



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel's first state visit to Chad, January 20, 2019. Photo: Kobi Gideon / GPO

# The Security Element in Israel-Africa Relations

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Over the past decade Israel's relations with African countries have grown closer, and in tandem, the importance of security ties and security exports invites special scrutiny. This article discusses the warming of Israel-Africa relations, and focuses on the role played by security ties. Review of Israel's security ties in general and with Africa in particular is absent from academic research and surfaces only minimally in the media and public discourse, in contrast to the wide-ranging discussion of Israel's civilian ties with the developing world. This is a deliberate decision by Jerusalem to limit the debate on Israel's security ties overall and with Africa in particular as much as possible. The article looks at what has driven Israel and African countries to promote relations over the past decade, and for the first time, the importance of security ties in these relations is examined in order to confirm the argument that contrary to official efforts by the Foreign Ministry to underscore civilian relations and Israel's foreign aid to Africa, security ties play a more significant role in the process.

*Keywords:* Israel-Africa relations, security ties, security exports, arms deals, diplomacy, foreign relations

## Introduction

Recent diplomatic meetings, including a meeting by Prime Minister Netanyahu with a delegation of senior officials from Chad in September 2020, and his meeting in February 2020 with the leader of Sudan in Uganda and in January 2019 with the leader of Chad, join the political developments of past decades in which Israel established, renewed, and strengthened diplomatic ties in sub-Saharan, central, western, and eastern Africa. The trend of renewing ties, which started in the mid-1990s following the Oslo Accords, has expanded in recent years, shown for example by the fact that since 2009, when the process accelerated at the initiative of then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, there have been a number of prominent official visits. In September 2009 Lieberman visited Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana. In the summer of 2014 he returned to Ethiopia, Kenya, and Ghana, and added Rwanda and the Ivory Coast. In 2018, this time as Defense Minister, Lieberman visited Rwanda, Zambia, and Tanzania. The visit to Africa by Prime Minister Netanyahu in the summer of 2016 included Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. Netanyahu returned to the continent the following summer to participate in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) conference, and during his visit to Kenya in November that year, he met with leaders of other African countries.

Although the scope of Israel's security exports and arms deals in Africa is limited compared to other regions of the world, this article looks specifically at the security aspect of Israel-Africa relations, for several reasons. First, in spite of the broad debate in the literature about Israel's civilian relations with countries in Africa, I believe that the security component has actually been dominant in the establishment of ties over the past decade. This argument mirrors the historical and recently expanding trend of a significant rise in the influence of the security establishment—in all its aspects—on the shape and implementation of Israel's foreign

and security policy in general, and in particular, in African and other countries with which it has no formal relations. For example, Efraim Halevy announced that the military level played an important role in Israel's foreign policy, and that it was responsible for Israel's ties with various Arab countries (Oren, 2020).

In other words, while the security establishment is perceived as ever more relevant in the field of foreign relations, the Foreign Ministry is perceived as secondary with regard to security issues. This dovetails with a background of complaints about the theoretical nature of its activity, reflected by the avoidance of risks and adherence to the official-traditional line (Oren, 2020). Moreover, Israel is wont to see the security element as a nearly exclusive component in the creation and reinforcement of national security, while downplaying the contribution of diplomacy; one of the consequences of the "over-securitization" of the discourse is that the security element is considered existential, and the diplomatic-political element is not. This was well expressed by Alon Liel, who claimed that the Foreign Ministry had failed to persuade the public that foreign relations are a "super important" component of national security (Michael & Salman, 2020).

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The tension between diplomatic and security elements has existed since Israel declared its independence, whereby security is considered of existential importance and diplomacy is

seen as something auxiliary, even marginal; in other words, it is not essential, and certainly not existential. The traditional reasons for this derive from the significance attributed to the many military threats Israel has faced since 1948. Today, this attitude is to a large extent also based on the inability of the Foreign Ministry to demonstrate its contribution and relevance to the showcasing of Israel's advantages in hi-tech, technology, economy, and civilian society as branches of Israeli exports that contribute to its national security (Michael & Salman, 2020). Consequently, the large and intensifying involvement of the security establishment in Israel's foreign relations is also evident in the impact of the growing dominance of the security aspect of Israel's relations with African countries over the past decade.

Second, this study represents an attempt to fill a gap in the research literature on Israel's security ties in Africa. As a rule, Israel does not provide information about its worldwide security ties. In its annual report of 2019, the Small Arms Survey organization defined Israel as the least transparent country with respect to security ties, together with North Korea, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Small Arms Survey, 2019).<sup>1</sup> The centralized security policy and the tendency among Israeli decision makers and security elements to limit any discussion of security issues as much as possible are even more acute when it comes to relations with Africa, apparently due to the dominance of light weapons deals (rifles and machine guns, artillery systems, mortars, tracking devices, and protection services, as well as combat training) between Israel and African countries. The reason that the volume of Israeli security exports to African countries is limited when compared to other areas, and consists of light weapons rather than major platforms (planes, sea vessels) lies not in the lack of willingness by Israeli arms manufacturers to expand their exports to Africa, but in the meager budgets of those countries, which prevent them from entering into larger and more varied deals (Melman, 2016; Nir, 2016).

