

Israel-East Africa Relations

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Diplomatic developments over the last decade point to the strengthening of Israel's foreign relations in sub-Saharan Africa. This article focuses on the ties between Israel and East Africa and argues that Israel's goal in strengthening relations is to improve its international standing and obtain political support in the UN arena. An examination of the voting patterns of four East African countries in the General Assembly in the years 2015-2018 shows that there is indeed political benefit, albeit limited, in strengthening Israel's foreign ties. The article recommends the continued provision of technological assistance for civilian-humanitarian development in East Africa, as, taking a broad perspective, this contributes to the achievement of political support for Israel at the UN and even to the enhancement of Israel's reputation in the West, alongside economic and security benefits.

Keywords: Israel-East Africa ties, civilian-humanitarian aid, United Nations, General Assembly

The trend of strengthened diplomatic relations between Israel and developing countries, dubbed a diplomatic "renaissance" by Prime Minister Netanyahu, has expanded in recent years. However, as shown by Netanyahu's comment during the visit by Chad's President to Israel in November 2018 that "Israel is returning to Africa," it seems that Israel's principal diplomatic effort is focused on the Dark Continent. Against this background, the following questions arise: What is the motive today behind the strengthening of Israel-Africa relations? What tools does Israel use to promote its goals in Africa? And do its efforts yield the desired results? The article contends that in the context of Israel's attempt to influence the UN arena, it seeks to gain

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political support from African countries by strengthening relations with them. Strengthened relations is achieved through Israel's soft power, in increased use of humanitarian assistance for civilian development; strengthened relations yields positive voting patterns from Israel's perspective at the General Assembly, albeit in a limited manner.

The article first reviews Israel-Africa relations, with a focus on the eastern portion of the continent; it then discusses the motives behind the efforts to strengthen ties in Africa, and examines the political benefits of providing civilian humanitarian aid by analyzing the voting patterns of Ethiopia, South Sudan, Kenya, and Rwanda at the UN General Assembly.¹ Finally, the article will consider the implications for shaping Israel's foreign policy toward East Africa.

Israel-Africa Relations

Israel's initial motives in relations with Africa can be divided into two categories: interests (security and political), and values that developed in light of the worsening Arab-Israeli conflict after 1948. In the early 1950s, following the isolation of Israel in a hostile Arab region, the need arose to create a sympathetic periphery, with an emphasis on non-Arab countries with a Western or Christian orientation, and *inter alia*, relations were established in East Africa with Ethiopia and with the Christians in southern Sudan.² At the same time, Israel showed an interest in other African countries that gained independence in those years and provided humanitarian assistance, reflecting the values underlying its initiatives there. Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir saw the provision of aid to African countries as a fundamental part of Israel's foreign policy in order to circumvent the Arab boycott, but also to support weak states following the end of the colonial era. The provision of aid was carried out via MASHAV – Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation.³

In the late 1960s, relations began to worsen due to the results of the Six Day War, and deteriorated to a low point after the 1973 war. Under pressure from Arab states, a pan-African process commenced and eventually led to the severance of Israel-Africa ties. Beginning in the 1990s, joint security challenges, mainly due to an increase in international terrorism and the strengthening of radical Islam, led to the expansion of Israel-Africa relations to countries throughout the continent.

East Africa is of great importance to Israel primarily because of its proximity to the Red Sea, which is Israel's conduit for trade with Asia. This

article focuses on Ethiopia, South Sudan, Kenya, and Rwanda, because of their importance in Israeli foreign policy.⁴ Ben-Gurion, for example, saw Ethiopia as part of the “periphery of the Middle East” and a potential pro-Israel base on the shores of the Red Sea in a way that made it the most important of the African countries, and Israel has invested in Ethiopia more than in any other country in the world.

Other shared interests have dictated close relations. Ethiopia and Kenya’s fears over the penetration of radical Islam into their territory, for example, have prompted their interest in Israeli military technology, and they have become purchasers of Israeli weapon systems. Furthermore, official diplomatic relations were established between Israel and South Sudan in 2011, in part in view of a shared sense of alienation by the Arabs and against the background of the view of Israel as the cradle of Christianity.⁵ Israel’s ties with Rwanda have also strengthened in recent years, seen for example in Israel’s support for Rwanda’s request to the United Nations to change the name of the International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Rwanda Genocide in a way that focuses on the genocide of the Tutsi.⁶ Relations between the two countries have also grown stronger in recent years due to Israel’s defense exports to Rwanda, subsequent economic opportunities, and attempts to reach understandings between the countries regarding the absorption of African asylum seekers in Rwanda.⁷

