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Apartheid South Africa and Israel: Cold War Outposts of US Empire

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ABSTRACT

This essay demonstrates how both Apartheid South Africa and Israel operated as outposts of US imperialism during the Cold War in related, connected, and changing ways. In addition, heightening conflicts with their respective liberation movements in the 1980s played directly into the negotiations of the Oslo Accords and the transition from Apartheid, both of which began in late 1991. Such focus on South Africa in relation to Israel in a specific conjuncture is directly relevant to the imperative of solidarity with Palestine. It forms part of a larger project that turns to Gramsci to develop a global conjunctural and comparative frame of analysis, with the aim of contributing to practices and processes of left solidarity and concrete internationalism.

> [S]olidarity is not an act of charity, but mutual aid between forces fighting for the same objective. Liquidating the Portuguese colonial fascist system means destroying one of the main bastions of contemporary fascism, which is stimulating the growth of the fascist forces in Europe, including Italy ... We reaffirm our solidarity with the struggle of the peoples of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia who, with us, are confronting imperialism in the trenches of Southern Africa ... We [also] support the just cause of the Arab and Palestinian peoples against Zionist aggression, for the recovery of occupied territories and for the national rights of the Palestinian people. We all join the progressive forces in the world in welcoming and rejoicing at the victory achieved by the comrades in Vietnam and Laos.
>
> (Machel 1973)

This epigraph comes from an address by Samora Machel at the First National Solidarity Conference for the Freedom and Independence of Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, at Reggio Emilia, Italy, on 25 March 1973. At that time the leader of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), he became the first president of independent Mozambique in 1975 after the overthrow of the fascist dictatorship in Portugal in April 1974. In 1986, he was killed in a plane crash when flying over South Africa, for which the Apartheid regime was responsible.[1]

The reverberations of Mozambican independence in Apartheid South Africa were massive and directly threatening to the regime. As Magubane (1979, 323) explained:

> The sudden end in April 1974 to four centuries of Portuguese colonialism in Africa reopened a remarkable chapter in Southern Africa's history. It threw into complete disarray the alliance of repression formed against African people by the white regimes and their imperialist supporters ... While the world was still trying to digest the long-range implications of the triumph of FRELIMO and MPLA [the Angolan liberation movement], the student rebellion began in Soweto on June 16, 1976. The Soweto uprising

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> heralded a new phase in the African struggle in South Africa. Not an isolated event, it marked the start of new popular upsurge.

Machel's reflections on solidarity more than 50 years ago remain powerfully relevant in the present. Most immediately, they serve as a sharp reminder that the case South Africa brought before the International Court of Justice charging Israel with the crime of genocide in Gaza was not just a reflection of benevolence or nostalgia by the African National Congress (ANC). In announcing the case in December 2023, many media outlets carried images of the affectionate embrace between Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat shortly after Mandela's release from prison in February 1990. What these and other reports neglected was how the South African government's move was driven by powerful popular pressure. Salim Vally, an important participant in Palestinian solidarity, makes clear that widespread popular support for Palestine in South Africa has deep historical roots that intensified in the 1980s with Israel's expanding military connections with the Apartheid regime.[2] A key moment was the September 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, when Israel and the United States together walked out to protest references to Zionism as apartheid racism. Another was the palpable excitement evoked by the visit to South Africa in October 2025 of Francesca Albanese, the eloquent UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Yet we must be wary of a widespread tendency to counterpose South African "success" in overcoming Apartheid against Palestinian failure to deal with Israel. The profound disappointments of the post-Apartheid era underscore the limitations of celebratory accounts of South Africa in relation to Palestine—as well as the imperative for contributing to Machel's (1973) vision of "mutual aid between forces fighting for the same objective." From this perspective, South Africa does *not* serve as a model of emulation for Palestine. Rather, its broad base of Palestinian support holds the possibility for forging alliances across registers of difference in and beyond both regions to press for social justice. Mutually illuminating relational comparative understandings situated in a global conjunctural frame have the potential for contributing to such processes.[3] By positioning South Africa and Palestine as distinct but relationally connected historical geographies, such a frame decisively refuses and refutes any depiction of Palestinian "inadequacy" in relation to South Africa. Also, the deeper comprehension of transformations of US imperialism since the end of World War II that this approach entails is crucial for anti-Zionist movements in other regions of the world, especially the United States.