On the other hand, the low cost of light weapons, their wide distribution, easy operation, use by the regular forces of national armies as well as rebel organizations, and the fact that small arms kill and wound more people in internal disputes than heavy weapons (aircraft, sea vessels, and tanks) all intensify the criticism of small arms deals (Adetiba, 2019; Boutwell & Klare, 1998). Thus, the combination of the nature of security links (small arms deals and training for presidential guards, which are often responsible for violations of human rights) and the increasing number of violent and unstable conflicts in the continent invites growing criticism of Israel, and this has led Jerusalem to adhere to a policy of lack of transparency and limited discussion. As described below, Jerusalem's lack of transparency imposes a methodological constraint with consequences for the empirical database that underlies the analysis of this article. For example, it is impossible to obtain full and accurate data regarding weapons deals brokered by third countries. Therefore this article refers only to openly available data, and the estimate is that the real figures are higher.

## The Goal and Structure of the Article

The civilian aid in medicine, water, and agriculture that Israel provides to African countries, which in recent years has been largely linked to Jerusalem's efforts to enhance its international image as a liberal democratic country against the background of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, has been widely discussed in the literature (Divon, 2006; Fried, 2006). This article focuses on Israel's security ties in Africa. Over the past decade, security exports, which have become a dominant element in Israel's relations with African countries in an attempt to strengthen these relations, are hardly mentioned in either the academic literature or the media, and there are very few official reports on security cooperation in Africa. Thus the following questions arise: What motivates Israel and African countries to seek closer ties

at present? Has the volume of Israel's security exports to Africa increased? Is this part of Israel's foreign policy, intended to strengthen links with African countries? And what are the benefits of an increase in security exports?

The central argument here is that contrary to the attempt to point to the significance of the elements of soft power in Israel-Africa relations, including the provision of technical assistance for the needs of development, the closer ties have actually been achieved through security exports and the involvement of the security establishment in the elements of hard power, in a way that serves both parties.

The contribution of this article, therefore, rests on its comprehensive and up-to-date view of the spectrum of interests of Israel and African countries over the past decade. While the literature has concentrated on a historical review of Israel-Africa relations and a survey of Israel's interests, mainly during the state's initial decades or the process of severing ties in the late 1960s, which reached its peak after the 1973 war (Erlich, 2013; Levey, 2012; Ojo, 1988; Peters, 1992), the current article has a broader scope, and includes reference to the interests of African countries in the past decade, particularly security interests. Another contribution of this article lies in its broadest possible examination of security ties with Africa, with the emphasis on light weapons deals. While the literature deals mainly with aspects of "soft" aid, certainly in the formative decades (Schler, 2018; Levin, 2015; Beker, 2006), here there is a broader examination of security ties, including arms deals, knowledge and intelligence sharing, help in the fight against terror, and training for the security forces.

In order to examine the scope of security ties, arms deals, and security aid, I used an empirical database that was as comprehensive as possible, although the ability to retrieve official data, certainly primary data, showing the extent of Israeli security exports is limited due to the confidential nature of arms deals between Israel and countries in Africa, and since some

of the deals are brokered by third countries. As a way of overcoming the methodological and empirical challenge that demands a cautious approach to the data, I tapped a large number of academic, official, and media sources in order to obtain the most comprehensive picture possible. The data was assembled from prior studies, reports issued by UN research institutes and human rights organizations that operate in Africa, official reports from the Security Export Division of the Ministry of Defense, and media reports; it was encoded, cross-referenced, and examined in a way that facilitated analysis and produced extensive validated findings, in spite of limited availability of data.

This article has three parts: the first is a presentation of the theoretical framework, with a definition of the term "power" in international relations. This is followed by a discussion of trends that have characterized Israel-Africa relations over the decades, with a focus on the recent growth of the security element. The second part discusses the motives of Israel and African countries behind the efforts to strengthen ties. The third part examines the security ties and tries to assess their scope and importance in these relationships.

## Hard Power in International Relations

In the context of international relations, power refers to all the factors that enable one actor to influence the conduct of other actors, and is defined as "the ability to achieve various objectives using various means and thus influence the conduct of a system of relationships" (Tzabag, 1997, p. 5). According to the traditional definition, hard power is based on the ability to persuade other players by economic means (material rewards for supporters and withdrawal of material rewards from the recalcitrant) or by military means (one actor's ability to use military threats in order to impose its will on other actors); soft power rests on the attempt to persuade and shape preferences without using force (Nye, 2004).