Israel’s Motives in Strengthening Ties with Africa

Humanitarian Aid

The provision of humanitarian aid for civilian development is associated with the concept of “soft power,” and is one of the important pillars of state soft power in the international arena.⁸ “Power” exists in every relationship and is defined as “the ability to achieve different goals through different means and thus to influence the management of any relationship.”⁹ Power in international relations refers to the sum of factors that allow actors to influence the behavior of other actors, and can be divided into “hard power” and “soft power.” If hard power is often based on the ability to convince actors through economic means (for example, reward for supporting actors and preventing material rewards from rogue actors) or by military means (the ability to threaten militarily to impose will), then soft power is based on a state’s attempt to persuade via its ability to shape the preferences of another state by non-coercive means.¹⁰ Soft power is the ability of a country to “attract” other countries through a variety of tools, including

culture, values, ideology, humanitarian assistance for civilian development, technology, norms, and institutions, thus enabling attainment of political goals and influencing the preferences of other countries.¹¹

The ability of a state to provide humanitarian assistance for civilian needs to developing countries is an important element in its soft power that is likely to improve its standing in the international community, and various countries provide humanitarian aid as a tool to increase their soft power.¹² For example, the US aid program to fight AIDS in Africa constitutes an important measure in enhancing its soft power. The same goes for China's strengthening of ties through investment and technological assistance in Africa.¹³ These cases exemplify the use made by actors, including superpowers, of civilian-humanitarian assistance as one of the foundations of their soft power, as opposed to exports and trade ties, which to a large extent constitute hard power.

For Israel, economic success and expertise in the fields of hi-tech, agriculture, medicine, and communications have helped to expand its diplomatic ties.¹⁴ Israel's technological capabilities were recognized by Portland Communications, which in 2015 ranked Israel 26 in its global "Soft Power 30" rankings of the world's top soft power nations. Israel's

technological capabilities were also reflected in its integration into the Horizon 2020 project for research, innovation, and technological and scientific cooperation, and those capabilities constitute the infrastructure for extending technological assistance for humanitarian, agricultural, and civilian uses.¹⁵

A number of prominent projects illustrate Israeli humanitarian aid in South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. Israel assists South Sudan in the development of water systems, infrastructure, and technologies. Joint projects include agriculture, natural resource development, infrastructure, science and technology, education, and defense. Israel was one of the first countries to extend assistance to the young state through the transfer of knowledge and

resources. Inter alia, it promoted the establishment of a model agricultural farm in East Equatoria, the renovation of the emergency and trauma ward at the main hospital in Juba, and university cooperation across the country. Speaking about the relations between Israel and South Sudan, the American

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ambassador said: “This is a country that loves us and you too, but loves you a little more.”¹⁶

In addition to more than 1,000 eye surgeries performed in Kenya in 2016 by Israeli doctors, and in light of the Kenyan request to learn from Israel agricultural development and receive assistance in the establishment of a scientific, technological, and agricultural park, MASHAV promoted additional civilian-humanitarian projects in the country, such as women’s economic empowerment, education on sustainable development, provision of water supply for agriculture, and the eradication of poverty in the Lake Victoria area.¹⁷ In Rwanda, Israel is particularly prominent in assisting in the development of agriculture in a variety of aspects – entrepreneurship, technology, and trade.¹⁸ In Ethiopia, MASHAV, together with the UN Development Agency, launched a project for innovation and technological know-how in the fields of agriculture, entrepreneurship, private sector development, and gender integration.¹⁹ A broader view of Israeli aid in Africa points to many directions. For example, as part of an ophthalmic medicine project run in several countries on the continent, hundreds of thousands of people were examined and tens of thousands underwent surgery. Another Israeli medical project has succeeded in reducing the mortality rate among AIDS orphans in Ethiopia from 25 percent a year to almost zero. Israel has also provided training courses for hundreds of African medical professionals.²⁰

