OLUSOLA OJO

AFRICA AND ISRAEL

RELATIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

Studies in International Politics,
The Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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Abbreviations

AG	Action Group
AHG	Assembly of Heads of State and Government (OAU)
ANC	African National Congress
BADEA	Arab Bank for African Development
CAR	Central African Republic
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa (UN)
EEC	European Economic Community
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization (UN)
FLNA	National Front for the Liberation of Angola
FRELIMO	Front for the Liberation of Mozambique
FROLINAT	National Front for the Liberation of Chad
IAI	Israel Aircraft Industries
ILO	International Labor Organization (UN)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISCOR	Iron and Steel Corporation (South Africa)
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCNC	National Council of Nigerian Citizens
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NPC	Northern People's Party
NPN	National Party of Nigeria
NPP	Nigerian People's Party
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OPEC	Organization of Oil Producing and Exporting Countries
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNITA	Union for the Total Liberation of Angola
UPGA	United Progressive Grand Alliance
UPN	Unity Party of Nigeria
WHO	World Health Organization (UN)

Preface

Academic interest in Africa's relations with Israel has considerably declined since the African states' almost total break of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973. Yet despite the diplomatic rupture, political, economic, and other forms of transnational relations between Africa and Israel have continued to exist and, in many cases, to grow. Five African states—Cameroun, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Togo, and Zaire—have since reestablished diplomatic ties, bringing to eight the number of black African states having diplomatic relations with Israel. Israel maintains "interest offices" in more countries.

This study is an examination of Africa's relations with Israel since about 1960. Its organization follows the basic chronology of the relationship itself, with each of the first four chapters after the introduction devoted to an analysis of the various themes of the relationship. The next two chapters are case studies on Israel's relations with South Africa and Nigeria, respectively. The concluding chapter is both an overview of past and contemporary relations and an examination of the controversial issue of the resumption of ties with Israel.

Many people and institutions have directly and indirectly contributed to this book. I would particularly like to thank the University of Ife, Ile-Ife, for granting me sabbatical leave to complete the project and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Harry S Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace for providing a base and support for the research. I am grateful to Professor Harold Schiffrin, Dr. Edy Kaufman, Ms. Dalia Shemer, Ms. Cecil Panzer, and the entire administrative and library staff of the Truman Institute, Dr. Gabriel Sheffer of the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, and Professor Marion Mushkat of the Political Science Department of Tel Aviv University for their encouragement and other forms of assistance during my stay in Israel. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Naomi Chazan and Ambassador H. Aynor of the Truman Institute and Dr. Leopold Laufer of the Leonard Davis Institute for their friendship and their willing-

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I owe a debt of gratitude to my family for their support and encouragement and for coping with my long absence from home in the course of my research for this book.

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University of Ife

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Introduction

It is sometimes assumed that formal diplomatic relations are a precondition for the establishment, maintenance, and growth of other bilateral ties between states. The severing of such diplomatic relations is often taken as heralding the simultaneous curtailment, or even abandonment, of other bilateral links. Consequently many casual observers of Afro-Israeli relations have assumed that the massive break of diplomatic ties between most of Africa and Israel in 1973 ended all contacts between the two.

However, although all but three (four until 1976) black African states severed diplomatic ties with Israel, economic relations did not suffer from Israel's political setback in Africa. In fact, commercial and economic links have expanded rapidly. Trade has doubled and in some cases even tripled and quadrupled, particularly as regards the larger or more economically viable states like Cameroun, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria. With the exception of Angola, Benin, Congo, and Guinea (before the 1980s), which have pursued "radical" foreign policies; of Chad, because of the breakdown of internal political order as a result of the civil war; and of Mali and Niger, which are very close to the Arab states for Islamic considerations, Israel has continued economic relations with other African states as well. These were at a lower volume than with the first group of states mentioned, but because of economic rather than political reasons.

This lack of correlation between economic and political relations was not entirely new, although it became particularly pronounced with the absence of diplomatic relations. Even in the days of formal diplomatic contacts, Israeli economic and other non-formal ties did not entirely reflect the state of political relations. This was the case with the black African members of the "Casablanca group of states" after the

1961 Casablanca resolution that denounced Israel. Nor did the level of Israel's non-formal contacts decline with the gradual deterioration of political relations between 1970 and 1973. In fact, Israel's exports to Africa not only increased by almost 100 percent between 1967 and 1972, but Israel also started for the first time to record a favorable balance in its trade with Africa precisely when the state of political relations began to be unstable.

