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Barking at the Big Dogs: South Africa's Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East

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ABSTRACT *This article places South Africa's foreign policy towards the Middle East in the context of the country's general foreign policy. South Africa is classified as a middle power, given its penchant for international 'bridge-building' and multilateralism. With regard to the Middle East, South Africa has frequently offered itself as a mediator in the region's various conflicts and continues to do so. However, the argument proposed here is that there is an 'anti-imperialist' strain in South Africa's foreign policy that renders it unlikely to be regarded as an impartial broker in the various Middle East conflicts. South Africa's middle power proclivities, as well as its anti-imperialist tendencies, are demonstrated with regard to Iran's nuclear ambitions, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, recent events involving Lebanon, and Hamas's 2006 electoral victory.*

KEY WORDS: South African foreign policy, Middle East, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq

Introduction

This article considers South Africa's foreign policy towards the Middle East. While a few scholars have written on the topic (Benjamin, 2001; Hughes, 2004), the contribution this article aims to make lies in taking account of recent events in the Middle East and in situating South Africa's foreign policy towards the region in the context of the country's general foreign policy. Identifying the gist of South Africa's foreign policy is no straightforward task, as commentators have struggled to make sense of the country's foreign policy, seeing it as fraught with inconsistency, randomness, even incoherence. Nevertheless, there has been some convergence of opinion on the classification of South Africa as a 'middle power', a notion which, despite its conceptual fuzziness, helps us to identify a certain consistency to South Africa's foreign policy behaviour (e.g. Bischoff, 2003; Hamill and Lee, 2001; Nel, Taylor and Van der Westhuizen, 2001; Van der Westhuizen, 1998).

Middle powers are supreme bridge-builders and multilateralists that characteristically perform two important tasks in the international system: they try to increase order in the international system, which includes legitimizing the norms espoused by

the hegemon; and they perform morally commendable tasks for the good of international society. Given that the middle power category includes countries as diverse as Mexico, Turkey, Sweden and the Netherlands, some scholars have felt it necessary to draw a distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers (Cooper, 1997, p. 18; Jordaan, 2003). Examples of traditional middle powers include Australia, Canada, Norway and Sweden, whereas Argentina, Malaysia, Nigeria and South Africa have all been mooted as examples of emerging middle powers at some point (Cooper, 1997). Traditional middle powers are wealthy, egalitarian, politically stable social democracies that are not regionally influential, while emerging middle powers are semi-peripheral, economically unequal, recently democratized states that display considerable regional influence. Behaviourally, traditional middle powers display a faint and ambivalent regional orientation and offer appeasing concessions to pressures for global economic reform, whereas emerging middle powers demonstrate a firm regional orientation and association, favour regional integration, and adopt, at most, a reformist attitude to the global economic order (Jordaan, 2003). As regionally powerful but internationally weak semi-peripheral states, emerging middle powers are perennially caught between the expectations of powerful states and their loyalty to developing countries in their region and beyond, whose loyalty emerging middle powers in turn depend upon in order to credibly and legitimately speak on their behalf. While the self-association and global position of emerging middle powers occasionally lead them into confrontation with the major powers, emerging middle powers cannot afford for these conflicts to be so vehement that they undermine their ability to build bridges and maintain order in international society.

Despite its role and interest in maintaining the current order, South Africa seems determined not to be seen as a lackey of the West. South Africa is, after all, a developing country that strongly identifies with Africa and the 'South'. Indeed, South Africa frequently presents itself as a spokesperson for Africa and the rest of the developing world. To maintain the allegiance of its partners in the developing world, South Africa has often felt it necessary to resist Western dominance on various fronts, a tendency Laurie Nathan (2005, p. 363) has identified as the "anti-imperialist" streak in South Africa's foreign policy. While Nathan's identification of an anti-imperialist element in South African foreign policy is useful, the term should be circumscribed in at least the following ways. First, South Africa's anti-imperialism is very mild and does not venture beyond actions that are ultimately symbolic and which, at most, lend weight to the principles, interpretations and justifications of those who stand opposed to the United States and its allies. Second, South African 'anti-imperialism' is confined to resistance to certain powers and interests that show themselves during transnational conflicts of an ostensibly *political* nature. Concomitantly, South African anti-imperialism should be stripped of any economic connotations for, even though the country's policy-makers sometimes "talk left", they certainly "walk right", in the words of Patrick Bond. This is shown by the African National Congress (ANC) government's neo-liberal economic policies, as well as by South Africa's role at the World Trade Organization, where US and EU delegations used an obliging South Africa to persuade other developing countries to accept their proposals (Lee, 2006, p. 57). The extent of South Africa's official discomfort with the current global economic order has hardly been

