy who had sent some of South Africa's and Israel's most sensitive military secrets to

Moscow invited me to his home on the windswept coast of the Cape Peninsula, where he now lives comfortably among the retired naval officers he once betrayed.'

Polakow-Suransky reminds his readers of the unlikely antecedents of this relationship. John Vorster, the prime minister of apartheid South Africa, supported the Nazis during the Second World War. Owing its creation in large part to the consequences of that war, Israel forged close ties with the newly independent black states of Africa in its first 20 years of existence. The Six-Day War of 1967 began to move the two countries closer together, he says. But the alliance began in earnest after the Yom Kippur War of 1973:

'Though both countries were receiving various degrees of support from the United States, neither enjoyed a defence pact with Washington and both were wary of relying too heavily on the Americans for their survival – especially in the early 1970s, when unconditional US support for Israel was by no means assured.'

In subsequent years

'Israel's war-battered industries desperately needed export markets and the possibility of lucrative trade with South Africa was hard for Defence minister Shimon Peres to resist. As [Yitzhak] Rabin, Peres, and a new generation of leaders inherited the [Labour] party from David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, the conviction that compromising certain values was necessary for survival gained sway and socialist idealism gave way to realpolitik. During the Rabin years, South African arms purchases breathed life into the Israeli economy and Israeli weapons helped to reinforce the beleaguered and isolated apartheid regime in Pretoria.'

The author then details in a narrative that reads like a thriller an ever-closer but largely covert relationship that sustained both countries, enabled their nuclear weapon development and much else under a succession of public relations initiatives to conceal that reality.

But this Cold War alliance wasn't to last. During the

mid-1980s mounting international pressure for sanctions against South Africa, growing divisions within Israel over ties to the apartheid regime and rising resistance within South Africa itself began to undermine the solidity of the alliance. Ronald Reagan's policy of 'constructive engagement' with South Africa notwithstanding, mounting pressure in the US for apartheid sanctions and growing awareness of South Africa's links with Israel began to unnerve AIPAC and other Zionist lobbyists in Washington.

Israel then began to distance itself – at least publicly – from Pretoria with sanctions moves of its own in 1987. But this, writes Polakow-Suransky, did not sever the largely hidden business and military ties between the two countries:

'As apartheid crumbled in South Africa, the proceeds from old arms contracts continued to fill the Israeli treasury. Making sure that no one exposed these ongoing military ties was a task that fell to Israel's allies abroad.'

But even the efforts of the Anti-Defamation League and other Israel support networks could not halt the direction of change in South Africa:

'In Pretoria, the Israeli government went to great lengths to improve its image after [Nelson] Mandela's release. Veteran leftwing critics of apartheid were appointed to key posts, including Alon Liel, who became ambassador in 1992 and worked hard to redefine Israeli-South African relations for the post-apartheid era. Even so, the legacy of the 1970s and 1980s left Mandela with a sour taste.'

Polakow-Suransky tells the story of this Cold War relationship with enthusiastic energy and critical balance. In concluding reflections on the current state of Israel and its supporters' reactions to Jimmy Carter's use of 'apartheid' in the title of his book on the Israel-Palestine conflict he says this:

'To argue that all Israeli leaders after 1967 supported apartheid South Africa's rulers due to natural ideological affinities between Zionism and Africaner nationalism is misleading. After all it was a small – albeit

powerful and influential – minority of leading right-wing generals and politicians such as Rafal Eitan, Eliahu Lanking and Ariel Sharon, who openly admired the apartheid regime, defended its political programme, and identified with its leaders. Many left-wing Israelis vehemently opposed the alliance both in rhetoric and practice – with the notable exception of the ever-sanctimonious Shimon Peres. Yet rather than honestly confronting the complexity of Israel’s relationship with apartheid South Africa or countering the apartheid analogy with evidence of the genuine differences between the two systems, Israel’s defenders have resorted to vitriol and recycled propaganda.’

The author finds the apartheid comparison an imperfect one:

‘Unlike white South Africa and many other colonial regimes, Zionists never banned miscegenation or kept people they had conquered as servants in their homes. Nor did they rely on others to build the Jewish state they dreamed of.’

But he also warns that while the apartheid analogy may be inexact today, it won’t be forever:

‘By failing to heed the lessons of South Africa’s demise, Israel risks remaking itself in the image of the old apartheid state. Pretoria’s efforts in the mid-1970s to airbrush its image abroad ended in scandal; today, Israel’s glitzy tourism promotion and marketing of its high-tech industry have in many ways been undermined by an overwhelmingly bad reputation generated by the use of devastating force against seemingly powerless civilians, most recently during the Gaza offensive of January 2009.’

He concludes:

‘Benjamin Netanyahu is clinging to a status quo that is demographically and geographically untenable.’

*Tom Easton*