

Shifts in Israel-Africa Relations

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Israel's reported involvement in the Westgate hostage rescue mission in Kenya in 2013 underscored Africa's significance in Israel's engagement with the globe.¹ Since the founding of the Jewish state, Africa has presented Israel with both opportunities and constraints for surviving and thriving in the international system. While the end of the colonial era accorded Israel the opportunity to establish relations with some African countries, the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors undermined these nascent ties.² In more recent times, the emergence of common security concerns has revived and strengthened Israel's relations with some African states.³ This article examines the evolution of Israel-Africa relations. In formulating its ties with the African continent, the Jewish state has largely been motivated by altruism and the drive to circumvent boycotts designed at its isolation; efforts to combat external and internal threats to security; construction and consolidation of alliances that reinforce its ideals and values; and enhancement of its position as an important actor in the international system.

Israel-Africa Relations

Three broad phases have defined Israel-Africa relations. The first phase was characterized by Israel's altruism and its drive to breach the boycott imposed by its Arab neighbors.⁴ Africa welcomed Israel because both parties shared a history of anti-colonial struggles, and among the developed countries, Israel was quick to extend development assistance to the continent.⁵ With the upsurge in conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the second phase was marked by Africa (mainly in solidarity with the Afro-Arab

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countries) severing ties with the Jewish state.⁶ Due to the emergence of common security concerns in more recent times, the third phase has seen Israel revive ties with its erstwhile African allies.⁷

In the immediate post-colonial era, Israel's engagement with Africa was driven by altruistic motivations and the drive to circumvent the Arab boycott of the Jewish state. Both Africa and Israel had suffered under the yoke of colonialism, and particularly following the Holocaust, the Jewish people acknowledged the importance of strengthening the capabilities of disadvantaged people in seeking to cope with threats that abound in a volatile world. To that end, during this phase Israel dispatched development experts to Africa.⁸ This humanitarian assistance cultivated cooperation in the areas of technical assistance, joint enterprises, and exchange and training programs.⁹ There was also a confluence of security interests that underpinned the evolution of these relations. With the proliferation of military regimes on the continent, Israel was an attractive partner to some African leaders, as it had the technical know-how to equip them with the coercive capability to stay in power. At the peak of defense cooperation during that phase, Israel was instrumental in training military personnel, establishing paramilitary organizations, and supplying arms to allies in Africa.¹⁰ With these relations, Israel marshaled a measure of international goodwill to counteract the Arab boycott.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 cast Israel in a foreign policy dilemma. Initially in establishing ties with some post-colonial African states, Israel had been critical of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Yet when the Afro-Arab members of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) pressured member states to sever relations with Israel (in solidarity with the Middle Eastern Arab states confronting Israel), Jerusalem established ties with the South African establishment (which ironically harbored Nazi sympathies) in order to maintain a foothold on the continent.¹¹ This shift not only punctured the altruistic component of Israel's foreign policy but also from the perspective of most African countries, portrayed the Jewish state as racist. The thorn in relations notwithstanding, Israel's engagement with Africa did not completely cease. Shared security concerns, ideals, and values presented a platform for continued ties between Israel and some African states.

Israel-Horn of Africa Relations

Of all the regions of Africa, the Horn of Africa (HoA) is of paramount concern to Israel. According to Ely Karmon, “The Horn of Africa is important for Israel’s economic interests, including trade with Asia through the Red Sea.”¹² Given its geographical proximity, the region would also be of critical security concern to Israel. In this vein, Israel has cultivated relations with some HoA countries to combat internal and external threats to its security, muster regional influence, and reinforce basic ideals and values.

In the HoA, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Kenya are of critical interest to Israel. Given their proximity to Somalia, Israel has sought to group these countries into a buffer zone against Somali Islamist groups (in concert with other radical groups) potentially linking up with the Palestinian militant group Hamas. In trying to cut the ties between external and internal security threats, Israel has also tapped into relations with its HoA allies to undercut the influence of Iran. Tehran is suspected of working to destabilize Israel by arming Hamas. According to the Israeli Defense Forces, Iran has tried to establish an arms supply route for the Palestinian militant group that connects through Sudan, the Red Sea, and the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip.¹³

The frosty relations between Israel and Iran are not only restricted to the conflict with the Palestinians. The two states are also engaged in a bitter war of espionage in the HoA. Stratfor Global Intelligence, a think tank that monitors Iranian activities in the region, reported that Israel has established spy bases in Eritrea to counteract Iran’s surveillance posts in the area.¹⁴

Despite these interests, the above exposition does not pinpoint the glue that binds Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, and Israel together. Given that these countries plus the newly created Republic of South Sudan are predominantly Judeo-Christian, as opposed to the predominantly Muslim Sudan, Somalia, and Iran, the configuration of the region reads like a clash of civilizations pitting two competing religious blocs. Reinforcing this notion, al-Shabab, the Somali Islamist group, has threatened retaliation for Israel’s claim over East Jerusalem, home to al-Aqsa, Islam’s third holiest shrine.¹⁵ It could be argued that Israel’s engagement with the HoA is partly intended to reinforce the religious facets that underpin its ideals and values.

