

The Africa-Israel Renaissance as a Response to Diplomatic Delegitimation

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginnings of the rebirth of Jewish statehood, there has been a strong ideological link between Israel and the African continent. Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism Wrote: “I am not ashamed to say, though I may expose myself to ridicule for saying so, that once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans.”

The Jewish People also had multiple bonds with the anti-apartheid movement. There were South African Jews who had fought in the Palmach Jewish militia in 1948 and were prepared to share their military experience with the ANC. Mandela himself had read The Revolt by Menachem Begin.

On July 4, 2016, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu embarked on a ground-breaking four-nation tour of Africa beginning in Uganda and reaching Rwanda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. It was the first time in 30 years that an Israeli prime minister made such a trip. At his first stop, which was the Entebbe airport, representatives from three other African states joined, including South Sudan, Zambia, and Tanzania.



Foreign Minister Golda Meir at festivities marking the start of the Gadna (*Gedudei No'ar*, the Youth Corps) course chats with participants from Africa and Asia in 1961.

Photo: Paul Goodman/IGPO

The purpose of the event at Entebbe was to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Entebbe raid when Israel sent elite commandos to rescue Israeli hostages hijacked aboard an Air France passenger jet by Palestinian and German terrorists. Entebbe was where the prime minister's brother, Yonatan Netanyahu, who commanded the operation, lost his life in 1976. But, in 2016, the event took on another dimension: Israel and Africa are reengaging.

Israel continued to undertake diplomatic initiatives in the African continent. Advised by an African foreign minister that South Africa would be a “hard nut to crack” for Israel, the Israeli foreign ministry nevertheless dispatched a diplomatic mission to Pretoria to negotiate and sign a set of new bilateral agreements. During 2016, Israel also focused on the Sahel region (north-central Africa south of the Sahara Desert), re-establishing diplomatic relations with Guinea (Conakry) on the Atlantic coast of Africa. Israeli efforts then focused on a belt of countries across the Sahara from Guinea to Mali, Niger, and Chad, up to the border of Sudan.

The following year, Netanyahu flew to Liberia to attend the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Summit in Liberia. Israel hoped to resume its observer status in the African Union (AU). While Israel had been an observer in this organization in the past, it found itself blocked from resuming its previous status by the head of the AU Commission, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the ex-wife of the then-president of South Africa. In the interim, this made the subregional grouping, ECOWAS, more attractive.

WHY AFRICA?

Most observers associate Africa with poverty, disease, and economic underdevelopment. But there is an African economic development story that is drawing the great powers to the continent. According to *The Economist*, Turkish trade with sub-Saharan Africa alone grew 216 percent between 2006 and 2018. Trade with China grew 226 percent for the same period, while trade with India shot up 292 percent. The sub-Saharan countries themselves are showing enormous growth on their own of more than five percent annually in 2019.



Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir greets visiting Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini Kabhekuzulu in Jerusalem in 1991.

Photo: Tsvika Israeli/IGPO

Looking to the future, Africa is anticipated to undergo a virtual population explosion with Nigeria alone having a larger working-age population than either China or India by 2034. Nigeria's population is expected to exceed the population of the entire European Union together by 2050. All this points to future demand for foodstuffs, medical support, and security services. It also points to the need for Europe to influence this population

boom to its south –unless it is apathetic about a huge migrant population likely to flow northward.

Israel cannot compete with these international actors seeking their share of Africa's future growth. But Israel has specialized resources that are of particular utility to African states. Israeli medical teams and agricultural extension services are active in Africa. African states have been accustomed to building large water purification systems near their capitals. Israel also produces small water purification systems that are highly mobile. These might not be the first choice of central governments, but they have been sought by tribal chieftains who often seek decentralized solutions to their needs.

WHY ISRAEL?

Since the beginnings of the rebirth of Jewish statehood, there has been a strong ideological link between Israel and the African continent. The founder of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, wrote in his memoirs:

“There is still one other question arising out of the disaster of nations which remains unsolved to this day, and whose profound tragedy only a Jew can comprehend. This is the African question. Just call to mind all those terrible episodes of the slave trade, of human beings who, merely because they were black, were stolen like cattle, taken prisoner, captured, and sold...I am not ashamed to say, though I may expose myself to ridicule for saying so, that once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans.”

Herzl's words were quoted by Golda Meir, Israel's former prime minister, who previously served as foreign minister when she

launched an African diplomatic initiative for Israel in 1958, visiting Ivory Coast, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, and Zaire. Israel's diplomatic reengagement with Africa was always regarded as inspiring by its foreign policy elites. As the constraints on that re-engagement were removed, Israel was able to restore ties with the continent.

The fall of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's strongman, opened the doors for Israeli ties with Chad and the other Sahel states. Moreover, as Israel's relations with the Arab states improved, there was no reason why a similar improvement could not be pursued with those African states.

In early 2020, the president of Sudan, which shifted from the pro-Iranian camp to the pro-Saudi camp was prepared to meet the Prime Minister of Israel in public for the first time. The opportunities for a further expansion of African-Israeli ties were growing.

There was another aspect of Israel's return to Africa, but it is likely to be fully appreciated only in the years ahead. Israelis perceived that there was a growing rift between them and the Jewish communities of the West, especially the progressive parts of the American Jewish community. It remains to be tested whether joint undertakings in Africa could help supply the glue that could bond different parts of world Jewry that is facing a growing split between its universalistic and particularistic agendas.

It is especially necessary to correct the false narrative about Israel as an allegedly "apartheid state." The Jewish people had multiple bonds with the anti-apartheid movement that needed to be recognized.

Thus, in 1961 Nelson Mandela took refuge from the apartheid police at the famous Liliesleaf Farm outside of Johannesburg,



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu introduces then-Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dore Gold to Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni on July 4, 2016.

Photo: Uganda Presidential Press Unit

where the ANC undertook military training. There were Jews there who had fought in the Israeli Palmach militia in 1948, who were prepared to share their military experience with the ANC. Mandela himself recalled spending much of his time reading books, including one particular book entitled *The Revolt*, by Menachem Begin.

In 2016, this author shared this story with the hardline foreign minister of South Africa, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, using it to



Then Director General of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dore Gold speaks with South African youth about Israel at Mandela House in Soweto in 2016.

Photo: MFA

break the ice between them. He stressed to her that the head of her national liberation movement read a book by the head of his Jewish national liberation movement about its anti-colonial war against the British precisely when Mandela was preparing for South African liberation.

There are certain truths about Jewish-African ties that need to be shared if the normalization of their relations is to be completed. The recent events, particularly African-Israel reengagement, indicate that the replacement of the older narrative about Africa and Israel with a newer, updated narrative has begun.