fundamental; rather, it has been limited to calling for a more consistent application of liberal economic principles and for measures to support those at the wrong end of the global economic scale. Third, South African anti-imperialism is also only aimed against the West—South Africa has of late been silent about China's occupation of Tibet and its aggressive economic pursuits in Africa. Fourth, South African foreign policy is marked by an outspoken insistence on respect for the sovereignty of developing states (including the occupied Palestinian territories) to a point where South Africa's position clashes with the demands, interests and actions of the West in the developing world. South Africa's respect for national sovereignty also obstructs its ability (and its willingness) to insist on human rights and democracy, responsibility for which rests most heavily with national-level political authorities.

Middle powers are characteristically eager peacemakers and the Middle East is a region rife with conflicts for a middle power such as South Africa to mediate, as it has attempted to do in the past. While South Africa's past interventions led to no visible success, it has remained interested in mediating some of the conflicts in the Middle East. Although some distance from the major powers and from major conflicts is necessary to be regarded as an "honest broker" (Cox, 1996, p. 244), the anti-imperialist tendencies in South African foreign policy that have surfaced with regard to various conflicts in the Middle East have seriously damaged South Africa's suitability as a potential mediator in the region. Below, South Africa's position on Iran's nuclear ambitions, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, recent events involving Lebanon, and Hamas's 2006 electoral victory, will be considered. It will be shown that while South Africa's response is foremost that of a middle power, it usually drifts into an anti-imperialist posture. But first, it is necessary to place South Africa's position on problems relating to the Middle East in the context of the country's evolving post-apartheid foreign policy.

South Africa's Post-Apartheid Foreign Policy

Hamill and Lee (2001, p. 34), postulate that middle power status is conferred in two ways. According to the first method, middle powers fall between superpowers and small powers when states are ranked in terms of an aggregate of their military, economic and strategic capabilities. The second and more useful approach considers mid-range capability to be a necessary condition for middle power status and requires, in addition, that states exhibit certain types of foreign policy behaviour, specifically an activist internationalism that tries hard to find peaceful and cooperative solutions to international problems, usually by steering these problems towards multilateral forums for resolution (see also Cox, 1996, p. 244). As mentioned, middle-power foreign policy is driven by an inordinate desire, firstly, for orderliness, security and predictability in international relations; and secondly, to perform certain morally inspired "good works" in the international system (Cooper, 1997, p. 7). The manner in which middle powers perform these tasks has been categorized as falling along a heroic-routine continuum (Cooper, 1997, p. 10), where a 'heroic' style refers to a high degree of publicity and risk-taking and a 'routine' style to discreet and consensus-building practices.

The behaviour-centred approach to middle-power identification emphasizes that foreign policy behaviour is not structurally predetermined, since states that occupy

similar positions in the global pecking order do not necessarily exhibit the same foreign policy behaviour. To better appreciate the variation among the foreign policies of states with mid-range capabilities one should pay particular attention to “the way in which decision-makers perceive or evaluate their options, their interests, and the likely outcomes of specific actions – in short, their *ideas*” (Nel, 2006, p. 109, emphasis in original). South Africa’s democratization entailed the assumption of power by an elite whose world view was vastly different to that of the white minority government they replaced. South Africa’s transition to democracy was accompanied by an intense reformulation of the country’s national identity through a highly moralistic language in which words such as freedom, equality and human rights figured prominently. The official redirection of South Africa’s identity also found expression in the ‘new’ South Africa’s foreign policy; whereas apartheid South Africa was an international outcast and a regional aggressor, post-apartheid foreign policy was characterized by high moral purpose and active good international citizenship.