Israel-Ethiopia Relations

The foregoing analysis provides a broad appreciation of the dynamics dictating Israel’s engagement with the HoA. For a more in-depth understanding of

this phenomenon, however, it is imperative to assess the actual nature of Jerusalem's relations with some of its key allies in the region.

Apart from Kenya, Ethiopia is Israel's other critically important ally in the HoA. Relations between the two states have been underpinned by the drive to strengthen mutual cultural connections and address shared security concerns. The ties between Israel and Ethiopia date back to Biblical times. During the reign of King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba of Ethiopia visited Israel.¹⁶ The last Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, considered himself to be of Jewish descent. Following an attempted coup in 1960, Israel provided a plane that relocated him to where he was able to crush the putsch. Yet relations between the two countries were challenged during the Yom Kippur War. As host of the OAU headquarters, Ethiopia could not break ranks with the rest of Africa when the Afro-Arab states pushed for a boycott of Israel in solidarity with the Arab states involved in the Middle East conflict.¹⁷

The above developments, however, did not put an end to Ethio-Israeli relations because aside from the cultural connections, the two states continued mutually beneficial ties underpinned by common security concerns. For example, Israel has been one of Ethiopia's major military suppliers. During the Eritrean War of Independence, Israel backed Addis Ababa, as apparently, in light of its difficult relations with its Arab neighbors, it wanted to prevent the "Red Sea from becoming the Arab Sea."¹⁸ It was this drive to check Arab influence in the region and external threats to security that prompted Israel in 2009 to bomb a convoy of vehicles in Sudan ferrying Iranian missiles bound for the Gaza Strip.¹⁹ Without the cooperation of Ethiopia, which enjoys geographical proximity to the Red Sea, it is difficult to imagine how the Jewish state could have successfully conducted this operation.

Israel-Uganda Relations

Although Uganda is not in the HoA, Israel found it important to establish and maintain relations with it, and in the past, has had security connections with this East African country. In 1976, Palestinian and German terrorist operatives hijacked an Air France plane carrying primarily Israelis, and with the cooperation of Uganda's President Idi Amin diverted it to Uganda's Entebbe International Airport. Israeli security forces forcefully rescued the hostages through a carefully planned operation.²⁰

Under normal circumstances, Uganda's role in the incident would have distanced it from Israel's web of allies in Africa. However, in the post-Cold War era, this was not the case because Kampala has emerged as a strategic ally of the United States. Given that at one time it shared a frontier with Sudan, Uganda was seen by the US as a bulwark against the southward exportation of Islamic fundamentalism emanating from Khartoum.²¹ In assuming this role, Uganda was not only serving US interests but also addressing its own security concerns. At one time, the Khartoum establishment sponsored Ugandan rebel groups – the Lord's Resistance Army and the Allied Democratic Front – apparently in retaliation for Uganda's support for the South Sudan-based Sudan People's Liberation Army rebel group.²² With the emergence of Sudan as a common threat to Uganda, the US, and Israel, there was sufficient ground for cooperation between Tel Aviv and Kampala.

In recent times as well relations between the two countries have been underpinned by security considerations. In 2013, Israel deported Sudanese and Eritrean illegal immigrants to Uganda with a plan of eventually having them sent back to their respective countries of origin. In return, *Haaretz* reported that Israel agreed to supply Uganda with artillery shells and mortars, and upgrade its jet fighters.²³ By accepting to temporarily host the deportees, Uganda assisted in relieving Israel of people who might impose a strain on the economy and in some cases potentially constitute a domestic security and demographic threat. Bolstering the military strength of Uganda was beneficial to both countries. Kampala would use its upgraded arsenal not only to maintain a balance of military capabilities in its interaction with Sudan but also bolster its interventionist efforts in Somalia, where it is battling al-Shabab. These considerations are central to Israel's confrontation of external and internal threats to its security.