Three methods can be cited for influencing the conduct of others: coercion, payment, and attraction. Coercion and payment are characteristic of hard power; attraction is linked to soft power and the ability of one country to influence another by means of its culture, values, ideology, assistance with civilian needs, technology, norms, and institutions (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2009). This article does not refer to the concept of hard power in the narrow traditional way, usually tied to the ability to impose a position on other actors, but in a broader sense, and includes exports and security aspects such as weapons deals, training of forces, and knowledge and intelligence sharing as elements of hard power. In addition, security exports are linked to economic aspects (another foundation of the traditional definition of hard power), and together with the approach that usually sees military and economic ability as tools to force a position on others, this article argues that security exports, as an expression or component of hard power, are also a tool for strengthening international relations.

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In the early 1950s, the attempt to influence the conduct of other actors largely relied on the components of hard power, elements linked to geography, territory, economy, and means of warfare. From the early 1990s, as the global arena changed following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and an overall decline in international warfare,<sup>2</sup> new methods of exerting influence emerged based on developments in technology and education, and the assumption that a country's ability to provide technical assistance in order to reduce poverty, hunger, and disease would raise its stock on the world stage. However, the proportion of elements of hard power linked to security exports and arms deals all over the

world has actually grown, as shown by SIPRI's latest annual report,<sup>3</sup> whereby in 2015-2019, the volume of exports of the leading arms exporters was 5.5 percent higher than in 2010-2014, and 20 percent higher than in 2005-2009. The report also illustrates Israel's hard power in the context of its varied abilities in the security sphere, as shown by the broad scope of its weapons deals and security exports. Israel is eighth in the list of the world's ten largest weapons exporters, with a share of 3.1 percent of all security exports worldwide (SIPRI, 2019). Clearly, then, Israel uses the elements of hard power (security aid and arms sales) in addition to the elements of soft power (technical assistance in the fields of agriculture, education, infrastructures, and health) to strengthen its ties in Africa.

## Israel-Africa Relations

In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel's relations with Africa were characterized, *inter alia*, by the provision of aid to newly-independent countries, and by the forging of relations with non-Arab countries with Western or Christian links, such as Ghana, Ethiopia, and the Christians in South Sudan (Alper, 2015; Guzansky & Lindenstrauss, 2012; Shavit, 2018; Gidron, 2020; Bar Zohar, 2008). In order to establish these ties, Israel granted aid in agriculture, education, and medicine, and David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir saw this as a fundamental component of Israel's foreign policy (Oded, 2011). At the same time, Israel gave security aid to African countries, and converging security interests also helped strengthen the ties, so that the heads of many of the continent's military regimes saw Israel as a desirable partner that could secure their survival with assistance that included the supply of weapons and training for their armed forces and presidential guards (Butime, 2014; Gidron, 2020).

After the Six Day War (1967), Israel's relations with African countries deteriorated, reaching a low point after the Yom Kippur War (1973), when countries throughout the continent severed ties with Israel (Oded, 2011; Bishku, 2017). In the



1990s there was some improvement following the Oslo Accords. Further improvement was achieved in 2009 in view of the work of Foreign Minister Lieberman to strengthen ties throughout Africa, including sub-Saharan Africa. Shared security challenges, the growing threat of international terror, and the rise of fundamental Islam were the basis and the incentive for this trend.

Today Israel has diplomatic relations with 41 African countries,<sup>4</sup> and with 11 of them it has an embassy (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, South Africa, Angola, Rwanda, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon); more recently there have been signs of potential normalization and expansion of relations following contacts with Chad, Morocco, and Sudan and the Abraham Accords. In some cases, the security links are extensive. For example, Israel is one of Ethiopia's most important arms suppliers and supported it in its recent war with Eritrea. The same goes for Kenya, where closer ties with Israel are partly due to the terrorism challenges it faces in East Africa (Butime, 2014). The security dimension is also reflected in Israel's relations with Nigeria; back in the 1960s the Foreign Ministry was determined to establish diplomatic ties with this large country, rich in minerals and a central actor in Africa. The Defense Ministry encouraged these ties, and in 1961 began to penetrate the Nigerian weapons market (Levy, 2012). Israel's security expertise is currently very relevant for Nigeria, which faces threats from radical Islamist groups that are flourishing in West Africa. One of Israel's indirect contributions to Nigeria's struggle against terror can be seen in the cooperation between Nigerian armed forces and the Cameroonian army, which was formerly trained by Israeli military advisers and whose basic equipment is of Israeli manufacture.

The Islamist threat has boosted the interest of Ghana, Ivory Coast, Rwanda, and Kenya in Israel's knowledge and intelligence capabilities (Melman, 2016). Relations with Uganda were renewed in 1994, and have improved steadily since then (Oded, 2002a), as shown for example

by Uganda's willingness to allow the passage of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers repatriated by Israel, in return for Israeli security exports (Bishku, 2017; Martin, 2013). Israeli-Ugandan relations were apparent in the context of Netanyahu's meeting in Uganda with the Sudanese leader in early February 2020. During the visit, Netanyahu and Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni announced the possible opening of embassies in Kampala and Jerusalem (Landau, 2020). Cooperation between Israel and Uganda has increased in recent years, evidenced by the granting of agricultural and medical aid, and above all in security cooperation, which even included the renovation of Ugandan Air Force planes in Israel (Ravid, 2014).