With the exit of the diplomats, Israel quietly seized on the extensive non-formal ties it had developed with Africa in the preceding one and one-half decades to develop its economic relations with the continent. The fact that these were one aspect of their contacts that had been mutually beneficial facilitated the development. The positive results of Israeli aid projects had contributed to African goodwill toward Israel and, perhaps more significantly, to a reputation for effective work and quality manufactured products. Besides, severing diplomatic ties need not entail any material loss, which would not have been the case if economic contacts had been severed. Moreover, it was possible to quietly continue to improve private economic relations without the publicity and consequent embarrassment that may be attendant on political and diplomatic ties.

The break of diplomatic ties per se did not lead to a total political blackout of Israel in Africa. Indeed, since 1973 discrete political contacts have been maintained and military assistance, arms sales, and technical cooperation have continued with some countries. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty provided an opportunity to formalize these contacts and a basis for a mutual review of relations. The changed political environment, and the worsening economic situation in Africa from the late 1970s, facilitated this reassessment.

Unlike in the early 1970s, when considerations of "African unity," the need for Third World solidarity, and Israel's identification with the West—and particularly the United States—had a negative effect on Israel's image in Africa, the political environment of the late 1970s and 1980s was decidedly different. Africa is now more divided than in the early 1970s, and unlike then, the "Israeli factor" is conspicuously absent as a cause. Ideological differences have become more pronounced, and indeed more important, than the fact of "continental unity" as a determinant of Africa's foreign relations. Chad, Western Sahara, and the history of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in the last few years provide evidence of this. Closely related to the growing importance of ideological differences is the fact that, unlike in the early 1970s, close ties

with the West, and with the United States in particular, are no longer viewed as a negative political factor in Africa. Indeed, the worsening economic situation of the African states, exacerbated by drought and famine on a scale hitherto unknown, has led to a determined effort by many African leaders to cultivate the goodwill and sympathy of the West. And, because of the powerful Jewish lobby in the United States, Israel is perceived by many African states as being in a good position to intercede with the American administration for more generous aid.

Moreover, by the late 1970s the warm relations between Africa and the Arab world, which developed out of the political support Africa had provided in 1973 by breaking diplomatic ties with Israel, had become very cool. Africa's refusal to toe the line with respect to Egypt's peace agreement with Israel led to further mutual disenchantment. Israel, on the other hand, was eager to capitalize on the peace treaty to work its way back to Africa. However, there were no sustained Israeli diplomatic moves to that effect until 1981. These efforts have not resulted in any dramatic diplomatic breakthroughs for Israel. Still, although the hope that the peace treaty would lead to a general renewal of formal ties has remained largely unfulfilled, as only Cameroun, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Togo, and Zaire have done so, relations have nonetheless shown marked improvement.

A number of explanations can be offered for the present state of Afro-Israeli relations. First, there has been a significant change in the political stance of African states toward the Middle East. Africa's initial involvement was influenced by Egypt's membership in the African system, but emphasis has decidedly shifted to concern for the plight of the Palestinians. Even before the Camp David Accords, OAU resolutions tended to lay as much stress on the need for Israel to withdraw from Egyptian territory and other Arab territories captured in 1967 as on the need for the recognition and implementation of the "inalienable rights of the Palestinian people." The overwhelming Arab opposition to the Camp David Accords and the peace treaty, partly for what the Arabs regard as the inadequacies of the agreements with regard to Palestinian rights, has meant a continuation of the African position. Furthermore, the OAU has made the problem of political and territorial concessions to the Palestinians the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the treaty and the establishment of formal relations between Egypt and Israel, Egypt has continued to encourage that attitude.

Second, Africa's dependence on Arab aid has often been advanced as a deterrent to its renewed diplomatic contact with Israel. The Arab

figure of over seven billion dollars in aid to black Africa since 1973 is often cited as an indication of the massive use of Arab petrodollars in the service of the Palestinian cause in Africa. Overt threats to deprive Africa of that aid should it review its Middle East policy are therefore seen to have kept Africa in line.

However, such an argument suffers important limitations. It seems an oversimplified analysis of Africa's foreign relations. While one cannot dismiss the claim that the possibility of receiving Arab aid will be a constant factor in the formulation of some African states' Middle East policy, Arab aid as well as its impact have been grossly exaggerated. The figures are very much open to dispute; and what is considered Arab aid has not amounted to much more than mere commitment for many states. The acute lag between Arab aid commitment and disbursement brings the alleged primacy of Arab aid as the determinant of Afro-Israeli relations into serious question. Indeed, many of the recipients of Arab aid have received no more than a few million dollars for a handful of projects.[1]

The aid linkage explanation also grossly underrates the autonomy of African states. There are quite a few African states, like Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, which are not beneficiaries of Arab aid but which nonetheless have maintained the diplomatic boycott of Israel (Côte d'Ivoire only until 1986).[2] It should also be noted that, prior to 1982, Zaire was, at least on paper, the third largest recipient of Arab aid in Africa—yet the loss of Arab assistance did not deter it from resuming relations with Israel. Arab aid as a monofactoral explanation is therefore not very convincing.

