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### ***Israel's international relations in Africa\****

Arab states should be made aware the rug is being swept from under their feet by Israel once again as it sets up strengthening its relations with the African continent. Arab leaders, politicians and people must realize Israel is strategically utilizing its foreign policy techniques and instruments to woo African countries for international, political and economic objectives. This article will give a brief historical analysis of the relations that developed between Israel and Africa, give a glimpse of the visit of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to East Africa in between 4–8 July 2016 and then focus on Israel's objectives in foreign policy which is gaining observer status in the African Union and in nurturing its relations with African countries to gain greater power at the United Nations and its Security Council.

#### ***Israel's 'Golden Age' in Africa***

Israel's new focus on Africa has recently been highlighted by the 2016 July visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He toured four countries in East Africa including Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda. This is the first visit in 30 years by a top Israeli politician since 1987 when Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, last made a visit to four West African countries that included Liberia, Ivory Coast, Togo and Cameroon<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/125258-160913-analysis-israel-s-three-pronged-diplomacy-in-africa>

From an international relations point of view it is right quite extraordinary that no Israeli Prime Minister made the visit to Africa since then because of the extent of relations that has been developing between Israel and African countries soon after its creation in 1948<sup>2</sup>. Relations with African countries have been on-going, albeit strongly, according to different historical periods, and African leaders have continually visited Israel and more important it has espoused the virtues of developing relations with the black continent.

In the 1950s Israel turned its attention to Asia and Africa as a way to establish its legitimacy in the world. Unlike the situation of Asian countries when China, Philippines, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Burma, India and Thailand recognized Israel almost immediately, the situation was different in Africa and took a while longer<sup>3</sup>.

Israel's relation with African countries began after the tripartite attack on Egypt in 1956 by Britain, France and Israel. Israel first forged ties with Ghana when it established a consulate in its capital in Accra, and which later become an embassy three weeks after the country gained independence in 1957<sup>4</sup>. Soon after, the door became wide open and Israel's relations with African countries strove full-steam ahead. Israel saw such countries in the 1960s and after as a great potential of political support and have tried to equate the creation of Israel with the independence of many of these African countries from

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<sup>2</sup> Golda Meir, *My Life*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1975, pp. 263-290; Ariel Sharon briefly mentions "Israel's strategy of the periphery" in *Warrior, The Autobiography of Ariel Sharon* by Ariel Sharon with David Chanoff, London, Simon & Schuster, pp. 269-178

<sup>3</sup> Walter Eytan, *The First Ten Years, A Diplomatic History of Israel*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1958, pp. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Eytan, p 190.

colonial rule. That was called the "golden era", first expounded upon by Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir, and started slowly building relations with Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria and many more. Israel had diplomatic relations with 29 African countries; the towering of such relations was in Kenya under its president Jomo Kenyatta that took part as early as 1963<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Oil boom and Israel's reversal of relations***

The "close relations," came to a halt by the end by 1973 under Arab pressure and at the time of the Arab-Israeli war and the first oil price shock when the Organization of Petroleum Export Countries single-handedly raised the price of oil from \$3 dollars to \$12 per barrel and when oil went up by over 400 percent overnight<sup>6</sup>. This signaled a new stronger, more powerful change in the international relations of the Arab world. It gave Arab countries, especially the oil producers much economic muscle and put pressure on African countries to cut their relations with Israel which many of them did. They started to turn to the Arab world.

### ***Netanyahu in Africa***

Today Netanyahu clearly wants to make the relations more upbeat. Despite, the last visit by an Israel Prime being made in the late 1980s, relations between Israel and the African continent has always existed and moving. Thus it would be an understatement to say he made the tour to revive relations.

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<sup>5</sup> Israel's relations with African states, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-6813.html>; Gold Meir, pp. 263-290.

<sup>6</sup> Joe Stork, Middle East Oil and the Energy Crisis, Monthly Review Press, 1975; Saudi Dove in the oil slick, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2001/jan/14/globalrecession.oilandpetrol>; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/mar/03/1970s-oil-price-shock>

Nevertheless, his last trip had a certain ambiance; there was a large degree of political jingoism and sound bites which he repeated in the different countries he went to and as he said "Israel [is] returning to Africa" and "Africa [is] returning to Israel" in reference to the 1960s; "I am in Africa because it's a continent on the move", he said<sup>7</sup>; "I believe in the past it [Africa] was not given the place it deserves", "Africa for us [Israel] is a major strategic effort." The mode of speech bordered on the altruistic, paternalistic and puritanical but it was well received as most of the countries he visited like Ethiopia and Kenya had long-lasting relations with the Jewish state.