In 1993, Nelson Mandela, who became South African president in 1994, published an article in *Foreign Affairs* that expressed the principles that were to guide the ANC government’s foreign policy during Mandela’s tenure. Mandela declared human rights, the worldwide promotion of democracy, respect for international law, non-violent solutions to conflict, special regard for Africa, and economic development through cross-border economic cooperation to be the six pillars of South Africa’s future foreign policy (Mandela, 1993, p. 87). Buoyed by its celebrated election to power, the ANC government embarked on highly visible and idealistic foreign policy pursuits. As a middle-income country and a regional hegemon, South Africa was also relatively well equipped to achieve its foreign policy ambitions, a prerequisite for middle powers (Hamill and Lee, 2001, p. 35). Since South Africa’s transition to democracy, it has mediated conflicts in places like the former Zaire and Ivory Coast, and sent peacekeepers to Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. South Africa also assumed leadership positions in a range of multilateral forums, including the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Commonwealth, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and various UN agencies, and sought to reinvigorate these to better serve the developing world. The ANC government’s foreign policy influence relied heavily on South Africa’s perceived moral authority, which derived from South Africa’s peaceful transition to a democratic system, from being the only country to voluntarily dismantle its nuclear weapons, from its victory over racism and oppression, from its powerful regional position and, of course, from the charisma and moral stature of Nelson Mandela.

During his presidency, Mandela dominated South African foreign policy in a style that was certainly ‘heroic’, but also rather out of step with what other states were willing or able to do. It was not long before the limits of pursuing an idealistic foreign policy in isolation from other states dawned on foreign policy decision-makers. One event proved particularly formative: in 1995, Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha had Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other activists executed after Mandela had personally pleaded for clemency. Mandela reacted by calling for an oil embargo against Nigeria and for the country to be expelled from the Commonwealth. His call fell on deaf ears. Stung by its failure, South Africa gradually began to move from the heroic and unilateral inclinations of the Mandela-era towards a more cautious and multilateral foreign policy that placed stronger emphasis on the ‘national interest’.

Subsequently, economic and security interests were afforded greater significance, while issues of human rights and democracy were so reduced in priority that South Africa nowadays rarely condemns human-rights abuses in the developing world.

As recent scholarship documents, multilateralism has become a central component of South African foreign policy (Lee, Taylor and Williams, 2006). South Africa uses multilateral channels for a number of reasons, some of which accord with its middle power role, while some are more in line with its anti-imperialist tendencies. First, South Africa has found regional and continental institutions handy as a screen for dealing with other African countries and so to avoid appearing as a unilateralist bully. Second, although South Africa has rather uncritically bought into the neoliberal agenda (Lee, 2006, p. 56; Taylor and Williams, 2006), it has used multilateral platforms to campaign on behalf of the world's poorest (Cornelissen, 2006). Third, and typical of a middle power, South Africa has been insistent that conflict in the international system be resolved through negotiation in multilateral settings. In the case of conflict in Africa, South Africa has put its faith in the African Union (AU) while, with regard to conflicts in the Middle East, it has repeatedly stated its preference for conflict resolution to take place under the banner of UN agencies. Regarding the fourth way in which multilateralism serves South African foreign policy, we are reminded by Robert Cox that although multilateral institutions are disseminators of hegemonic norms, they can also advance counter-hegemonic ideas and interests. In this regard, South Africa has viewed some international institutions as a site for political struggle, a space in which to challenge the major powers. Most notably, South Africa has sought an expansion of the UNSC, which would see Africa gain two permanent seats and five non-permanent seats and a change in the way veto rights are exercised (Cornelissen, 2006, p. 37). South Africa has also tried to move decision-making authority away from UNSC—the country recently voted against a resolution condemning human-rights abuses in Burma because it felt that the newly created Human Rights Council was the more appropriate forum for such matters. Fifth, South Africa has used multilateral forums as a place to present itself as a leader of Africa and the developing world by, for example, hosting various world conferences and manoeuvring for a permanent seat on a possibly expanded Security Council.