Another country where the security aspect is a central feature of relations with Israel is Eritrea. The ties that were first established in 2013 have become steadily stronger, following the life-saving hospitalization of Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki in Israel (Dibon, 2002). Relations with Eritrea are complex, against the background of Israel's historic support for Ethiopia in the suppression of the Eritrean revolt against Ethiopian imperial and then revolutionary rule (after the overthrow of the Emperor), but are essential for preserving Israel's security interests in view of its proximity to Somalia and its ability to serve as a barrier to Somalia's Islamist organizations that cooperate with Hamas and Iran (Butime, 2014).

Unlike other countries that see in Eritrea an economic opportunity, in Israel's case the interests are largely security-based due to the country's location east of Sudan, on the Red Sea coast, and its proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the sea route to Eilat, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia (Melman, 2011). In Eritrea, Israel has operated shipping harbors and a surveillance station, as part of the effort to stop Iran smuggling arms to Hamas and Hezbollah (Beres, 2019).

Official diplomatic relations were established between Israel and South Sudan in 2011, but there were actually relations between the

two countries since the late 1960s (Gidron, 2018). Israel's former ambassador to South Sudan, Haim Koren, claims that their "attitude toward us borders on love" (Michael & Salman, 2020). Koren also claims that South Sudan is one of Israel's most consistent supporters in international forums, including the UN (Koren, 2019), due to the aid that Israel gave the southern rebels in their struggle for independence from North Sudan, a sense of shared alienation from the Arabs, and as Christians, their perception of Israel as the cradle of Christianity (Guzansky & Lindenstrauss, 2012; Rolandsen, 2011; Levey, 2004; Gidron, 2018). Since then, the security aid provided by Israel to South Sudan has been an important element in relations. On the other hand, Israel's name is also linked to the civil war in South Sudan, which has continued since its declaration of independence. In this context, there has been criticism of Israel's security exports to a divided country, and of the Ministry of Defense's policy of concealing security ties (Harel, 2019; Cohen, 2015; Tzuriel & Passovsky, 2019; Melman, 2017a, 2017b).

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Israel's relations with Rwanda also reached new heights with the opening of the Israeli embassy in Kigali in April 2019. Beyond the tendency in Rwanda to identify with Israel against the background of a comparison between the Holocaust of the Jewish people and the genocide of the Tutsis, relations have become closer in recent years, mainly due to Israel's security exports to Rwanda, which began officially in the early 1990s (Cohen, 2014), and the subsequent

economic opportunities. In addition, there were attempts to reach an understanding over Rwandan acceptance of asylum seekers from Israel (Lior, 2018; Keinon, 2017).

### **The Motives Driving Closer Relations between Israel and African Countries**

The interests of African countries in stronger ties with Israel derive from their fears of infiltration of global jihad elements into their territory and what they see as the necessity of security, economic, and technological cooperation with Israel. African countries have many needs in areas such as communications, health, agriculture, infrastructure, defense, security, and intelligence. Alon Liel notes the admiration for Israel's economic and technological achievements, claiming that what interests African countries is survival, and they need "everything—communications, agriculture, health, technology; they want to receive and Israel is the source" (Liel, quoted by Michael & Salman, 2020). Moreover, African regimes want Israeli security assistance as a means of securing their own survival. Another striking motive, at least in some countries, is that good relations with Israel are also perceived as a way of promoting relations with the United States. It is possible, for example, that South Sudan's consistent political support for Israel in the UN derives partly from its attempts to forge closer ties with the United States (Gidron, 2020).

From Israel's perspective, closer ties with countries in Africa meet a number of its vital interests—strategic, economic (general exports, security exports and arms sales), military, and political (support in UN institutions):

*Strategic interests:* The importance of the Horn of Africa lies in its geographical proximity to the Red Sea coast. In the mid-1960s, stronger ties with Ethiopia and its neighbors became Israel's most important objective in Africa, arising from its interest in "protecting its flanks" and securing the maritime lanes in the Red Sea, which were the conduits for trade with Asia (Levey, 2004). The need to secure

the maritime routes to the Far East and South Africa encouraged closer ties with Ethiopia and Kenya, and the port of Mombasa was a central station on the way to these destinations. Moreover, the need to maintain El Al Airlines routes to Kenya and South Africa added to the importance of the air space over East Africa. In addition, in strategic terms, the locations of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda at the rear of Arab countries also contributed to their importance for Israel (Oded, 2002b). Israel has attached importance to Ethiopia in particular for many years. For example, Ben-Gurion saw it as part of the “Middle East periphery” and a potential pro-Israel base on the Red Sea shores. It was thus the most important African country, and Israel invested more in Ethiopia than in any other country (Butime, 2014; Oded, 2011).

*Economic interests:* In 2018 general Israeli exports to African states totaled \$725 million, while in 2019 the value was \$600 million (Export Institute, 2019, 2020). Security exports are vital for the activity and maintenance of Israel’s security industries and “the most valuable industry for the State of Israel” (Wezeman, 2011, p. 9). Apart from the aspiration to realize economic opportunities (Sabhat, 2018), the purpose of Israel’s attempt to promote the economic involvement of the private sector is to increase its influence all over the continent, inter alia through development assistance (Gidron, 2020).