Influence in International Forums

Beyond security needs and the attempt to curb Iran’s influence in various arenas and reduce its ability to supply weapons to Hamas, and beyond the realization of economic opportunities in the strengthening of ties with many of the 54 African countries, attainment of political support in the UN arena is another motive for strengthening relations, given the Palestinians’ growing use of voting procedures in the UN to promote their political goals.²¹ Therefore, alongside American support, Israel is working to broaden support from other UN member states, and in contrast to the few attempts to influence the UN arena in the past on the grounds of an inherent bias against it, Israel has recently stepped up its activity to influence UN decisions.²² A statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu during a meeting with Israeli ambassadors to African countries in February 2017 supports this argument: “There are 54 countries in Africa. If you change the voting pattern of a majority of them, you at once change the balance

of votes against us at the UN.”²³ Another statement by Netanyahu from that meeting leaves no room for doubt regarding Israel’s motive in Africa:

When I look at the pyramid of our foreign policy interests, Africa is very high up ...I want to say what our interest is. The first interest is to dramatically change the situation regarding African votes at the UN and other international bodies from opposition to support...This is the first goal. I am purposely defining it because while there are many other goals it outweighs them all... Whether in the end or at the outset, our goal is to change their voting patterns.²⁴

Statements made by MASHAV officials and the Israeli diplomatic corps also serve as evidence. MASHAV head Gil Haskel claimed that “when important, significant UN operational resolutions are reached, we see a direct link between our investments and the behavior of those states. If they don’t vote with us, they abstain, or leave the room...in all the countries I mentioned, and in others, we have been active for many years and we can see results.”²⁵ Arye Oded, a former Israeli ambassador to several African countries, said with regard to Netanyahu’s visit to Africa: “One of the goals of the visit is to change the situation, so that they will not vote automatically against us...that they at least abstain from voting.”²⁶ Israel’s ambassador to Rwanda, Ron Adam, said: “Our obligation as part of the Western world is to help others as well, when we invest more in foreign aid, we will have greater legitimacy in the world, and then we will be stronger politically.”²⁷

The Political Benefits of Israel-East Africa Relations

In order to evaluate the political benefits of Israel’s East Africa policy, the voting patterns of Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Rwanda in votes on resolutions concerning Israel at the General Assembly in 2015-2018 were examined. During this time frame, relations between Israel and Africa strengthened – in particular, relations between Israel, Rwanda, and South Sudan flourished – and important resolutions concerning Israel were presented to the General Assembly, including the decision to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem. This review was based on the United Nations, United States State Department, and UN Watch databases, and analyzed 76 General Assembly resolutions concerning Israel: 18 in 2015, 18 in 2016, 21 in 2017, and 19 in 2018.²⁸ The votes were divided into four categories – against (against Israel), pro (for Israel), abstentions, and absences. The analysis focused on the General Assembly, since of the African countries,

only Ethiopia served as a member of the Security Council in 2017-2018; in addition, the goal is to avoid bias given the veto power of the United States at the Security Council and in view of the fact that all votes are equal at the General Assembly. Alongside the main analysis, voting patterns were also examined in a number of major votes concerning Israel in 2014, prior to the period under study.

The US opposed all the resolutions on the grounds that they were anti-Israel. Regarding Africa, Table 1 points to a link between the strengthening of Israel-East Africa ties and the trend of voting patterns at the United Nations of some of the countries in favor of Israel.

Table 1. Voting Patterns of 4 African States on Resolutions concerning Israel, 2015-2018

	Ethiopia				South Sudan				Kenya				Rwanda			
	Against	For	Abstain	Absent	Against	For	Abstain	Absent	Against	For	Abstain	Absent	Against	For	Abstain	Absent
2015	16	-	2	-	2	-	8	8	18	-	-	-	1	-	1	16
2016	16	-	2	-	1	2	9	6	18	-	-	-	-	-	-	18
2017	17	-	4	-	-	2	14	5	18	1	1	1	4	1	7	9
2018	17	-	2	-	2	-	6	11	19	-	-	-	3	-	15	1

The analysis did not find a clear pattern of voting in favor of Israel, but the tendency to abstain or even to be absent from anti-Israel votes demonstrates a consistent positive trend in the votes of South Sudan and Rwanda. In addition, during the term of Rwanda as a member of the Security Council in 2013-2014, a prominent Jordanian resolution in December 2014 called in part for the establishment of a Palestinian state, but was not accepted as it did not gain the required nine votes – Rwanda was among the countries to abstain.²⁹ The pro-Israel line in the votes of South Sudan and Rwanda was also reflected in the draft resolution A/ES-10/L.22 of December 21, 2017, which was brought before the General Assembly by Yemen and Turkey to protest the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and was supported by 128 countries. On the other hand, 9 countries voted against, 35 abstained – among them, South Sudan and Rwanda – and Kenya was among the 21 no-shows.³⁰ Taking a broader perspective, among the countries that consistently voted alongside the United States in

favor of Israel in all 76 votes were Australia, Canada, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau, although the votes of the small island states result more from their dependency on the United States and less on their relations with Jerusalem. The positive votes of Britain and Germany are also significant, albeit in a more limited fashion. These findings suggest a relationship that must be maintained at least as much, if not more so than the attempt to strengthen ties in Africa.