In sum, one might say that although South African foreign policy continues to exhibit the traits of 'middlepowership', the country is increasingly being pulled away from this role by a more upfront pursuit of its economic and security interests, as well as by its desire to show solidarity with the non-Western world and its ambitions to come across as leader of the developing world. The high stakes of the various Middle East conflicts offer South Africa a stage on which to register its protest against the US and its allies and thereby demonstrate its independence and justify its pursuit of leadership of the developing world.

South Africa and Recent Issues in Middle East Politics

Iran's Nuclear Programme

In August 2002, an Iranian opposition group presented the world with evidence that Iran's nuclear programme was far more advanced than generally suspected. Driven

by the US, the international community piled on the pressure to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Iran, despite sitting atop vast oil and natural gas reserves, remained insistent that its nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes but nevertheless resisted international efforts to inspect its nuclear facilities. The result has been a tense standoff in an already volatile region.

South Africa's involvement in the crisis stemmed from its occupation of a number of important positions in multilateral institutions concerned with finding a solution to the conflict: non-permanent member of the UNSC (2007–08), member of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) board of governors, and leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to which Iran also belongs. South Africa is also a peacemaker and an aspiring leader of the developing world. Significantly, South Africa enjoys a close relationship with Iran and has expressed no misgivings about Iran's status as, for example, a state-sponsor of terrorism or the world's leading executioner of children (Human Rights Watch, 2007). It is also important to bear in mind that Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been South Africa's two largest suppliers of oil, a vulnerability that South Africa has started to address by increasingly importing from Nigeria, Angola and Russia (Department of Trade and Industry, 2007). Nevertheless, for critics of the ANC government, South Africa's friendship with Iran fits the party's predilection for embracing all manner of international outcasts, a menagerie that already includes Suharto, Fidel Castro and Muammar al-Gaddafi.

On the face of it, South Africa played a commendable role in the Iran conflict—it sought to mediate between conflicting parties and tried to shield a developing country from being bullied by the US and its allies, in line with its duty as chair of the NAM at the time. South Africa met with Iranian delegations on a number of occasions to urge them to cooperate fully with UN nuclear inspectors. At the same time, and still in line with the position of the NAM, South Africa defended the “inalienable right” of developing countries to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (Bloomberg, 2006; Non-Aligned Movement, 2005). South Africa further tried to keep a lid on tensions by letting the IAEA deal with the Iran problem rather than the UNSC. In September 2005, South Africa abstained on a vote by the IAEA on whether or not to report Iran to the UNSC. In 2007, South Africa took up a seat on the UNSC as one of the 10 non-permanent members and also used this forum to argue against a heightening of the conflict between Iran and the international community. On 19 March 2007, South Africa proposed extensive amendments to a draft resolution that called for “modest” sanctions against Iran and was drawn up by the five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany. In line with its soft approach, South Africa proposed a 90-day time-out on sanctions against Iran. South Africa also wanted proposals in the draft resolution calling for an embargo on Iranian arms exports and targeted financial sanctions to be dropped (CBS News, 2007). Even though South Africa continued to express “deep disappointment” that not all its amendments were accommodated, Security Council Resolution 8980 was unanimously adopted five days later in a form close to that which South Africa had previously rejected.

Although it was acting in defence of a fellow-member of the NAM, South Africa's potential as a probable peace-broker has been damaged by using its institutional role in the conflict over Iran's nuclear programme to promote the anti-imperialist cause.

In this regard, South Africa's desire to be in solidarity with the developing world led the country to adopt some rather questionable positions. For example, South Africa has maintained that Iran is *not* in the process of developing nuclear weapons when it most likely is and further encouraged "all initiatives aimed at restoring confidence in Iran's peaceful nuclear programme" to which Iran has an "inalienable" right (Bloomberg, 2006; Department of Foreign Affairs, 2007a; Reuters, 2007). Furthermore, South Africa's ambassador to the UN, Dumisani Kumalo, further opined that: "After all, there is no basis for arguing that mass-destruction weapons are safe in some hands and not in others" (United Nations, 2007a). Kumalo coupled this view with another defence of the Iranian government, by drawing a rather strange distinction:

If the co-sponsors of the resolution were convinced that the Iranian programme was a threat to international peace, then the Council should have been asked to take a decision on a draft that had concentrated on that, and not act as if the Iranian Government itself posed a threat to international peace and security (United Nations, 2007a).

