



31 January 2022

President Cyril Ramaphosa
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Minister Naledi Pandor
Minister@dirco.gov.za

Dear President Ramaphosa and Minister Pandor

As you are aware, South African Jewry has strong religious, historical, familial and cultural ties with the State of Israel. In light of this the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, as the community's representative spokesperson and civil rights lobby, takes a particular interest in the relationship between South Africa and Israel. It is for this reason that we wish to raise with you our unease and hurt regarding what can only be described as the obsessive manner in which South Africa is attempting to exclude Israel from the African Union. This unprecedented approach on the part of our government to rescind Israel's accreditation at the AU leaves South African Jewry bewildered. We cannot but wonder at this apparently relentless hostility towards the Jewish State. It further causes us to ask why our government is applying this punitive approach solely against Israel and not to any other conflict regions around the world.

Israel's recently acquired accreditation as an observer state at the AU will be debated at the forthcoming meeting of the African Union on 6 February. As events of the past several months have shown, South Africa has emerged as one of the most vociferous opponents of Israel's being accorded observer status and is going to considerable efforts to spearhead a campaign for this to be revoked. The purpose of this letter is to record the dismay and perplexity that we feel over the stance of our government is taking regarding this matter.

Perhaps first and foremost, it must be asked why when it comes to this particular issue South Africa is following a policy that is wholly inconsistent with the way it has approached other international disputes, both in Africa and further afield. Taken as a whole, our country has since the transition to democracy sought to play a meaningful role in conflict resolution through acting as an honest broker and using its own experiences of dialogue and negotiations to engage with all the parties concerned. To cite just a few examples, South Africa involved itself in helping resolve conflict situations in Burundi, the DRC, Cote d'Ivoire, Libya and Zimbabwe. There has always been a willingness and political commitment on the part of our country's leaders to address the continental conflicts and national resources have been committed to this end. However, when it comes to the Israel-Palestine question, such principled even-handedness and openness to hearing all sides has been glaringly absent. Instead, South Africa is choosing to align itself with hardline anti-Israel factions that completely reject any kind of engagement with Israel and seek instead to boycott and exclude from all international forums. It begs the question as to what it is about Israel, the nation state of the Jewish people that inspires such an obsessive antipathy on the part of our government.

South Africa's inexplicable opposition to efforts aimed at normalizing relations between Israel and countries previously hostile to it was also shown by our government's rejection of the Abraham Accords in 2020. Whereas the international community's response to these normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain (with Sudan and Morocco also subsequently coming on board) was overwhelmingly positive, South Africa again aligned itself with anti-peace factions bent on perpetuating a political and ideological war against Israel. It is relevant here to point out the alarming extent to which



BDS-aligned groupings are now influencing government policy in this highly sensitive and complex area. In both word and deed BDS, while it positions itself as a human rights lobby, is at its core a fundamentally antisemitic movement that openly campaigns for the elimination of the Jewish state and has been complicit the world over (including in South Africa) in promoting hatred and provoking innumerable acts of violence and intimidation against Jews who support and identify with it. Why indeed is South Africa, given its own divided past and principled opposition to all forms of discrimination, aligning itself with such toxic elements in our society?

So far does government's antipathy towards Israel go that it is evidently even prepared to foster division and ill-feeling between countries on our own continent in order to express it. By assuming a leading role in the campaign to rescind Israel's AU accreditation, it is in fact undermining the very unity and cooperation between member states that the AU was set up to achieve. In addition, it is importing to a forum whose purpose is to address specifically African issues a foreign conflict that has minimal influx on African countries. It amounts to a sad betrayal of everything this country has striven to achieve in terms of furthering the welfare of the greater African community, as well as of the legacy of Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and other revered South African leaders who devoted so much effort towards that goal.

It is further significant we believe to point out the kind of company South Africa finds itself in by adopting so aggressive a position on the accreditation issue. Another country that has been especially active in pushing for Israel's observer status to be rescinded is Algeria, whose human rights records is one of the poorest on the continent. Among the myriad abuses that have been noted are arbitrary detention; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, including arrests of journalists and site blocking; significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association; lack of judicial independence and impartiality and the worst forms of child labour. Again, it begs the question as to why our government's anti-Israel obsession is so strong as to cause it to turn its back on the very democratic, humanitarian values upon which this country was founded following the demise of apartheid.

As we have consistently made clear in our interactions with government, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies is committed to a negotiated, two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and fully supports all efforts by South Africa aimed at advancing that process. We urge the South African government to review its current policies on the matter and instead recommit itself to one based on dialogue and engagement with all the parties concerned.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Karen Milner
National Chairperson

Zev Krengel
Vice President