Netanyahu came to Africa with a large Israeli entourage in large jump jets carrying staff, advisors and 80 businessmen from 50 companies selected by the Israeli Export Institute which means Israel wants to reset new political and economic relations with these nations<sup>8</sup>. The visit was criticized however, for carrying little meaningful substance. Israel is a small state but with much economic clout. Netanyahu brought with him

a mere \$13 million - as a gesture of aid and goodwill but which in real terms had meant very little<sup>9</sup>. The visit however, was criticized also by Israel's domestic constituency, having

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Netanyahu-departs-today-for-5-day-visit-to-Africa-459420>;  
<http://www.coastweek.com/3927-Israeli-Prime-Minister-visits-Rwanda-to-strengthen-ties.htm>

<sup>8</sup> In Africa, Benjamin Netanyahu Looks for Friends, and U.N. Votes, for Israel, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/world/africa/israel-africa-netanyahu-uganda-kenya-rwanda.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/world/africa/israel-africa-netanyahu-uganda-kenya-rwanda.html?_r=0);  
<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-leaving-on-historic-visit-to-Africa-3-July-2016.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/israel-netanyahu-expensive-visit-africa-to-bring-big-deals.html>

been dubbed as the most expensive foreign tour at \$7 million for just four days being lavishly made when the country faces different forms of economic domestic crises. Netanyahu and his officials at the Israeli Prime Ministry denied this and said the visit cost the Israeli tax-payer a mere \$3.2 million<sup>10</sup>.

But it appears that the visit was attempted to deflect rising domestic criticism so aptly put forward by the chairman of the Israel Labour Party Isaac Herzog who was scathing in his attack on the Likud leader, saying Netanyahu “fled from a military solution and a political solution”<sup>11</sup>. Herzog said Netanyahu has much domestic troubles at home, he has to find solution to the rising Intifada on the West Bank, to the crisis of settlements on the West Bank, the continuing siege of Gaza Strip imposed since 2007 which shows no sign of ending and is costing Israel too much because of the continuing war on the Strip, the last one was in 2014 -\$2.5 billion for 50 days- and to the families of kidnapped Israelis also in Gaza. Herzog added Netanyahu is fleeing from European criticism of Israel on the international level, with many world leaders and politicians tired of him of obstructing the peace process with the Palestinians.

Many other opposition leaders are up-in-arms criticizing the flamboyant, abrasive and discursive style of Netanyahu who has been in office as Prime Minister since 2009 and won a

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-heading-off-on-historic-and-expensive-africa-trip/>; Herzog said Netanyahu’s visit has “nothing to do with Israel-Africa ties but extravagance, <http://theinvestigatornews.com/2016/07/exclusiveisrael-pm-under-fire-for-spending-a-whooping-ugx24billion-on-visit-to-africa-as-uganda-set-to-benefit/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/herzog-snipes-at-netanyahu-for-fleeing-to-africa/>;

fourth term in office and is the second-longest Israeli Prime after David Ben-Gurion and there appears to be no sign of moving him because of the nature of the Israeli political system that relies on alliances and allows extremist Jewish religious groups to grow in the Knesset because of their constituencies.

One Meretz MP described the Africa visit as absurd and extravagant with the Movement for the Quality of Government in Israel demanding the prime minister's office release a detailed timetable with costs for the visit<sup>12</sup>. The anger had arisen because the last Africa visit was not about changing Israel's foreign policy which is pro-western, and strongly pro-American and shows no signs of changing despite the ups-and-downs of Netanyahu's relationship with US president Barak Obama whose relationship is to say the least restraint<sup>13</sup>.

However, his trip shows that greater pliability and flexibility is being applied in Israeli foreign policy, it does not want to change its external policy directives but wants to have variety in perspectives and approaches towards other countries and that's why making headway on such continents as Africa is seen as a sophisticated political balancing act. Observers have already said Israel is going back to Africa to provide a

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-heading-off-on-historic-and-expensive-africa-trip/>

<sup>13</sup> Netanyahu's abrasive style of politics aggravated many, including domestically, in Israel and internationally; it is suggested US-Israel relations has reached so low during the Obama administration and mainly attributed to Netanyahu, see article on what was called US-Israel crisis in relations <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-crisis-in-us-israel-relations-is-officially-here/382031/>; Netanyahu was allegedly disliked by other world leaders such as former French president Nicolas Sarkozy who in a private conversation with Obama called the Israeli prime minister a "liar", see <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4145266,00.html>.

counterweight to Europe, and France especially, which is becoming more pro-Arab and Palestinian and has a new plan to revive the flagging peace process<sup>14</sup>. But this is a clearly naive assumption. For one thing Europe, has far greater weight for Israel, including in the political and economic fields and such a view doesn't take into account the complexity of foreign policy analysis and its role in state building and external relations.

What is clear however, is Israel is moving more to international forums like the United Nations and attempt to garner support from the African, Asian and Latin American countries in the UN Generally Assembly. While it is true it is having such support from some of these countries, it might be barking up the wrong tree given the history of the UN resolutions passed over the years and decades condemning Israel and branding it as a racist state.

Definitely, there are African countries, like those Netanyahu visited last summer, and some of whose leaders appeared to have been visiting Israel in droves but the Likud-led government is under no illusion that no matter what it does, it is far from being accepted in the world community regardless of the changing international situation, including global terrorism. But this could change in the future depending on different forces, balance of powers, economic and political relations as made clear by Israel's prime minister in his last 2016 speech at the UN General Assembly when he spoke of

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<sup>14</sup> See commentary by Myriam Benraad France's Fascination with Israel and Palestine,  
[http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_frances\\_fascination\\_with\\_israel\\_and\\_palestine290](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_frances_fascination_with_israel_and_palestine290)



changing times all to the benefit of Israel<sup>15</sup>.