In addition to lending credibility to the claims of those aligned against the West, South Africa's anti-imperialism also manifested itself in the country's attempts to use the UN to contest the global arrangement of power beyond the Iran issue. After rejecting the abovementioned Security Council draft resolution, Ambassador Kumalo acknowledged that South Africa's actions were in part to protest against the exclusion of the ten non-permanent members from the drafting of the resolution (Voice of America News, 2007) and insisted that South Africa was not on the Security Council as "window dressing" (*Khaleej Times*, 2007).

While a certain degree of foreign policy combativeness is not incompatible with the middle power role, middle powers should ultimately play a unifying role, which South Africa failed to do on the Iran question. Instead, a Western diplomat on the Security Council complained that South Africa had gone "too far" and that they had "broken the unity of the Security Council" (*Financial Times*, 2007). The anti-imperialist tendency among South Africa's foreign policy elite has also hampered its ability to distinguish justified resistance to the US and its allies (e.g. in defence of the Palestinians) from less legitimate causes (e.g. shielding the Iranian regime). Ultimately, it is a poisoned gift for a country whose foreign policy influence depends greatly on the moral high ground to be thanked by the Iranian foreign minister "for its continuous support for Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes" (Bloomberg, 2006).

The Invasion of Iraq

In the lead-up to the American-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, South African diplomats worked feverishly to prevent war. In an attempt to avert war, South Africa had urged the Iraqis to cooperate fully with UN inspectors. In line with the middle power role and its stated foreign policy principles, South Africa insisted on a multilateral solution to problems surrounding Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, a commitment that was enhanced by South Africa's then

chairpersonship of the NAM and the AU (Hughes, 2004, p. 177). If war proved necessary, the decision was to be made by the UN.

South Africa's official reactions to the outbreak of war in Iraq convey a sense of deep dismay. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aziz Pahad, for example, opened his statement on the outbreak of war by saying: "The moment we feared and hoped to avoid has arrived. A few hours ago war against Iraq started . . . This is a tragic failure of negotiations and diplomacy" (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2003). Yet, dismay was not the only reaction. Outraged by American unilateralism, Mandela fumed: "What I am condemning is that one power, with a president who has no foresight, who cannot think properly, is now wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust" (CBS News, 2003).

In spite of its vehement criticism of the US, South Africa soon retreated to a more conciliatory role as South African government officials started giving assurances that there was no rift between South Africa and the USA over the war in Iraq (*Mail and Guardian*, 2003). In July 2003, US President George W. Bush visited South Africa with the intention of improving relations, which the visit probably did, although not all was forgiven. Bush's presence was marked by protests and there was to be no photo opportunity with Mandela, as has become customary for foreign luminaries when visiting South Africa. As part of its rapprochement with the US, South Africa generally refrained from commenting on the ongoing Allied occupation of Iraq (while continuing to give a running commentary on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict). Although South Africa's retreat was informed in part by a desire not to damage its economic ties with the US (Bond, 2003), after the conventional war it became apparent that South Africa and the US both wanted the same thing in Iraq—Iraqi self-government as soon as possible. Moreover, South Africa's inability to prevent war in Iraq also demonstrated the country's powerlessness in the face of a superpower with a leadership determined to go to war, and thus merely reinforced South Africa's middle power impulses. While the US-led invasion of Iraq dealt "a blow to multilateralism" (BBC News, 2003) and to the UN in particular, multilateral channels remained the only avenue through which South Africa could hope to affect superpower policy, which is why South Africa repeatedly called for a strengthening of the UN in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq.

Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

During the apartheid years, for a while at least, there was close military cooperation between Israel and South Africa's white government, while the ANC received support from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Arab states. Despite these historical associations, once in government, the ANC tried to let its dealing with all the states in the Middle East be guided by a principle of 'even-handedness'. In practice this translated into formal recognition of the 'State of Palestine' and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority (Benjamin, 2001, p. 165). With regards to South Africa's policy towards the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, South Africa has repeatedly stated its preference for a two-state solution, with a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

In line with South Africa's self-image as a bridge-building middle power it has sought to support and contribute to the Middle East Peace Process. Since South Africa has very limited influence over states in the Middle East, it has tried no more than to *facilitate* dialogue between the Israelis and the Palestinians (Benjamin, 2001, p. 166; Hughes, 2004, p. 156). In 2002, South Africa hosted two rounds of trilateral talks at Spier Wine Estate between Israelis, representatives of the Palestinian National Authority and South African government officials and persons involved in the country's negotiated transition. These talks, however, yielded no discernable outcome and were regarded as "inconsequential" by some Israeli officials (Hughes, 2004, p. 156). The Spier talks remain the highpoint of South Africa's contribution to the peace process. Continuing its facilitator role, South Africa recently hosted the United Nations African Meeting on the Question of Palestine, which amounted to little more than an opportunity to express solidarity with the Palestinian aspiration to self-determination.

Although South Africa's influence on the Middle East peace process has been negligible, it remains eager to play a role. However, South Africa's future contribution is unlikely to amount to much, for a number of reasons. South Africa's limited foreign policy clout has been mentioned, while others also feel that South Africa's lack of a stake in the conflict should be a disqualification (see Hughes, 2004, p. 156). Furthermore, many South African contributors have a tedious habit of viewing a solution to the Israel–Palestine issue in terms comparable to those of South Africa's peaceful transition to democracy, and of likening the Israeli strangulation of the Palestinians to apartheid, all of which is too simplistic to be of much help. An asset that could come in handy is South Africa's close relationship with the Palestinians, who are unlikely to have much faith in Western democracies. However, proximity to the Palestinians has been accompanied by deteriorating relations with Israel, which can be put down, in part, to the former's condemnation of Israel's treatment of Palestinians in recent years, while South Africa's recent absence during a United Nations General Assembly vote on Holocaust denial also did nothing to improve relations. Relations with Israel have also suffered as a result of South Africa's desire to stand in solidarity with Israel's enemies, specifically its closeness to Iran and its defence of Hamas's 2006 electoral victory over Fatah, as well as its open criticism of the Quartet (consisting of the EU, Russia, the UN and the USA), particularly the US, on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Such seeming partiality makes it unlikely that Israel would put much trust in South Africa as a potential 'honest broker'.

Recent Events Involving Lebanon

Lebanon has not enjoyed particular attention in South African foreign policy circles. This changed as a result of two recent issues in international politics. The first concerns the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, which was mostly waged on Lebanese territory, while the second pertains to the establishment of a UN tribunal to try suspects in the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005. In South African policy on both these issues, it is possible to detect some movement away from a middle power role, a deviation that once more reflects the anti-imperialist strain in South African foreign policy.

On 12 July 2006, Israel launched a large-scale attack against Hezbollah in response to its kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, starting a war that was to last 34 days.

During this period, Hezbollah failed to return the soldiers and repeatedly fired rockets into Israel, while Israel's heavy attacks resulted in the deaths of more than 1000 Lebanese, caused vast damage to Lebanese infrastructure, including Beirut's international airport, and resulted in the spilling of up to 15 000 tonnes of oil into the Mediterranean after Israeli planes bombed the Jiyeh power plant 30 Kilometres south of Beirut (BBC News, 2006). While the US predictably delayed pressuring Israel into a ceasefire, South Africa joined an international chorus calling for an immediate ceasefire. The Israeli reaction was widely regarded as disproportionate and condemned by France, Italy and Russia, among others. South Africa concurred but went further, insinuating that Israel was guilty of war crimes (*Business Day*, 2006), which proved congruent with South Africa's characteristically scathing response to Israel's misbehaviour.