This essay links directly to "Progeny of Empire," in which I focused on the interconnected processes through which South Africa and Palestine were forged as nations in the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries as creatures of the British Empire (Hart 2024a). The present essay demonstrates how both Apartheid South Africa and Israel operated as outposts of US imperialism during the Cold War in related, connected, and changing ways. In addition, heightening conflicts with their respective liberation movements played directly into the negotiations of the Oslo Accords and the transition from Apartheid, both of which began in late 1991. Both essays are part of a larger project to comprehend the current conjuncture in a politically enabling way.

This focus on South Africa in relation to Palestine and Israel extends my work on South Africa, India, and the United States, in which I turn to Gramsci to develop a global conjunctural frame of analysis. Burgeoning interest in conjunctural analysis in geography and urban studies in recent years has been accompanied by sharply divergent readings and deployments of Gramsci (Hart 2024b). For those who view conjunctural analysis primarily as a research method, Gramsci's approach is "not especially systematic" and in need of revision (Sheppard et al. 2024, 2). In contrast, and along with several other contributors to this Symposium, I view it as an analytical and political strategy, integrally connected with other key themes in the *Prison Notebooks*.[4] At the same time, we recognize the imperative to translate and extend Gramsci's analysis in relation to the demands of the present conjuncture, as the editors of this Symposium make clear in their Introduction.

This approach to conjunctural analysis requires taking seriously Gramsci's key distinction between the deep-seated structural movements he termed "organic" and those "which appear as occasional, immediate, and almost accidental" to which he gave the term "conjunctural." The key challenge of conjunctural analysis, in Gramsci's words, lies in identifying the "incurable structural contradictions" of specific capitalist societies in relation to the international processes of which they are a part, and how dominant political forces are struggling in vain to cure and overcome them: "These incessant and persistent efforts ... form the terrain of the 'conjunctural', and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise" (Gramsci 1971, 178).[5]

In my global conjunctural and comparative frame, the idea of global conjunctural moments (discussed below) provides an organizing device for tracing long-wave organic movements (or spatio-temporal formations and processes) that have played into the present conjuncture—and how they are moving and changing in relation to one another and to the more immediate or conjunctural movements with which they are dialectically connected. Working within this frame, I originally envisaged the present essay focused on the Cold War as the second in a trilogy of a Gramscian-informed comparative analysis of South Africa in relation to Palestine in the present conjuncture. When Hashem Abushama and I began reading each other's work and recognizing powerful complementarities, this plan gave way to the idea of a short, co-authored book. Provisionally titled *Palestine and South Africa: The Politics of Comparison and Relational Solidarities*, our book will suggest how relational comparative analysis situated in a conjunctural frame enables insights into the present conjuncture that go beyond ideal-type understandings of Apartheid or settler colonialism, which prevail in much of the literature with some important exceptions.[6] In the concluding section of this essay, I return to the imperative of a deeper understanding of key processes that gathered force during the Cold War to illuminate the present conjuncture.

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1 | South Africa and Palestine/Israel in a Global Frame

> Palestine now sits at the forefront of a global political awakening that exceeds anything seen since the 1960s. Amidst this heightened awareness of the Palestinian condition, our analysis must go beyond immediate opposition to Israel's brutality in the Gaza Strip. The struggle for Palestinian liberation sits at the centre of any effective challenge to imperial interests in the Middle East, and our movements need a better grounding in these wider regional dynamics … We also need a deeper understanding of how the Middle East fits within the history of fossil capitalism and contemporary struggles for climate justice. The question of Palestine cannot be separated from these realities. In this sense, the extraordinary battle for survival waged by Palestinians today in the Gaza strip represents the leading edge of the fight for the future of the planet.
>
> (Hanieh 2024a)

Earlier in the essay from which this epigraph is taken, Adam Hanieh points out that framing the conflict in terms of human rights depoliticizes the Palestinian struggle. It also fails to understand why Western states continue to provide unequivocal support to Israel. Attributing such support to a Zionist "pro-Israel lobby" is a "false and politically dangerous viewpoint that gets the relationship between Western states and Israel fundamentally wrong" (Hanieh 2024a). Instead, we need to comprehend how oil is literally and figuratively "woven into the fabric of our modern world" (Hanieh 2024b; see also Mitchell 2011; Wight 2021). These and related arguments about the intertwining of oil, finance capital, and militarism at the heart of US imperialism have compelled me to rethink key elements of my own efforts to construct a global conjunctural and comparative frame, especially in the period following World War II, which forms the focus of this essay.

