

Review

Heribert Adam (2002) *Peace-making in divided societies: the Israel-South Africa analogy*. Cape Town: HSRC Publishers.

Chris Desmond

Television images of stone-throwing youth battling armoured vehicles in the Palestinian West Bank readily prompt parallels with the South Africa of the 1980s. The oppression of one group by another through the use of superior military and economic strength seems, on the surface, to be startlingly similar. Given the similarities, some observers have pondered whether the South African 'miracle' can be replicated in the Middle East or whether, at the very least, there are applicable lessons to be learnt from South Africa's success.

Adam, a political sociologist with a joint appointment at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business, attempts to answer these questions by probing the nature of the South African transition and making comparisons with the Israel-Palestine situation. His comparison covers six elements pertinent to both conflicts: economic interdependence, religious divisions, third-party intervention, leadership, political culture, and violence. He argues that the differences between the pre-transition South Africa and the current Israeli-Palestine situation outweigh the similarities.

The publication, in my view, is a less than balanced comparison and a pro-Israeli bias is detectable at times. It was written, it seems, with the intention of showing that the parallels between the two situations are not all that relevant and that the differences are such that any process of transition in Israel-Palestine, and the results thereof, are likely to be very different from those in South Africa. Little attention is given, therefore, to similarities while much is given to the differences.

In arguing that the two cases are very different, Adam presents a number of interesting arguments. The degree of economic interdependence between whites and blacks in South Africa was, and for that matter still is, far greater than between Israelis and Palestinians. There was not such a religious divide in South Africa nor was there the added burden of common, but disputed, holy sites. International opinions on, and support for, Israel is far more divided than was the case with apartheid South Africa. This leads to the conclusion that the most likely end product of the Israel-Palestine conflict will be very different from that which occurred in South Africa – namely, a two-state outcome.

Adam, in making his case, seems in places to downplay the sharp divisions that characterised pre-transition South Africa, brushing over some of the complexities and challenges it faced. It is doubtful, for example, whether many Black South Africans noticed that 'racial animosity and prejudice steadily softened' during the 1970s and 1980s; or that 'the segregated South Africa of the apartheid era ... was characterised by comparatively close personal interactions'. One is also curious to know on what basis Adam offers such generalisations as 'the average Afrikaner did not mind plainly discussing delicate subjects with visitors'.

Adam is more convincing when he suggests that factors peculiar to South Africa's circumstances facilitated a peaceful transition, and that their absence in the Middle East renders unlikely any possibility of a repeat. In the South African transition a key factor was that after decades of oppression, suffering and death, those who had suffered most were prepared to compromise with those who had caused them to suffer. There is no evidence at present of such a scenario in the Middle East. To the contrary, Adam outlines how all parties to the Israel-Palestine conflict believe both that they are the primary victims and that they occupy the moral high ground. In such a scenario, Adam correctly argues, compromise is impossible.