A central element of the economic aspect is the sale of knowledge and security equipment, as well as weapon systems. According to Sibat figures,<sup>5</sup> in 2018 Israel’s security exports worldwide amounted to \$7.5 billion, roughly 27 billion NIS (Ministry of Defense website, 2019), and in 2019 amounted to \$7.203 billion, almost 25 billion NIS (Ministry of Defense website, n.d.). These figures show the importance of security exports and their contribution to the Israeli economy. Apart from Israel’s clear economic interest, there is also a mutual security interest that has strengthened over the past decade, largely as a reaction to growing Islamic terror,

and driven African states to purchase Israeli weapon systems.

*Military interests:* These are linked mainly to the fight against Islamic terror, as shown by the statement “Kenya’s enemies are Israel’s enemies,” attributed to Netanyahu, referring to Kenya’s struggle against the al-Shabaab organization (BBC News, 2011) and the attempt to block Iran in Africa (Tardiman, 2016; Melman, 2016; Gidron, 2020).

Israel assisted in the attempt to build a coalition of Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Tanzania to combat Somali and other Islamic groups, which threaten them directly. Over the last 15 years, thanks to its contacts in the east of the continent, Israel has managed to track the Islamic groups in the region and collect information about Iran’s attempts to smuggle arms. For example, according to Galia Tzabar, in 2009 Israel stopped a delivery of weapons from Iran to Hamas that passed through Sudan. She claimed that this was just one example of many (Tzabar, quoted by Martin, 2013).

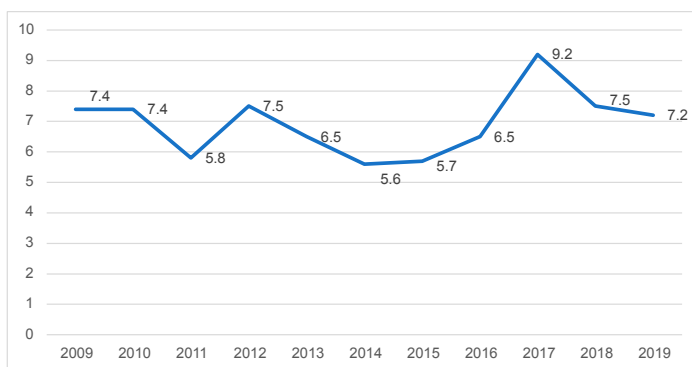
Israel seeks to limit the influence of Iran, which is trying to strengthen its grip on Sudan through a variety of channels, including economic investments, military aid, and cultural-ideological influence. Because of its access to the sea, Iran sees Sudan as a channel for smuggling weapons to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic organizations in the Maghreb through the Sinai Peninsula (Guzansky & Lindenstrauss, 2012). Evidence of Israel’s attempts to block Iranian influence in Africa was referenced by Defense Minister Lieberman, who at the end of his visit to the continent in 2018 said: “Unless we can succeed in strengthening cooperation, we’ll miss an enormous opportunity and others, particularly the Iranians, will do it instead of us. We have to understand, in every country where we have alliances and cooperation, we are pushing Iran out and isolating it” (Yisrael Beytenu website, 2018).

*Political interests* are linked to the attempt to undermine Palestinian diplomatic efforts in the international arena (Gidron, 2020),



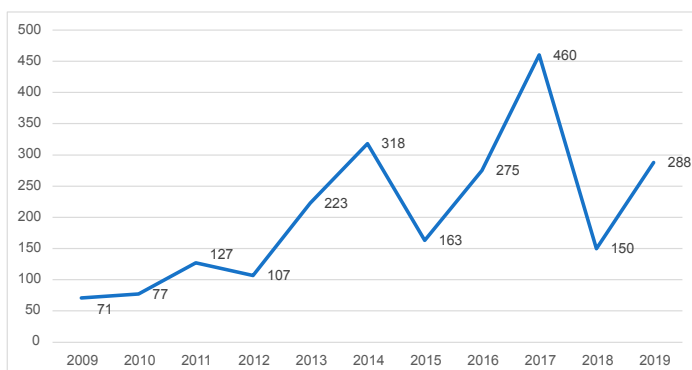
largely in response to Palestinian use of UN voting processes to promote its political aims. Israel has recently intensified its activity in UN institutions, as reflected in its efforts to achieve political support from African states (Salman, 2019, 2020). The Prime Minister's remarks at a meeting with Israeli representatives in Africa in February 2017 leave no room for doubt over Israel's political motives in the continent: "If I look at our foreign policy interests as a pyramid, Africa is very high...The first interest is to dramatically change the way Africa votes at the UN and in international bodies, from opposition to support" (Prime Minister's Office, 2017). This is also the belief of Knesset Member Avraham Neguise, leader of the lobby for Israel-Africa relations, who said in a television interview:

"We need Africa to vote for us in UN institutions. For example, today Ethiopia is a member of the Security Council...We want Ethiopia to be with us, and the same goes for other countries in various UN organizations, such as UNESCO" (Channel 20, 2016). Gil Haskel, head of Mashav (the Foreign Ministry Agency for International Development Cooperation) said: "We are more motivated to help countries that are particularly friendly. The basket of considerations for where to direct our aid absolutely includes a political consideration" (Kahane, 2018). Arie Oded, Israel's former ambassador to a number of African countries, discussing Netanyahu's visit to Africa, said that "one of the goals of the visit is to change the situation, so that they won't automatically vote against us, or that they'll at least abstain" (Cohen, 2016). These expressions indicate the importance Israel attaches to the political motive in its contacts with Africa.



**Figure 1. Total security exports, 2009-2019 (in billions of dollars)**

Source: Azoulai, 2013; Dagoni, 2011; Milman, 2018; Mack, 2019; MOD website, 2017, 2018, 2019



**Figure 2. Security exports to Africa, 2009-2019 (in billions of dollars)**

Source: Azoulai, 2013; Dagoni, 2011; Milman, 2018; Mack, 2019; MOD website, 2017, 2018, 2019

## The Security Aspect of Israel-Africa Relations

As a rule, information about Israeli exports of large weapons (aircraft, naval vessels, and tanks) is more available and usually revealed in reports that Israel sends each year to UNROCA.<sup>6</sup> However, these reports do not include information about deals involving light weapons. The same applies to information provided by Sibat, which does present official data about the scope of Israel's security exports to Africa—which amounted to 2 percent of all deals in 2018, and even doubled in 2019 to 4 percent of all deals (Ministry of Defense website, 2019, n.d.)—but still gives no information about the types of weapons, the destination countries, or sales brokered by third parties. The average annual value of Israel's security exports is about \$7.5 billion, of which \$200-400 million annually comes from Africa (Tzuriel & Passovsky, 2019). Over the past decade there has been a gradual increase in security exports to the continent, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

The data show that from a global perspective, the scope of Israel's security deals in Africa is

marginal compared to other regions. However, although an analysis of the export reports that Israel sent to UNROCA in 1992-2018 reveals that they are partial since they do not include information about light weapons deals,<sup>7</sup> Figure 2 indicates the trend of moderate but consistent growth in sales to Africa. An examination of the last decade in Figure 2 shows that while security exports to Africa totaled \$71 million in 2009, by 2019 they had reached \$288 million, that is, an increase of 306 percent (notwithstanding the fluctuations in 2012 and 2017). Moreover, when compared to general security exports, which have remained stable and even declined slightly—from \$7.4 billion in 2009 to \$7.2 billion in 2019 (a decrease of 3 percent)—there is a more significant growth in the size of security exports to Africa. This is particularly striking over the last two years, in which general exports shrank from \$7.5 to 7.2 billion, while security exports to Africa doubled. In other words, while general security exports declined, security exports to Africa increased. Although these trends point to a growth in security exports, they also show that security ties are a basic and important building block in Israel's relations with countries in Africa, which is largely due to the fact that Israel's security interests coincide with those of African states and the survival of their regimes. The widely-reported 2009 visit of Foreign Minister Lieberman to five African countries included a large delegation of businesspeople, some representing companies engaged in security exports. Lieberman's last visit to Africa as Defense Minister in 2018 also demonstrated Africa's importance to Israel and the scope of the security aid it provides to countries in that continent.

According to SIPRI, in 2006-2010 Israel supplied various types of large weapons to Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Nigeria, Rwanda, the Seychelles, South Africa, and Uganda. Nigeria is the leading importer in Africa of Israeli weapons, accounting for almost 50 percent of all Israel's security exports to the sub-Sahara (Wezeman, 2011). Israel is one

of the six main suppliers of light weapons to Africa, together with Russia, China, the United States, Germany, and Belgium (Boutwell & Klare, 2000). Additional information about Israeli exports of light weapons to Africa can be gleaned from evidence gathered from photographs of armies and national guards in African countries (in Cameroon, a unit of the national guard was even nicknamed "the Israeli unit"), showing soldiers equipped with rifles and other weapons manufactured by Israeli Military Industries (Mack, 2019; Wezeman, 2011). These photographs are evidence of Israeli-manufactured weapons (improved Galil, Uzi, and Tavor rifles and Negev machine guns) in the hands of various African security forces, and they also tell us about the destination countries for security exports (including Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Djibouti) (Wezeman, 2011).

Evidence of the use of Israeli light weapons in African states can also be found in reports from human rights groups. For example, an Amnesty International report states that Galil assault rifles made in Israel are among the main weapons used in the civil war in South Sudan (Amnesty International, 2014); this joins cooperation with the South Sudanese Ministry of Internal Security, including Israeli assistance to install and operate surveillance equipment for internal checks (Gross, 2015). In addition, Kenya and Uganda, countries that are worried about the growing influence of extremist Islamist organizations in their territory against a background of instability, particularly in Somalia, make use of Israeli security light weapons assistance to deal with this challenge (UPI, 2010; Bishku, 2017). According to SIPRI, since 2002 Uganda has been one of the Israeli security industry's largest clients, with purchases including rifles, mortars, and even upgrades of MIG planes (Wezeman, 2011).