This global frame has grown out of my efforts to comprehend what I call "warring tendencies" in South Africa, India, and the United States since the end of the Cold War—by which I mean not only the rise (or resurgence) of right-wing fundamentalist nationalisms and populist politics, but also their mutually antagonistic relations with progressive, secular forms of liberalism. The framework views South Africa, India, and the United States as neither pre-given national units nor variations of a broader process, but rather as historically specific yet interconnected nodes in the *production* of world-wide processes. Closely attentive to changing forms of imperialism, it focuses as well on race/racism, gender/patriarchy, nationalism, religion, and other dimensions of difference as active constitutive forces in relation to capitalist developments and class processes.

Undergirding this frame is the idea of *global conjunctural moments*, defined as major turning points when interconnected forces at multiple levels and spatial scales in different regions of the world have come together to generate new conditions with world-wide implications and reverberations. Comprehending forces operating since the end of the Cold War requires going back to earlier global conjunctural moments—most immediately, the late 1940s and the late 1960s/early 1970s, but also historical processes of racialized dispossession, labor exploitation, and imperialism through which South Africa, India, and the United States were formed as nation-states in key conjunctures in the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries. It is these longue durée processes that remain salient in the present that "Progeny of Empire" engages.

1.1 | South Africa and Palestine as Connected Outposts of British Empire

Situating Palestine within this frame, "Progeny of Empire" focused on how South Africa and Palestine were forged as nations through deeply interconnected imperial processes prior to World War II. Following Britain's defeat in the American War of Independence and its takeover of India in the first decades of the 19th century, the Cape Colony and Palestine became important and related outposts of empire, securing respectively the sea and land routes to India that undergirded the "Empire of Cotton" (Beckert 2014). Long preceding its Jewish counterpart, Christian Zionism played a key role in the early British incursion into Palestine and has remained centrally important. I also suggest how the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 following the Anglo-Boer War and the Balfour Declaration in 1917 can be seen as interconnected moments of nation formation in the service of British imperialism. In a nutshell: I discovered that the *same* set of British liberals—working in close alliance with mining capital—who were actively involved in cementing segregationist principles, policies, and practices to secure the conditions of accumulation more than 40 years before the advent of Apartheid, *also* became major players in the formulation of the Balfour Declaration which effectively handed Palestine over to the Zionist movement! Drawing on their South African experience, this cast of characters and their embodied institutional power also played a central role in promoting pro-Zionist policies in Mandatory Palestine at the end of World War I. Hence, I argued, these South African imperial connections are crucial to grasping the racialized practices and processes of dispossession, exclusion, and settler colonial nation formation in Palestine in the Interwar years that led up to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

"Progeny of Empire" pointed to two other key processes in both South Africa and Palestine in the Interwar conjuncture: (1) the explosion of multiple antagonisms among both Black South Africans and Palestinians towards settler colonial forms of oppression, along with intensified anti-colonial nationalisms since the 1920s; and (2) the growth and consolidation in the Interwar years of fundamentalist religious nationalisms by white Afrikaners and Jewish settlers, both of whom saw themselves as God's chosen people—and many still do. From this perspective, Zionism appears as part of a family of fundamentalisms that includes not only white Christian Nationalism in South Africa and the United States, but also Hindutva in India and Political Islam.[7] All assumed their modern form in the 1920s–1930s;

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re-emerged with a vengeance around the mid-1970s amid worldwide economic and political upheavals; and remain powerfully salient in the present (Hart 2021).

This analysis contributes to efforts to counter claims that anti-Zionism is necessarily antisemitic by showing how antisemitism and pro-Zionism—especially in the form of Christian Zionism, which long predates its Jewish counterpart—have co-existed for a *very* long time and continue to do so.[8] Also, both historically and in the present, Palestinians have been forced to pay for crimes of Euro-American antisemitism.