On the other hand, Ethiopia voted against 66 times, and as a member of the Security Council in 2017-2018 in two prominent draft resolutions in which the United States imposed a veto to prevent their adoption, it voted once in favor and abstained once, partly because of its desire to draw closer to Arab states and maintain a neutral image.³¹ Kenya also voted against in 73 of 76 resolutions.

In addition, there were two major draft resolutions at the General Assembly in 2018. The first was in June, dealing with the dispatch of an international defense force to the Gaza Strip against the background of clashes on the border fence, and was adopted by a majority of 120 countries in favor and eight against. South Sudan was among the 45 countries that abstained, while Rwanda was among the 20 no-shows. A second draft resolution from December dealt with an American proposal to condemn Hamas. Among the countries supporting the resolution were Rwanda, South Sudan, and Eritrea, while Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda were among the countries that abstained. The draft resolution did not pass, but it was supported by 87 countries (and 33 abstentions).³²

Policy Implications

The article points to a positive but limited connection between foreign relations and policy benefits reflected in UN voting patterns and recommends expanding civilian-humanitarian assistance in light of expected benefits for Israel.

Political benefits: First, in light of the reduction in Israel's foreign aid budget today, certainly in relation to the budget in the 1950s and 1960s, and in relation to OECD requirements, the foreign aid budget, which stands at just 0.1 percent of GDP,³³ should be increased. Second, Israel should continue to promote the use of its technological capabilities for development in Africa. For example, climate change is gaining a central place on the agenda of the United Nations, the European Union, and the African Union. In view of the UN's humanitarian development goals, the

OECD requirement that its members allocate a portion of their budgets for humanitarian aid, and in view of the importance of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) in Israel's foreign policy as far back as the early 1950s, it is desirable that Israel too join this international effort, both from its experience as a country affected by direct and regional implications of climate change, and through its technological capabilities relating to climate change, focusing on agriculture, drip irrigation systems, water saving, water purification and recycling, solar energy development, and economical and efficient management of resources. These are examples of what Israel can contribute in light of its own challenges in the face of harsh climatic conditions, drought, and desertification.

In Africa, the entire continent is directly and negatively affected by climate change, which together with population growth may lead to challenges that will have an impact beyond Africa in the international arena in areas such as migration, economic crisis, terrorism, instability, and human suffering.³⁴ Israel's contribution in its technological solutions to global humanitarian problems related to phenomena such as desertification, drought, hunger, agricultural development, and humanitarian civilian development may accelerate consolidation of its status in African countries, especially in Ethiopia, which has tackled climate change phenomena in recent years. It may also contribute to raising Israel's prestige in international institutions and in the West.

In other words, in places where Israel uses soft power by positioning itself as a source of knowledge and expertise for humanitarian development, it may gain – beyond Africa – support, for example, at various UN bodies. One example was the acceptance by the General Assembly of an Israeli initiative on Third World entrepreneurship and development that was supported by 129 countries.³⁵ This is reflected in Haim Koren's statement that South Sudan is one of Israel's most consistent supporters in international forums, including in the UN arena. According to Koren, the esteem Israel receives for its involvement in the development of Africa gives it the reputation of a country that wants to help, and "one that knows how to do it."³⁶

Economic-security benefits: Israel's foreign policy achievements in Africa are limited, given the attempt by the African countries to display neutrality and "enjoy the best of both worlds." In other words, on the one hand, their membership in the African Union requires them to show solidarity and not deviate from the anti-Israel line led by the African-Muslim countries in the organization, but on the other hand, ties with Israel are important to them

from business-economics, humanitarian-civilian, and security aspects. Thus, the ability to translate Israel's civilian-humanitarian assistance and even its defense, trade, and economic into political support is limited.