Third, Israeli-South African links have become a complicating factor in Afro-Israeli relations. Significant African opinion regards these links as seriously harming the cause of African liberation. The ousted Nigerian president, Shagari, made this clear:

> **We acted as Africans because of Israel's continued cooperation with racist South Africa. Israel has further intensified this cooperation with South Africa and we, as Africans, have continued to be horrified by this attitude. So it is not just the question of Israel's quarrel with the Arabs, it has another quarrel with Africa as well. We just cannot ignore Israel's continued strong and growing friendship with an enemy.**[3]

The same sentiments were echoed by the former Nigerian head of state.

In a wide-ranging review of the country's foreign policy in December 1984, General Buhari justified Africa's continued diplomatic isolation of Israel:

> **The overwhelming evidence of Israeli military, nuclear and economic collaboration with the apartheid regime in South Africa is good ground to believe that the underlying reason for which Nigeria severed diplomatic relations with Israel in the first instance is still relevant. It is inconceivable that a people who have themselves been victims of racial horror and genocide can turn round to provide instruments of death and repression to a regime dedicated to the destructive principle of racial superiority. . . . If Israel wishes to have full diplomatic relations with Nigeria restored, she must review her present collaboration with South Africa.**[4]

Finally, some African states favor the status quo and do not believe they are worse off for it. These countries have continued to maintain economic and commercial ties with Israel and to send students for training in Israeli institutions despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations. Moreover, they have not been blacklisted by Arab aid agencies.

This study is an examination of the complexities of Afro-Israeli relations. Its organization follows the basic chronology of the relationship, with the next four chapters devoted to each of the four phases of that relationship. Chapters 2 and 3 examine relations from about 1958, when Israel launched its diplomatic initiative in Africa, to 1973, when most African states severed their diplomatic ties. The next two chapters investigate post-1973 ties. Chapters 6 and 7 are case studies, the former examining Israeli-South African relations as these have constituted one of the major complicating factors in contemporary Afro-Israeli relations. Chapter 7 is a study of Israel's ties with the largest and most important African country, namely, Nigeria, and reflects the degree of complexity in Afro-Israeli ties. The Arab-Israeli conflict has become politically internalized within African countries; thus for Nigeria, as for many African states, the state of bilateral relations with Israel is no longer primarily determined by what happens in the Middle East but by internal political factors. The concluding chapter examines the issue of the resumption of ties with Israel.

NOTES

1. For a breakdown of total Arab aid between 1975 and 1982 by countries, see Arab Bank for African Development (BADEA), *Annual Report*, 1985, p. 84.

2. Although there is a published Arab figure of $54.5 million in aid to Côte d'Ivoire between 1975 and 1982, President Houphouët-Boigny stated categorically in October 1983 that his country had not received a dollar in Arab aid. See *Jeune Afrique*, 12 October 1983, p. 57.

3. *Africa Now*, November 1984, p. 58.

4. *West Africa*, 17 December 1984, pp. 2565–2566.

TWO

Foundation and Growth of Relations, 1958-1969

Despite the long-standing Zionist interest in the continent,[1] there was virtually no Israeli presence in Africa until the late 1950s. Until 1985 there was a significant Black Jewish population in Ethiopia, and the former Ethiopian monarch took his historical links with biblical King Solomon very seriously. (Indeed, the Ethiopian monarchy traced its royal legitimacy to the union of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon.) Moreover, two African countries had also participated in the United Nations action that led to the creation of the State of Israel (Liberia voted for, and Ethiopia abstained on, the resolution that gave birth to the state). There was also a strong personal friendship with, and affection for, Israel by the late President William Tubman of Liberia.[2] But overall, the low Israeli profile was hardly surprising. Israeli diplomacy in the first decade of the state's existence was preoccupied with the superpowers and Europe. Israel's immediate needs, in view of its uncompromisingly hostile regional environment, were security and economic survival. The attainment of these twin objectives was perceived by Israeli leaders to depend on the degree of support from the major powers. Besides, Israel was effectively cut off from Africa by the Egyptian naval blockade of the Straits of Tiran. As a result, Africa, which in any case was still largely a colonial dependency, and the Third World generally, figured marginally in the foreign policy of Israel.

This chapter investigates the factors that led to both a change in Israel's attitude toward Africa and a favorable African response. It further examines the growth of Afro-Israeli relations in the first decade of Africa's independence.