1.2 | Apartheid South Africa and Israel as Connected Outposts of US Empire

Let me start with the global conjunctural moment of the late 1940s, which encompassed the entrenchment of US imperial power; the Bretton Woods Regime of relatively stable exchange rates, dollar dominance, and restrictions on financial movements across national borders; the start of the Cold War; decolonization in much of Asia, but colonial powers trying to hang on in most of Africa; the formation of the United Nations and the Marshall Plan. Hanieh (2024b, 111) makes the crucial point that this was also the moment when oil replaced coal as the world's major fossil fuel: "Oil's rise was transformative to capitalism: the restoration of the post-war rate of profit, the internationalisation of capital, the qualitative growth in new consumption markets and commodities, the acceleration in the circulation of goods and services—all these vital changes were closely attached to oil's ascension as the primary fossil fuel." These transformations included the petrochemical revolution and the shift to plastics, artificial fibers, and other materials derived from oil along with escalating carbon emissions. They also propelled the disintegration of the European-controlled order in the Middle East, and the growing importance of Saudi Arabia and Israel in buttressing US global dominance.

As part of the global conjunctural frame, I suggest the concept of Cold War Era (CWE) projects of accumulation and bourgeois hegemony in regions beyond the communist world. Inspiration for this concept comes from Gramsci's bringing together of Stalinism, Americanism-Fordism, and fascism in the same frame as interconnected nodes of passive revolution in the Interwar conjuncture. The turn to CWE projects allows me to bring South Africa (Apartheid), India (Nehruvian Development), and the United States (Fordism) into the same frame, while recognizing the ongoing significance of longer histories of colonialism and imperialism. CWE projects also embodied popular demobilization and containment, bearing in mind that all three were preceded by significant popular uprisings. In addition, in South Africa and India, they were projects of partition.

This framework enables us to see the formation of Israel in 1948 as a CWE project, grounded in extreme (and extremely violent) but not exceptional processes of dispossession and partition—in this instance with the support of the UN General Assembly's resolution for the partition of historic Palestine in November 1947. In the Nakba or Catastrophe that followed, "some 80 percent of the Arab population of the territory that became the new state of Israel had been forced from their homes and lost their lands and property"; in addition at least 720,000 of the 1.3 million Palestinians were made refugees, and by 1949 Israel controlled 78% of the territory of Mandatory Palestine (Khalidi 2021, 58). Rashid Khalidi notes that the Nakba was grounded in the defeat of the Great Palestinian Rebellion that raged from 1936 to 1939.

The 1967 war between Israel and leading Arab states extended Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and the Syrian Golan Heights. The Israeli victory shattered the movements of Arab unity, national independence and anti-colonial resistance, and led to the US replacing Britain as Israel's primary patron: "From that moment onwards, the US began to supply Israel annually with billions of dollars' worth of military hardware and financial support" (Hanieh 2024a).

The war also alienated Israel's African allies and led to closer ties with South Africa, facilitated by its affluent and active Zionist community. These connections included military ties, which after 1974 were linked to the apartheid regime's drive to develop nuclear weapons following the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship and the imminent liberation of Mozambique and Angola (Schofield 2014, 86–87).

Hanieh (2024a) points out that the connection between the internal character of the Israeli state and its relationship to US power in the Middle East is akin to the role that the Apartheid regime played across the African continent during the Cold War: "as settler colonies, both countries came to act as core organising centres of Western power in their respective neighbourhoods." South African support for counterinsurgency in Southern Africa included the Alliance Against Rebellions in Africa, a secret political-military alliance between Portugal, South Africa, and Rhodesia. With US support, South African troops invaded newly independent Angola in October 1975—although this move provoked a swift backlash from the US Congress. The centrality of the Middle East in the global political economy of oil continues to give Israel a far more significant role in US imperial power than that ever held by the Apartheid state.