Israel-Kenya Relations

According to Galia Sabar, "To Israel, Kenya is one of the most important countries in Africa. Since 1963, the two countries have had a close, profound and, for the most part, a mutually beneficial relationship."²⁴ Israel-Kenya relations principally spring from two premises. First, apart from present day Israel, Kenya was the other prospective homeland for Jews who yearned to have a state of their own, a Zion. Second, in advance of the establishment of Israel, Kenya was a theater in the Jewish people's anti-colonial struggle.

Connections between the two countries began at the turn of the twentieth century. At the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903, under what was known as the Uganda Scheme, British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain offered part of Kenyan territory for the creation of an autonomous Jewish state. Although at the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905 this proposal was rejected, some Jewish families emigrated to Kenya. In 1913, a Jewish synagogue was built in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Since this initial influx of emigrants, hundreds of Jews have grown to consider the East African country their premier homeland.²⁵ In this sense, cordial Israel-Kenya relations can partly be traced back to Kenya at one time presenting as a prospective Zion for the Jewish people. Although it did not live up to this billing, the influx of Jewish immigrants into the country left a lasting historical connection between Kenya and Israel.

Anti-colonial struggles also generated a measure of shared history between the two countries. In 1947, the British authorities set up a colonial detention center at Gilgil in the Kenyan Rift Valley, which housed, among others, members of the Irgun and Lehi Jewish underground resistance organizations. These insurgents were taken care of by members of the Jewish community who had settled in Kenya. Some of the Irgun and Lehi operatives later died and were buried in this East African country.²⁶ With Kenya posting its indirect contribution to the history of the Jewish state, at the end of the colonial era, there was a sufficient basis upon which Israel-Kenya relations could be cultivated. This notion is further supported by the argument that in the evolution of bilateral relations, Kenyans themselves could favorably relate to the anti-colonial experiences of the Jews. In their struggle to end British rule, Kenyans staged a rebellion, the Mau Mau uprising, which like the Jewish resistance, saw the incarceration of leaders of the anti-colonial movement.²⁷ In this sense, both nations were united by a common historical struggle against colonial oppression.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War damaged Israel's relations with its allies in Africa. With regard to Kenya, people-to-people relations endured and the two countries also continued cooperating on security matters, albeit covertly. Notably during this era, Kenya purchased missile boats and Gabriel missiles from Israel and in 1976 assisted it in the operation to rescue Israeli hostages in Uganda.²⁸ Relations between the two states normalized in 1988. Six years later, after President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya visited Israel, Kenya appointed its first ambassador to Israel.²⁹ Whereas the specific factors that shaped this normalization of ties are not clear, presumably

the enduring shared history, ideals, values, and concerns may have had a bearing on the rapprochement.

Israel-Kenya relations extend to almost all spheres of human interaction, and over the years have included people-to-people, political, trade, economic, technological, security, cultural and academic exchange.

Cooperation in Socio-Economic Development

Like its relations with the rest of Africa, Israel's cooperation with Kenya in socio-economic development has largely been driven by altruistic motivations and the need to maintain the global competitiveness of the Israeli economy. According to Aliza Belman Inbal, "In the same way we are a high tech power, we can become a development tech power because our problems are their problems and our expertise fits their needs."³⁰ Inbal herein emphasizes the altruistic function of technology: it is not only meant to better the lives of those who own it but should also be shared with those who do not have it. This bolsters the theory that sharing a common history of anti-colonial struggles, Israel reached out to Africa in part because it harbored an empathetic obligation to do so.

Against the above rationale, Israel and Kenya have concluded numerous bilateral agreements and Memoranda of Understanding which include, among others, the Agreement on Technical and Scientific Cooperation (1989); the Agreement on Water Resource Management, Technologies, Irrigation and Capacity Building (2009); and the Memorandum of Understanding on Fisheries Cooperation (2011).³¹ These protocols have paved the way for substantial trade between the two states. According to the Israel Export Institute, bilateral trade relations in 2012 amounted to some \$139 million, constituting 8 percent of Israel's trade with Africa.³² Like Africa's interaction with the developed world, however, Israel-Kenya ties potentially yield an imbalance in trade relations between the two countries. Whereas Israel exports high value industrial goods like transport, security, medical, and electrical equipment, Kenya mainly sells primary resource products that include animal, plant, and wood products.³³