Nonetheless, alongside civilian-humanitarian assistance, the article recommends a comprehensive effort, to expand economic exports, not only in light of the economic benefits to Israel (according to the Israel Export Institute in 2018, exports to sub-Saharan countries stood at \$725 million)³⁷ but also in view of the political and security benefits that may result. From the security perspective, strengthening Israel's relations with East Africa through civilian-humanitarian aid and economic-defense exports could ultimately contribute to Israel's security, inter alia, by reducing Iran's influence in the region and thwarting its initiatives to assist terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip by smuggling weapons from the Red Sea, Sudan, and the Sinai Peninsula and promoting intelligence cooperation. The proximity of Ethiopia and Kenya to Somalia may also serve as a buffer to the possible influence of radical Somali Islamic groups on the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip. This constitutes a common Israeli, Ethiopian, and Kenyan interest, because they also fear the possible influence of radical Islam in their territory.

Notes

- 1 Although located in central Africa, Rwanda is included in the analysis here in view of the importance allocated to it by MASHAV (in the Foreign Ministry), which sees it as among its Priority Countries, inter alia, given the many similarities between it and Israel, and because it is among the highest growth countries on the continent. See "MASHAV – Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/mashav/Where_We_Work/Pages/Africa.aspx.
- 2 Yossi Alpher, *A Lonely Country* (Tel Aviv: Matar, 2015) [in Hebrew]; Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel's Foreign Policy?" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 2 (2012): 27-40, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FILE1345031866-1.pdf>; Shabtai Shavit, *Head of the Mossad* (Rishon Le-Zion: Yediot Ahronot, 2018), p. 95 [in Hebrew]; Michael Bar Zohar, "David Ben-Gurion and the Policy of the Periphery 1958: Analysis," in *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics and Foreign Relations, pre-1948 to the Present*, eds. Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2008), pp. 191-97.
- 3 MASHAV – Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation, founded in 1958, was motivated by interests and moral considerations. Golda Meir put it well when as Foreign Minister she said: "Did we go into

- Africa because we wanted votes in the UN? Yes, of course that was one of our motives....But it was far from being the most important motive...The main reason for our African 'adventure' was that we had something we wanted to pass on to nations that were even younger and less experienced than ourselves." See Golda Meir, *My Life* (New York: Putnam, 1975).
- 4 On the importance of the horn of Africa, see note 1. MASHAV lists these countries among its priority countries.
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 - 6 Noa Landau, "Amid Deportation Deal, Israel Backs Rwanda's UN Move to Rename 1994 Genocide," *Haaretz*, January 29, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2J979Ml>.
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 - 8 The article does not discuss Israel's defense-economic exports.
 - 9 Shmuel Tzabag, *Power in International Relations* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1997), p. 5 [in Hebrew].
 - 10 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 1-32.
 - 11 Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York, Basic Books, 1990); Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.
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 - 13 Joseph S. Nye, "Rice Must Deploy More 'Soft Power,'" Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, January 25, 2005, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/rice-must-deploy-more-soft-power>; Drew Thompson, "China's Soft Power in Africa: From the 'Beijing Consensus' to Health Diplomacy," *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 5, no. 21, October 13, 2005.
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 - 16 Haim Koren, "How Do You Establish Diplomatic Relations with a Country that Was Just Born?" *The Arena*, No. 3, January 7, 2019 [in Hebrew].
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 - 18 "Israel in Africa: Rwanda," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 4, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Ly7BW3> [in Hebrew].
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- 21 Haim Koren, "Israel and Egypt: A Strategic Axis in the Regional Web?" *Mitvim*, <https://bit.ly/2XLtbwx> [in Hebrew]; Moshe Terdiman, "The Israeli Return to Africa," *Ynetnews.com*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4853614,00.html>; Amir Sabhat, "Is Israel Missing Out on the African Economy," *Calcalist*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3742663,00.html> [in Hebrew].
- 22 In twelve cases between 2001 and 2018, the United States blocked a draft resolution against Israel at the Security Council. See "Security Council – Veto List" at <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/veto>; Yaron Salman, "Peace Missions in the 21st Century," *Politika: Israeli Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 27 (2018): 51-66 [in Hebrew]; Yaron Salman, "Bypass Surgery: How to Overcome the Paralysis in the Security Council," *The Arena*, No. 3, January 7, 2019 [in Hebrew]. This is also reflected in Israel's announcement of its withdrawal from UNESCO in December 2017.
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- 31 See S/2017/1060 on the transfer of the United States Embassy to Jerusalem; S/2018/516 on the dispatch of an international force to the Gaza Strip.
- 32 Itamar Eichner, "Close Vote: The States that Blocked the Condemnation of Hamas," *Ynet*, December 9, 2017, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5422256,00.html> [in Hebrew]; Itamar Eichner, "A Majority in the UN was

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