This brings us to the Global Conjunctural Moment of the early 1970s, summarized by Panitch (2000, 10) as "a time when increased inter-capitalist competition, rampant inflation, falling rates of profit and spreading speculation against the dollar were conjoined with a worldwide upsurge against American imperialism, while the core capitalist countries themselves were shaken not only by waves of industrial militancy, but by the eruption of youth and black protests in the streets, as the war in Indochina became a US disaster." Yet the eruption of popular uprisings in the late 1960s and early 1970s was by no means limited to "core capitalist countries." In addition, this global configuration of forces drove major transformations of US imperialism from the mid-1970s that reconfigured the relationship of the United States to different regions of the non-Western world.

In August 1971 the Nixon administration brought the Bretton Woods Regime to an abrupt end by delinking the dollar from the price of gold, then fixed at $35 per fine ounce. This effective devaluation of the dollar is often represented as a defeat for a weakened American capitalism, battered on the one hand by competitive pressures associated with the economic ascendance

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of Germany and Japan and, on the other, by the quagmire in Vietnam and the rise of oppositional movements in the United States and beyond. In *The Global Gamble*, Gowan (1999, 19) contested this widely-held view, maintaining that "the Nixon administration was determined to break out of a set of institutionalised arrangements which limited US dominance in international monetary politics in order to establish a new regime which would give it monocratic power over international monetary affairs." In my book I show how analyses by Hanieh and others of the close links between oil, financial markets and militarism forged in the early to mid-1970s provide effective support for Gowan's argument about how the shift to the Dollar-Wall Street-Treasury Regime bolstered US imperial power. A key element was the lifting of capital controls that was crucial to the hugely significant recycling of petrodollars to which we now turn.

Petrodollar recycling refers to the vast oceans of money generated by oil sales following the oil price rise, much of which landed up in Anglo-American financial institutions:

> A new global financial system materialised, structured at the apex around the transatlantic connectivity of financial markets in the US and those in Western Europe. Dominated by Anglo-American financial institutions, this new architecture of global finance would help re-embed the primacy of the American state and the US dollar at a time of major political and economic uncertainty. It would also enable the appearance of new modes of wealth extraction and dependency across much of the globe, expressed most particularly through the chains of debt that emerged following the oil shocks. Rooting oil in these wider transformations of global finance and US power not only clarifies the real legacies of the 1970s and the so-called OPEC revolution—but also helps to illuminate oil's place in the contemporary world.
>
> (Hanieh 2024b, 181)

Also crucial in cementing new forms of US imperial power were escalating sales of US weapons and military hardware to oil-producing states in the Middle East. Between 1972 and 1978, US military exports to Saudi Arabia shot up 10-fold, and those to the shah of Iran were even higher (Hanieh 2024b, 183).

In the midst of these escalating US weapon sales, the UN in 1977 imposed a mandatory arms embargo aimed at cutting off the Apartheid regime's access to weapons and military technology. In response, the regime drove the massive expansion of the state-owned Armaments Development and Production Corporation (ARMSCOR) which, by the end of the 1970s, was at the center of a major indigenous military-industrial complex (O'Meara 1996, 226). Over 5600 corporations were linked to ARMSCOR, including all the main South African conglomerates, multinationals such as IBM, Shell, Daimler-Benz, and many others. Israel also played a prominent role, building on its earlier collaboration with the Apartheid state in the production of nuclear weapons.[9] In the 1980s these arrangements received the blessing of the Reagan administration in the form of policies of "constructive engagement" with the Apartheid state.

The seemingly spectacular success of reconstituting the US empire after the end of the Bretton Woods Regime also generated intense tensions and contradictions. David Wight (2021, 7) observes that the US-led petrodollar order intensified conflicts and economic disparities across the Middle East and North Africa as "the US and allied governments utilized oil wealth to marginalize and violently repress the interests and political participation of oppositional groups, particularly … leftists and antimonarchical Islamists." The most extreme fallout was the Iranian revolution in 1979, driven by widespread popular anger against the shah's involvement with the US. This coincided with the overthrow of the US-backed regime in Nicaragua, as well as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, helping to pave the way for Reagan and the neoliberal counterrevolution.