While more recently Israel's relations with India, China, and Eastern Europe have to a large extent eclipsed those with Africa, ties with Africa help to keep the Israeli economy competitive.³⁴ According to the international consulting firm McKinsey, the key for the future survival of global firms is "innovation to win in low-cost, high-growth countries."³⁵ Despite the global financial meltdown, in 2012 about a quarter of the countries in

Africa registered an impressive economic growth rate of 7 percent or more.³⁶ Although Israel's trade with Africa compares unfavorably with that of trade with Asia and the US, excluding diamonds, Israel maintains substantial exports to Africa worth \$ 1.3 billion.³⁷

Security Cooperation

Partly due to the existence of shared values between Israel and Kenya in a world of competing civilizations, both countries have tended to attract common enemies. To address this problem, bilateral security cooperation has been characterized by Israel offering military capabilities and Kenya proving an attractive platform and market for Israel.

In the formative phase of this cooperation, Kenya was instrumental in offering Israel a platform for espionage and counterterrorism in Africa. The Mossad once operated a station in Kenya, and while the Israeli government was plotting the Entebbe rescue mission, it relied heavily on Kenya. The Scottish-born Bruce McKenzie, who was linked to the Mossad, convinced Jomo Kenyatta, then President of Kenya, to allow Israel to collect intelligence and refuel its military planes in Kenya while conducting the operation. For his role in the rescue mission, McKenzie was later assassinated by Amin's agents, who blew up a plane in which he was travelling. To acknowledge McKenzie's role in the rescue mission, Mossad head Meir Amit arranged the planting of a forest in Israel in his memory.³⁸

Kenya's association with Israel and particularly its supportive role in the hostage crisis made it a "legitimate" target of pro-Palestinian groups. In 1980, an Arab group claimed responsibility for bombing the Norfolk Hotel, citing Kenya's role in the Entebbe rescue mission as a motivating factor.³⁹ Although the attack on Norfolk Hotel signaled the extension of the Jewish-Arab conflict to Kenya, it was not until two decades later that Israeli interests evolved into a direct target of pro-Palestinian groups. In 2002, al-Qaeda affiliated militants conducted a suicide bomb attack on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa and attempted to shoot down an Arkia Airlines airplane carrying Israeli nationals.⁴⁰ The above developments, coupled with Kenya's evolving status as a battleground in East Africa's war on terror, pushed the two countries to strengthen security cooperation. In 2011, Israel and Kenya concluded the Agreement on Cooperation in Public Security Issues.⁴¹

While strengthening bilateral ties, the long history of Israel-Kenya cooperation has at the same time generated constraints on both countries'

ability to engage constructively with other actors in the international system. To this effect, Israel's designated enemies are expected to automatically translate into Kenya's and vice versa. In 2013, Tel Aviv was alarmed by a meeting between President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Kuwait. The two leaders met on the sidelines of the Africa Arab Summit to discuss prospects of re-opening the Palestinian Embassy in Nairobi and securing land for a Palestinian Chancery.⁴² Whereas Israel may have had some cause to be apprehensive about the meeting, the zero-sum manner in which it conceptualized the Israel-Kenya alliance left no room for either country to constructively engage with actors hitherto designated as adversaries of the two states.

The zero-sum perception of Israel-Kenya cooperation is particularly reinforced by people-to-people exchanges. Reacting to the Kenyatta-Abbas meeting, Francis Ndegwa, the Head of the Shalom Club, a society of 3,000 Kenyans who over the years have studied in Israel, warned: "It should be approached with caution because it has political implications."⁴³ The existence and behavior of the Shalom Club points to the notion that whereas Israel-Kenya relations may mainly be shaped by cooperation on concrete economic and security issues, the influence of lobby groups originally rooted in "softer" connections between the two states should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Although there have been various downturns in their relations, Israel and its allies in Africa have continued cooperating over the past six decades. Israel's interests have centred on altruism; the drive to circumvent isolating boycotts; confrontation of external and internal security threats; shared ideals and values; and enhanced status in the international system. On the other hand, Israel's African allies have sought to consolidate cultural connections and harness Israel's technological expertise in the spheres of development and security.

Whereas security cooperation continues to be an enduring facet of Israel's engagement with Africa, in order to make the ties with the continent more durable, Israel would do well to place most of its emphasis on development assistance. In this direction, Israel should strengthen its technical assistance approach toward more development assistance. The kind of technical assistance that the Israeli Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV) delivered in Africa in the 1960s is

potentially more transformative than the donor aid that African countries receive from most of the developed countries. In the long term, this soft power approach to bilateral relations is the key to winning the hearts and minds of Africa.

Notes

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