In addition to exports of weapon systems, Israel is also involved in the

maintenance, renovation, and upgrade of the systems, including fighter planes from other manufacturers, in countries such as Uganda, Angola, and Kenya (Melman, 2016; Wezeman, 2011). Moreover, Israel provides assistance in the training of security forces and presidential guards. For example, Israel trained the presidential guard in Equatorial Guinea, and the special forces of Uganda and the Nigerian navy. Israel also trained pilots for the Ugandan Air Force and updated its fleet of fighter planes, which participated in Uganda's war against the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army). Israel has brokered security deals between African countries and global arms suppliers, for example between Serbia and Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Uganda, and in general, former senior members of the Israeli security system living in Africa play an important role in closing arms deals. Private security firms and private businesspeople often replace official security ties between countries—for example, in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Liberia, and Angola, in which there are violent internal conflicts—in a way that does not usually reflect Israeli policy and may even damage its image (Melman, 2016; Wezeman, 2011; Chazan, 2006).

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**For Israel, security exports are a vital element of economic development and maintenance of its military industries, certainly since the local market is limited when compared to the international market.**

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### Assessment

Israel has several obvious interests to promote in Africa: the economic interests of expanding the activity of its military industries and increasing security exports; strategic interests connected to the Red Sea coast and the need to secure its shipping routes; military interests, such as the efforts to keep Iran out of the continent and block Islamic terror; and political interests, relating to the attempt to gain the support of

African states in UN institutions. In order to achieve these objectives, Israel uses security exports and aid (in addition to civilian aid) to meet its own needs as well as those of the client countries. The central argument of this article refers to the prominence of the security dimension represented by security exports, partly against a background of an ongoing decline in “soft” aid from Israel, certainly in comparison with the 1950s and 1960s (Belman Inbal & Zahavi, 2009).

The Foreign Ministry makes efforts to highlight Israel's contribution to countries all over the world, including in Africa, with aid for agricultural, medical, and water development, as well as targeted aid following natural disasters, so-called “disaster diplomacy.” But Israel's foreign aid budget, which was only 20 million NIS in 2017, is one of the lowest among OECD countries.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in total contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when Mashav was one of the Foreign Ministry's largest departments, today it operates on a tiny budget. For example, Israel allocates only 0.07 percent of GDP to foreign aid—only a tenth of its OECD requirement (Landman, 2018; Mitvim, 2018).

These figures—minute foreign aid budgets on the one hand, and security cooperation worth billions of shekels in 2019 on the other hand—show the dominance of the security component in the expansion of Israeli activity in Africa. Taking a broad view, they also reinforce the claim of the dominance of the security establishment in Israel's considerations and decision making processes in the field of foreign relations. For Israel, security exports are a vital element of economic development and maintenance of its military industries, certainly since the local market is limited when compared to the international market. Corroboration for this view comes from Itai Mack, who states that 70-80 percent of security production is for export and not the IDF (Mack, 2019). Moreover, African countries that have already bought Israeli security equipment represent a potential for further deals, such as the need

to upgrade systems (UPI, 2010). In addition, Israel's willingness to supply weapon systems, knowledge, and security equipment to regimes whose sensitivity to human and civil rights is low may be at the center of controversy, but it also contributes to the competitiveness of Israeli security companies (Wezeman, 2011).

One of Israel's goals is to limit Iranian influence in the region. The development of military ties is essential to promote this goal, and it appears that Israel is managing to achieve its strategic, security, and military objectives in Africa. On the other hand, the response to its political goals of achieving the support of African countries in international institutions, particularly the UN, is limited. One way to assess political support is to examine the voting patterns of African countries on anti-Israel resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly. It is possible to discern a positive trend, but this is largely expressed by abstentions or absences from voting, rather than voting directly for Israel (Salman, 2020).

So what are the contributions of the growth in security exports and in security ties to the expansion of Israel's relations with African states? Taking a broad view, security exports represent a considerable contribution to Israel's economy and national security. Security exports account for 10 percent of total industrial exports and are an important growth engine (MOD website, 2019). Moreover, it is not impossible that Israel's position as one of the world's ten leading security exporters improves its standing in the international arena. The analysis of data in this article indicates that while the volume of general security exports remained stable over the past decade, there has been a moderate but steady rise, notwithstanding some fluctuations, in security exports to Africa. Although the volume of security deals in Africa is marginal compared to other regions of the world, it has features that support the claim that the security dimension is an increasingly important element, becoming stronger than economic and other considerations, in Israel's attempts to achieve closer ties in Africa.