In *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*, Mamdani (2004, 13) shows how "As the US defeat in Vietnam in 1975 coincided with the collapse of the Portuguese empire … the center of gravity of the Cold War shifted from Southeast Asia to southern Africa"—and from there to Central America, Central Asia, and the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s. Both South Africa and Israel operated in effect as mercenaries in the prosecution of proxy wars. The imperative for proxies was driven by congressional restrictions on executive power, including the War Powers Act of 1973 and the Clark Amendment of 1976 following the debacle of the South African invasion of Angola in 1975. Proxy wars could be hidden from public scrutiny but were difficult to finance from public funds, and often went hand in hand with illicit trade, usually in drugs.[10]

Despite the horrified response of the US Congress in 1975, South Africa remained actively engaged with the US in fostering terrorist organizations in Angola (UNITA) and Mozambique (RENAMO) in the 1980s, both sharply opposed to the MPLA and FRELIMO, the respective liberation movements that came to power in 1975. The Reagan administration openly backed UNITA. Although denouncing acts of RENAMO's terror, the US "warmly support[ed] the South African regime, which directly nurtured RENAMO, Africa's first genuine terrorist movement, from birth to maturity" (Mamdani 2004, 92). Mamdani (2004, 92) notes that "The point of constructive engagement was to bring South Africa out of political isolation so as to better tap its military potential in the war against militant—and pro-Soviet—nationalism." South Africa was also the locus of Executive Outcomes, which drew on soldiers from the South African Defence Force to pioneer the proliferation of mercenary companies that came to play a major role in the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Israeli connection to the US proxy wars circuited through both Central America and the Middle East, linking US arms sales to Iran with purchases of war supplies for the Contras, the right-wing terrorist organization in Central America supported by the US: "The heart of the deal that came to be known as Iran-Contra was that the United States [secretly] agreed to sell arms to Iran, either directly or indirectly through Israel, at prices sufficiently inflated to use the difference to purchase arms for the Contras" (Mamdani 2004, 112–113).

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We turn now to focus on how both Israeli and South African involvement in the Reagan administration's proxy wars went hand-in-hand with intensified wars on their respective liberation movements over the 1980s, which in turn played into both the Oslo negotiations and those to end Apartheid at precisely the same time. Both sets of negotiations circulated through the United States—although in dramatically different ways.

1.3 | South Africa, Israel, and Palestine in the 1980s: From Counterinsurgency to Negotiations

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon with the aims of debilitating the Palestine Liberation Organization (which had regrouped there after being expelled from Jordan in 1970–71) and absorbing Gaza and the West Bank into Israel. Khalidi (2021) calls this the Fourth Declaration of War on Palestine, in which the US was deeply complicit. It is best remembered for the brutal massacres in Sabra and Shatila, in which Lebanese militias murdered more than 3000 Palestinian refugees as Israeli soldiers surrounded the camps to prevent them from fleeing. "The 1982 war did succeed in weakening the PLO," Khalidi (2021, 168) concludes, "but the paradoxical effect was to strengthen the Palestinian national movement in Palestine itself, shifting the focus of action from outside to inside the country." The reference here is to the First Intifada or Palestinian uprising, which Khalidi sees as the Fifth Declaration of War stretching from 1987 to the conclusion of the Oslo Accords in 1995.

According to Khalidi (2021, 169), the intifada "generated extensive local organization in the villages, towns, cities, and refugee camps," through "flexible and clandestine networks which the military occupation authorities were unable to suppress." The PLO, stuck in exile in Tunis and trying to win US and Israeli acceptance, "was taken by surprise by the outbreak of a grassroots-led uprising and lost no time trying to co-opt and profit from it" (Khalidi 2021, 175). Other scholars argue that, although the spark for the Intifada was spontaneous, it is important to recognize the role of PLO parties working in the interior in contributing to the deeply grassroots forms of mobilization, organization, and revolutionary fervor.[11] During the 1980s, the PLO-party leadership outside Palestine reconciled with Arab regimes (following earlier intense clashes with Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Gulf States) and became more amenable to negotiations than interior sections of the PLO closer to the grassroots.

Despite these different interpretations, what seems clear is the incredibly asymmetrical structure of combined Israeli and US power that the PLO confronted. Negotiations towards the Oslo Accords began in Madrid in late 1991, with the PLO in an extremely weak position after failing to support Kuwait after its invasion by Iraq in 1990 and having lost Soviet support: "the United States was left as the sole international guarantor and sponsor of any Palestinian–Israeli process" (Khalidi 2021, 181).

