

FC-275

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES 24

**Anti-Semitism in South Africa**  
**Recent Trends**

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The American Jewish Committee

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## **ANTI SEMITISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In a February 2 1990 parliamentary speech South African president F W de Klerk initiated the reversal of the country's apartheid policy by legalizing the African National Congress (ANC) and other banned antiapartheid groups releasing some dissidents from prison including the ANC's leader Nelson Mandela, and repealing the discriminatory Separate Amenities Act. Since then negotiations between the government and representatives of South Africa's black majority including the ANC, have progressed—if not without considerable difficulty—and universal elections (based on the principle of one person-one vote) are scheduled for April 27 1994

De Klerk's policy shift, while welcomed by Jews and many other whites has created anxiety about the future. For the most part, Jews share the concerns of whites in general and anti-Semitism is not a pressing concern. Nevertheless its presence is visible enough to merit attention

It needs to be emphasized that South Africa is in a state of radical transformation. For that reason there is a danger that any analysis will become outdated within a short period indeed aspects of some recent analyses have already become obsolete. Still, it is important to examine South African attitudes toward Jews as they now exist

### ***The Jewish Community***

An estimated 106 000 Jews (as well as 10-12,000 Israelis) live in South Africa, constituting 0.3 percent of the total population of 40 million which also includes an estimated 30 million blacks 3.4 million people of mixed racial background 1 million Indians and 5 million whites

Substantial Jewish immigration to the country began in the midnineteenth century and by 1880 around 4 000 Jews had moved there, mostly from Britain. An additional 70 000 Jews immigrated to South Africa between 1880 and 1948 primarily from Lithuania.

However since 1970 Jews have been emigrating from South Africa in large numbers an estimated 38,000 having left the country between 1970 and 1991—approximately 12,000 of them moving to Israel and nearly 10 000 to the United States. Australia, Britain, and Canada have been the other principal destinations. This mass emigration has resulted from anxieties about racial unrest fear that a future regime will abandon democracy and concern for the future viability of the Jewish community

After the 1967 war reawakened sympathy for the Jewish state on the part of the South African government which provided some military aid to Israel during the conflict, South Africa attempted to resume trade with Israel and it opened a consulate there in 1972. Still Israel remained more interested in ties with the black African nations.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War—which isolated Israel from the international community even more than the 1967 war had—brought Israel closer to South Africa and in 1974 and 1975 the two countries exchanged ambassadors. Prime Minister John Vorster signed several trade agreements during a visit to Israel in 1976 and the same year Israel began selling arms to South Africa. The two countries signed additional economic agreements through the mid 1980s. Moreover, the South African government has allowed Jews to contribute large amounts of money to Israeli charities and to invest in Israeli companies, a rare exception to South Africa's currency-control policy.

In March 1987, anticipating the release of a U.S. State Department report on arms sales to South Africa, Israel announced that it would not sign any new military contracts with South Africa. The following September, Israel adopted a series of sanctions against South Africa that were maintained like those of the United States until 1991.

#### Recent Attitudes Toward Jews in South Africa

##### *Whites*

The white South African establishment manifests little anti-Semitism, and the National Party's stance toward Jews like its pro-Israel policy has reflected this generally positive attitude. After an outbreak of neo-Nazi incidents in 1987, President P. W. Botha promised the country's Jews that the government would protect them, and he stated before the Parliament, "I want to tell the Jewish community of South Africa: We appreciate your contribution to the economic, cultural and technological achievements of our fatherland."<sup>5</sup> President de Klerk gave similar assurances to the Board of Deputies in early 1992. In addition, as the principal Jewish chaplain in the South African army, Rabbi Isador Rubinstein told an interviewer in the late 1980s, anti-Semitism among army officials doesn't happen that often and normally when it does happen, steps are taken very quickly to deal with it. The army is supersensitive to its public relations image at least in this respect.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the white establishment, the extreme right manifests a great deal of anti-Semitism. Increasingly active since the early 1980s, right-wing groups are presumed responsible for numerous anti-Semitic incidents in the last few years. These have included a memorial service for Rudolf Hess following his death in 1987, the wrapping of pigs' heads in Israeli flags and leaving them on synagogue gates outside private homes, and even in March 1991, on the seat of a Jewish National Party town councillor in Boksburg, the vandalization of synagogues and cemeteries, the burning of the Israeli flag and display of Nazi flags, and anti-Semitic graffiti. There have been no physical attacks on Jews.

The most extreme right-wing group is the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB for *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging*) which, despite its notoriety, has only several thousand active members and attracted only 700 people to a December 1992 rally. The group's emblem, which

consists of three number sevens (a reference to a passage in Revelation) resembles a swastika its flag resembles that of the Nazis Organized in 1979 by former policeman Eugene Terre Blanche the AWB is committed to white supremacy in South Africa, and its ideology is extremely anti-Semitic. Indeed as scholars Allie Dubb and Milton Shain note “There seems little doubt that the strident anti Jewish sentiments so frequently expressed by the AWB encouraged a rash of anti-Semitic incidents [during the late 1980s]—despite Terre Blanche’s vigorous denial that his movement was in any way involved”<sup>7</sup> AWB representatives attended the 1987 Rudolf Hess commemoration after Jews objected to this Terre Blanche said that they “would make life very difficult for themselves” by complaining.<sup>8</sup>

The AWB formed the Blanke Volkstaat Party (White People’s State Party) in 1980 only to dissolve it in 1982 when the rightist Conservative Party was formed in 1986 the two groups discussed the possibility of an alliance However critics have focused on the AWB’s potential for violence more than on its political aspirations—fears that have been reinforced by the group’s paramilitary activities