As a rule, the explanation for closer ties lies in a number of factors. In South Sudan there are very positive feelings toward Israel, mainly thanks to Israel's support and assistance in their revolt against Arab Sudan in the late 1960s, part of their struggle for independence (Gidron, 2018), but also because of their Christian identity and the religious significance they attribute to Israel. Rwanda identifies with Israel, partly because of its own experience with genocide. In addition to the historic ties between Israel and some African countries, Israel's close ties to the United States also likely play a part for African countries that believe that good relations with Israel could "open doors in Washington" (Michael & Salman, 2020; Gidron, 2020). In this context, the recent normalization of Israel's relations with Sudan is striking, where Sudan's main motives are stronger ties with the United States, receiving US economic aid, and removing itself from the list of terror-supporting countries (Bergman & Walsh, 2020).

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Israel's civilian contacts in Africa also have a positive effect on relations between the countries. Although this may not be expressed in voting patterns at the UN, it can be seen at other levels, as indicated by Gil Haskel's remarks on Kenya: "Kenya [is] a country that supports us politically and where we have the most extensive economic activity in Africa. That doesn't mean they're with us at every UN vote, but political support means that in their political statements...they have good things to say about Israel and Israel's other activity" (Kahane, 2018). Indeed, with Kenya, as with Ethiopia, Israel has broad and open civilian and security ties that serve the interests of Jerusalem, Addis Ababa, and Nairobi, and yet both of them tend to vote

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**“It is very difficult to prove an unambiguous link between foreign aid and an immediate political dividend. It is far easier to prove the long term benefit, both political and economic... When you look at it over the years, you see that in countries where Israel has invested, ultimately there is more economic activity and more political benefit.”**

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against Israel. So the ability to translate Israel’s civilian (and security) contacts into political support, certainly in the short range, exists but is limited, as Haskel explains:

It is very difficult to prove an unambiguous link between foreign aid and an immediate political dividend. It is far easier to prove the long term benefit, both political and economic... When you look at it over the years, you see that in countries where Israel has invested, ultimately there is more economic activity and more political benefit. (Kahane, 2018)

At the same time, security ties have acquired increasing importance for Israel-Africa relations in recent years, in spite of the official efforts by Jerusalem to minimize this trend. This is particularly striking in the case of countries for which it is possible to say with confidence that the security element is central, such as Eritrea, Uganda, and even Chad, whose official relations with Israel are growing closer. The threat of Islamic terror in the east and west of the continent, and the need for regimes to ensure their survival, helps to reinforce the security dimension of African relations with Israel.

A number of conclusions emerge. First, Israel uses hard power by granting military and security aid, and soft power through other aid—to promote shared interests, mainly relating to security. Contrary to the nature of Israel-Africa relations up to the 1970s, which had an ideological dimension of identification between

states that had struggled for independence, current relations are based more on a confluence of interests for mutual benefit.

Second, the security links point to the prominence of the security-economic element in Israel’s relations with African countries. Once again we see a change in the trend of Israeli policy toward Africa; in the 1950s and 1960s support was based on soft power and technical assistance provided by Mashav, while in recent years security exports have become significantly stronger, as technical assistance aspects have declined. Nevertheless, the official tendency among security elements in Israel remains—to limit as far as possible any public discussion of Israel’s security links worldwide, including Africa. There is much discrepancy here, because there is a large official propaganda effort to publicize civilian links, even though the scope of Israeli foreign aid has shrunk dramatically over the years, compared to security links in Africa, which in 2019 were worth billions of shekels. This was well expressed by Yossi Melman: “There is no other democratic country in the world that censors information about its security export deals” (Melman, 2017a). Therefore, considering the importance of security exports for Israel’s relations with African countries, and leaving aside any ethical questions that arise (which are important in themselves, but outside the scope of this article), it would be possible to limit the policy of non-transparency and give some expression to the security dimension, because of its important role in promoting Israel’s foreign relations in Africa.

In conclusion, this article highlights the goals of Israel and African states in seeking closer ties, and analyzes at length the security contacts that Israel uses in order to increase its influence in the continent. But although the security channel is prominent, it is likely that the whole fabric of civilian and security links helps accelerate the process of strengthening ties and helps Israel to establish its status on the African continent, which is a contribution to its own national security.



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## Notes

- 1 Support for this claim can be found with Itai Mack, a lawyer who deals with human rights and works to increase transparency and supervision of Israel’s security exports. In an email exchange with me, Mack said he had no data about security exports, and that he was not sure if anyone had all the data, “because of the secrecy in this field.”
- 2 This refers to the smaller number of wars between states, alongside a growing number of internal conflicts. See Pettersson et al., 2019; Pettersson & Eck, 2018.
- 3 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.
- 4 See: Foreign Ministry, List of Countries and Status of Relations with Israel: [https://www.gov.il/he/departments/general/israeli\\_relations](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/general/israeli_relations)
- 5 Sibat—the Security Export Division of the Ministry of Defense.
- 6 United Nations Register of Conventional Arms.
- 7 See <https://www.unroca.org/>
- 8 The OECD requires its members to allocate 0.7% of GDP to foreign aid as a target for their development budgets, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/the07odagnitarget-ahistory.htm>