Negotiations to end Apartheid also began in late 1991 following the unbanning of the ANC and other oppositional movements in February 1990. In addition to the end of the Cold War which had given it coverage, the Apartheid regime was forced to the bargaining table by massive popular uprisings over the 1980s. It was also hemmed in by powerful pressure from key fractions of capital on the one side, and the global anti-Apartheid movement on the other. From the late 1970s the government of president P.W. Botha had tried in vain to contain popular unrest through a series of "reforms," warning whites that they would have to "adapt or die." Yet the reforms proved far too limited and exclusionary—and instead opened new spaces for political organizing. His regime then turned to "Total Strategy" and the lessons of counter-insurgency from other colonial regions that combined military violence with "winning hearts and minds," based on close collaboration between senior generals in the South African Defence Force and "captains of industry." By 1985 it was evident that Total Strategy was a catastrophic failure: "The political initiative was firmly in the hands of the resistance in the streets, and the uneasy combination of reluctant, tentative ad hoc reforms and intense repression was clearly not going to return it to government hands" (O'Meara 1996, 338). On 12 June 1986, a few days before the tenth anniversary of the student uprising in Soweto, the Apartheid regime declared a State of Emergency imposing restrictions that far exceeded any that had come before. This was also the moment when the amplifying crisis of accumulation pushed powerful fractions of capital to press for liberal reforms.

These pressures coincided with another key moment on 2 October 1986, when the US Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAA), which banned new US investments, loans, and imports of South African goods, prohibited South African Airways from landing in the United States, prevented the South African government from holding US bank accounts, and set preconditions for lifting sanctions, including releasing political prisoners and negotiating a nonracial democracy. Reagan vetoed the Bill, but Congress overrode his veto—by 313–83 in the House of Representatives and 78–21 in the Senate. The override was made all the more remarkable by the Republican majority in the Senate of 53–47. A key figure was Senator Richard Lugar, Republican from Indiana, who "made clear that he wanted a bill with large and bipartisan support to send a message to South Africa."[12] The House had a Democratic majority of 71 seats, but they were joined by 159 Republicans in overriding Reagan's veto. The CAAA constituted a powerful rejection of Reagan's "constructive engagement" with the Apartheid regime. It was made possible by intense anti-Apartheid organizing throughout the United States, sparked by Steve Biko's assassination in captivity in 1977. In addition to unions and churches, mobilization around divestment offered an opportunity to educate students about conditions in South Africa—many of whom in turn educated their parents.

In short: the configuration of forces that propelled the Apartheid regime into negotiations with the ANC and other elements of the liberation movement in late 1991 was dramatically different from that which drove Palestinian-Israeli negotiations at precisely the same moment—marked by the world-wide triumphalism of neoliberal forms of capitalism and liberal democracy. Yet both "resolutions" embodied profound contradictions and limitations that have intensified since the mid-1990s. Comprehending these contradictions in terms of both their spatio-historical specificities and global conjunctural interconnections is crucial to expanding and deepening practices and processes of solidarity in

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what Machel (1973) called "mutual aid between forces fighting for the same objective."

2 | Concluding Reflections

In a powerful essay titled "The Actually Existing 'State of Palestine'" Abushama (2026, 4) maintains that the Oslo Accords "elaborated a *conjuncture* animated by an organic contradiction ... [namely] Zionism's continuous inability—indeed failure—to decisively complete its conquest of Palestine, a contradiction that is vulnerable to the political, social and economic vicissitudes of each historical conjuncture." He points to the reformist logic built into the Accords, which drew together "the dominant leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the Palestinian bourgeoisie scattered around the world and its aspirations for national capitalist development, and the reactionary regional ruling bloc in the neighbouring Arab countries (where some of the strongest currents of Palestinian capital were organically elaborated), ... [as well as] US imperialism and Israeli settler colonialism" (Abushama 2026, 6–7). The Oslo Peace Accords, in short, "offered a framework for the continuities of neoliberal and colonial forces, which in turn became the conditioning limits of the actually existing state of Palestine" (Abushama 2026, 6).