Another extreme right wing group is the Reconstituted National Party (HNP for *Herstigte Nasionale Party*) which broke away from the National Party in 1969 The HNP which holds to an ideology of “Christian Afrikaner nationalism” has published articles supporting Holocaust revisionism in its newspaper *Die Afrikaner*

The most widely supported far right group in South Africa—indeed since 1987 the major opposition party in parliament with the support of about one third of the white population—is the Conservative Party (CP) formed in 1982 by Nationalist Party members who opposed President Botha’s reform program Although the CP allows Jews to join and does not openly espouse anti-Semitism it has many anti-Semitic members and its “Christian national” ideology has aroused suspicions that the group’s policy is anti-Semitic. Dr Andries Treurnicht the group’s leader until his death in April 1993 expressed some sympathy for Holocaust “revisionism

In addition the CP has formed parliamentary alliances with the HNP and as mentioned earlier has also had ties with the AWB Although Treurnicht attempted to distance the party from the AWB a prominent CP leader (Clive Derby Lewis) as well as a member of both the AWB and the CP (a Polish immigrant named Janusz Walus) have been convicted and sentenced to death for the April 1993 killing of communist leader Chris Hanı Derby Lewis founded the Stallard Foundation which pursues ties between the Conservative Party and other right wing groups on the one hand and international racist movements on the other hand Moreover after the killing of two ANC supporters during a march protesting Hanı’s assassination the police arrested a man who is both a local Conservative Party leader and an AWB member

### *Blacks*

Because blacks form the overwhelming majority of South Africans their attitudes toward Jews are of particular concern There is anti-Semitism among South African blacks Dubb and Shain note in their report on the 1991 situation [F]or large numbers of black industrial and commercial workers the boss—and therefore the exploiter of his labor—was typically a Jew

During a visit to Chicago Tutu stated, "Most of the outstanding whites in South Africa who have been in the forefront of the struggle for justice and peace have been Jews"<sup>18</sup> And he told an interviewer

One ought to be able to say—in the horrible expression—that some of my best friends are Jews. Well, I mean, that is in fact true. When we were being investigated by the Eloff Commission our advocate was Sydney Kentridge who is a leading Jew. I was the chief executive officer of the South African Council of Churches and I was responsible for choosing who would be our advocate. If I was anti-Semitic, it's a very odd thing to have done.<sup>19</sup>

But in a 1984 speech at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, defending himself against previous criticism he referred to

the remarkable sensitivity of the Jewish people who were quick to shout anti-Semitism at the drop of a hat. I can understand why this is so with your horrible experiences but sometimes the things at which you take umbrage are strange. This sensitivity comes from arrogance—the arrogance of power. Because Jews are a powerful lobby in this land and all kinds of people woo their support.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly Tutu told his interviewer "Then there is a kind of Jewish arrogance one can only call it that I do not know whether you've heard but I sometimes say that apartheid is as evil as Nazism and there have been Jews who say I am insulting them. Jews seem to think that they have a corner on the market of suffering."<sup>21</sup> While Tutu's statements were not classically anti-Semitic, they revealed a definite ambivalence about Jews. However since he is no longer an extremely prominent figure, his views have become less salient.

### *Muslims*

Anti-Semitism is prevalent among South Africa's community of approximately 500,000 Muslims. Still it has become highly visible only in the last ten years.

When an interviewer asked clergyman Farid Esack—then national coordinator of the Call of Islam and an activist in the United Democratic Front—whether Jewish organizations would "have to renounce all recognition and support of Israel in order to be accepted by the Muslim community" he responded "Nothing that the Jews do will be enough for Muslims."<sup>22</sup> He also commented

I think that if one is honest about the question then the Muslims of South Africa are not anti-Zionist. They are anti-Semitic. Of course you have political animals like myself—the more sophisticated ones—who will make a distinction and will say we are not anti-Jew we are only anti-Zionist. Even that one must take with a pinch of salt.<sup>23</sup>

Muslim anti-Semitism usually masked as anti-Zionism has found its strongest expression on university campuses—especially the University of Witwatersrand (in Johannesburg) and the University of Cape Town—and has led to physical clashes between Muslim and Jewish students. Qibla—a pro-Iranian anti-apartheid group with a degree of support among Muslim youth—is extremely anti-Semitic. In addition such groups as the Islamic Propagation Center International in Durban have distributed anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic material to many households.

South African Muslims are too few in number to constitute a serious political threat to Jews. However, the presence of anti-Semitism among this segment of the population is cause for concern.

### Conclusion

Given the state of flux that currently characterizes South African life and politics, any analysis of the situation of South African Jewry may soon become outdated. Keeping that risk in mind, certain conclusions may be tentatively drawn.

A significant strain of anti-Semitism exists in South Africa, especially among Muslims and white extremists. At the same time, the government that is scheduled to replace the present one after April 1994 elections—probably to be led by the African National Congress with the National Party as a junior coalition partner—is likely to carry out the ANC's promises to protect the civil rights of South African Jewry. Some pressure might be exerted on welfare institutions, and these may lose their exclusive Jewish character and clientele. In addition, special privileges related to support of Israel may be curtailed, although it is improbable that Zionism would be proscribed.

Despite the advent of democracy in South Africa, the country's turmoil places Jews (along with the population as a whole) in a vulnerable position. This underscores the need for close communication with the South African Jewish community in order to remain abreast of developments affecting the community's future well being.

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**Institute of Human Relations**  
**165 East 56 Street, New York, NY 10022 2746**

December 1993

Single copy \$2.00  
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