The political battle over the establishment of a tribunal to prosecute suspects in the assassination of Hariri has been at the core of deep division and paralysis in the Lebanese political system. Opposition to the tribunal has come primarily from Hezbollah, which receives its backing from Iran and Syria. The Syrian regime is widely believed to have been behind Hariri's assassination. Stalemated at home, current Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora wrote to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to ask the Security Council to put the tribunal into effect as all domestic avenues had been exhausted (United Nations, 2007b). On 30 May 2007, through a resolution sponsored by the US and the United Kingdom, the UNSC authorized the establishment of the tribunal by a vote of ten in favour, with China, Indonesia, Qatar, Russia and South Africa abstaining. South Africa's abstention was based on the view that:

it is not appropriate for the Security Council to impose a tribunal on Lebanon, especially under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. [South Africa] has frequently cautioned that the Security Council should be judicious in its invocation of Chapter VII of the UN Charter ... [The Security Council] cannot be seen as taking sides in internal Lebanese politics. There is a danger that the imposition of the Special Tribunal on Lebanon without all the parties' consent will detrimentally affect the political stability of an already fragile Lebanese state (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2007b).

While a call for caution has become characteristic of South African foreign policy, so have invocations of respect for the sovereignty of developing countries. Indeed, South Africa's concern over the use of Chapter VII as a violation of Lebanese sovereignty was shared by Syria, who fears the findings of the tribunal (*International Herald Tribune*, 2007). More worryingly, as a result of its stance on the Lebanon tribunal, South Africa has done further damage to its reputation as an impartial broker, for once again it has found itself in opposition to the US and in the company of its sworn enemies, in this case Hezbollah and Syria.

Hamas's Electoral Victory

In the Palestinian parliamentary elections of 26 January 2006, the radical Islamic group Hamas achieved a surprising but convincing victory over the more moderate

Fatah. Although the election was free and fair, a government led by Hamas, which the US and the EU list as a terrorist organization and which is officially committed to the destruction of Israel, proved unacceptable to the West. In response, the Quartet suspended direct aid to the Palestinian Authority, while Israel withheld Palestinian tax revenues. The result has been a sharp decline in Palestinian living standards and in the government's ability to provide social services. Worse still, vicious fighting broke out between Fatah and Hamas as the two engaged in a disastrous power struggle.

The ANC has a long history of solidarity with the Palestinians and has repeatedly expressed its distress about Palestinian internecine fighting and called for a cessation of hostilities. The Quartet's stance on Hamas's electoral victory has been so harsh that South Africa has had to do very little to fall foul of Western standards on this issue. Against Israel and members of the Quartet, South Africa has urged an end to the economic suffocation of Palestine. South Africa also condemned the various members of the international community's unwillingness to accept a Hamas-led government which South Africa, by contrast, finds "perfectly acceptable" (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2007c). South Africa has demonstrated its independence by inviting the Hamas leadership to visit South Africa. However, South Africa still has to figure out how to reconcile Hamas's fundamental rejection of Israel's right to exist with its vision of a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict which, at the moment, seems impossible.

Conclusion

By drawing on examples from South African foreign policy towards the Middle East, this article has attempted to show how an anti-imperialist element predictably surfaces when South Africa attempts to perform the bridge-building role in international society for which it has become known. While South Africa's anti-imperialism is not always unreasonable, it has nevertheless led South Africa into the proximity of actors such as Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. South Africa's association with such actors is damaging to the country's moral stature, as well as its ability to fulfil a mediating role in the central conflicts of the Middle East, as it seems unlikely to be regarded as an impartial broker by Israel and its principal backer, the United States. Moreover, the publicity that surrounded South Africa's interventions in the Middle East reduced its chances for success even further, especially when one contrasts the South African approach with Norway's more discreet and successful use of 'back-channel' diplomacy to broker an agreement between Israel and the PLO during the mid-1990s (Österud, 1997). The best example of South African 'quiet diplomacy' has of course been the country's (unsuccessful) 'interventions' in the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe. South Africa's hushed approach and failure to publicly condemn Mugabe's disastrous rule stand in sharp contrast to the loud anti-imperialist protests the country registered over conflicts in the Middle East. While the loyalty of emerging middle powers to those in their region is to be expected, what we have witnessed in South Africa's foreign policy since the country's run-in with Nigeria over the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa, and demonstrated in this article with reference to conflicts in the Middle East, has been an abandonment of judging each case of international conflict on its merits in favour of a blanket solidarity with the developing world against the West.

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