Despite obvious differences, striking resonances can be found in the ANC's capitulation to heavily concentrated corporate capital in South Africa. This process was set in motion *prior* to what is widely seen as the ANC's formal imposition of neoliberalism in 1996, with a conservative faction rejecting even the mildest of racially redistributive reforms. A constitutive contradiction is that corporate capital has, from the onset of the transition, needed the ANC to contain popular antagonisms. Yet its dynamic of accumulation, defined by a heavily concentrated corporate structure combined with massive capital flight, renders this imperative increasingly difficult. By the same token, the ANC's articulations of the nation and liberation so central to its exercise of hegemonic power are simultaneously a source of weakness and instability because they are vulnerable to counterclaims of betrayal—a vulnerability both shaped and intensified by the workings of capital and South Africa's positioning in global political economy (Hart 2014). These contradictions burst into view around the 2024 elections when the ANC broke apart into populist and liberal factions. The latter then hopped into bed with the Democratic Alliance (descendant of a party formed by corporate capital in the late 1980s) and several smaller parties in an awkward and fragile Government of National Unity.

In the face of this seeming liberal dénouement, some have asked how Palestine can become more like South Africa. One answer, which Canada and some European countries are pursuing, is to recognize what Abushama (2026) calls "the actually existing state of Palestine"—in effect, the Bantustan solution. This question and its possible answers fail to address the constitutive contradictions of both post-apartheid South Africa and Palestine that render *any* "solution" fraught and fragile. They also serve to "distract us from the historical necessity to support progressive forces in Palestine and globally and the urgent emergence of an internationalist impulse that sees Palestine as intimately connected to systems of oppression and resistance movements globally" (Abushama 2026, 14).

Critical comparative understandings cast in a global conjunctural frame can potentially contribute to extending, deepening, and strengthening the concrete internationalism called forth by fierce opposition to genocide in Gaza.[13] Realizing this potential in practice hinges crucially on careful attention to how Gramsci (1971, 189-190) used comparative conjunctural analysis to illuminate the fascist conditions in which he found himself, including that the "continuous effort to separate out the 'international' and 'unitary' elements in national and local reality is true concrete political action, the sole activity productive of historical progress ... [requiring] an organic unity between theory and practice, [and] between intellectual strata and popular masses."[14] Crucial to such efforts are understandings of the past that can enable "seeing the present differently" in order to change it.[15] In our forthcoming book, Abushama and I will elaborate on the political stakes of how we comprehend both the Cold War Era and historical processes of nation formation in grasping the contours and contradictions of the present conjuncture.

Returning to the questions posed at the start of this essay, a global conjunctural frame that enables us to see the specific dynamics at play in South Africa and Palestine as intimately connected with each other and with longer histories of imperialism and global capitalism compels and enables a more complex praxis of solidarity in the present than simply holding up post-apartheid South Africa as Palestine's awaited future.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

[1] His widow Graça Machel gave evidence to this effect at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998.

[2] See Pontarelli's (2024) illuminating interview with Salim Vally.

[3] I discuss more fully different modalities of comparison between South Africa and Palestine and Israel in Hart (2024a) and the broader issue of global conjunctural analysis in Hart (2024b).

[4] I specifically take issue with how proponents of this approach replace Gramsci's distinction between organic and conjunctural movements with the categories of "the general" and "the particular."

[5] Q13§17.

[6] These include Clarno (2017).

[7] For an insightful critique of different approaches to Political Islam, including Kepel's (1994) efforts to relate it to other fundamentalist religious movements, see Mamdani (2005).

[8] In the lead up to the Balfour Declaration, the Jewish Zionist movement also drew on powerful antisemitic tropes (Hart 2024a).

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[9] For the apartheid state's collaboration with Israel, see Schofield (2014).

[10] See Ellis (2012, 47–50) for a detailed account of how agents of the Apartheid state were involved.

[11] I am citing here and in the remainder of this paragraph from an email communication with Hashem Abushama.

[12] *Source:* https://www.thecongressproject.com/comprehensive-antiapartheid-act-of-1986.

[13] See Kipfer (2025) for a compelling argument about the imperative for concrete internationalism.

[14] Q13§36.

[15] This is a reference to Gramsci's concept of "prevision" that I discuss in Hart (2024b).

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