This stiffer upper lip approach is being made despite the fact that many African countries, and because of their colonial experiences, have already fixed “pro-Palestinian mindset” that has already been set through decades of resolutions against Israel as Netanyahu himself recognized in the UN speech when he dismally said that in 2015 the UN passed 20 resolutions against Israel<sup>16</sup>. These are not going to change very much, and probably in the immediate future regardless of how new attempts are being made to change relations and Israel knows that as inferred by the Netanyahu’s speech.

### *Sour grapes in Uganda*

This is what happened when Netanyahu made his visit to Uganda as part of the East Africa tour on 4 July, 2016<sup>17</sup>. He was partly to take part in the 40th-anniversary of the raid on Entebbe by the Israeli air force to rescue Israeli hostages. The anniversary was a Ugandan government staged public relations exercise which show how their government is thinking to attract new investments and building political relation<sup>18</sup>.

That sojourn turned into a series of sour grapes and gaffes especially for Netanyahu as member of the injured party

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<sup>15</sup><http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-full-remarks-at-un-general-assembly/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup><http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/israel-pm-netanyahu-historic-east-africa-trip-160704084656635.html>

<sup>18</sup><http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Israeli-PM-seeks-to-restore-ties-with-Africa-and-fight-terrorism/1056-3278652-onsces/index.html>; <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/israel-netanyahu-expensive-visit-africa-to-bring-big-deals.html>; <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-05/netanyahu-in-africa-seeking-trade-diplomatic-opportunities>

especially when president Yoweri Museveni's repeatedly kept referring to Israel as Palestine and as if the rescue was an Israeli failure and a Palestinian success. "The sad event, 40 years ago, turned into another bond linking Palestine to Africa," Museveni was reported as saying and continuing "...This is yet another bond between Africa and Palestine because there were earlier bonding events"<sup>19</sup>.

Netanyahu didn't flinch while he heard this but the debacle was also on the social media and reported that Israeli radio stations cut off his speech<sup>20</sup>. A Ugandan government spokesman denied there was a gaffe; Ofowono Opondo P'Odeal tweeted "the whole of that land was originally known as Palestine"<sup>21</sup>.

But it showed the Palestinian imprint is still riding high among the psyche of Africa leaders and as a wrong had been committed to them and that Israel's relations with African countries is only based on self-interest long fed by politicians such as Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman when in June 2014 he made a trip to the African continent<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ugandan President refers to Israel as 'Palestine' during Netanyahu visit, <http://www.voanews.com/a/netanyahu-visits-africa/3403114.html>; <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/05/the-president-of-uganda-kept-calling-israel-palestine-during-netanyahus-visit/>; Mark Goldberg called this speech bizarre <http://www.undispatch.com/rare-israeli-trip-africa-truly-bizarre-speech/>; <http://www.evilyoshida.com/thread-12022.html>; <http://us.blastingnews.com/world/2016/07/uganda-s-president-museveni-kept-calling-israel-palestine-during-netanyahu-s-visit-001002663.amp.html>; <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/netanyahu-uganda-kenya>.

<sup>20</sup><http://www.freepch.com/2016/07/05/ugandas-museveni-mars-netanyahus-visit-calls-israel-palestine/>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://mobile.twitter.com/OfwonoOpondo/status/749961233831497729>

<sup>22</sup> <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2014/Pages/FM-Lieberman-to-leave-on-state-visit-to-Africa-9-June-2014.aspx>

In January 2016 the Knesset made a 360 degrees forward to establishing an Israel-Africa caucus, a crowning of the icing in the cake so to speak<sup>23</sup>. Israel is already on the continent through its aid, cooperation in agriculture, extended experts and cyber information technology realizing the potential for economic activity as seven of the 10 fastest economies in the world are in Africa<sup>24</sup>. Despite the fact that Israel has long supplied many African states with military supplies, Israel's trade with the African continent is only 2% of its total foreign trade shows there is a prosperous, fruitful market there and which is yet to develop and has great potential<sup>25</sup>. While no Israeli Prime Minister may have visited Africa in three decades, the other way around was greatly made and in style, topped by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to Tel Aviv. Kenyatta was so well pleased he is reported to have said “in the future he might ask Israel to upgrade his [country’s] air force”<sup>26</sup>.

### *Israel seeks observer status in AU*

It is clear Israel is involved in the creation of much across-the-board political and economic relations with African countries in a two-pronged strategy: Bilateral relations with different states and “bloc” relations with pan-African

<sup>23</sup> <https://unitedwithisrael.org/netanyahu-stresses-common-concerns-at-launch-of-new-caucus-for-israeli-african-cooperation/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-10-24-africas-21st-century-moment-not-yet;>  
<http://www.businessinsider.com/seven-of-the-worlds-10-fastest-growing-economies-are-african-2012-5;>  
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/which-are-africa-s-fastest-growing-economies/>

<sup>25</sup> Another era in Israel-Africa relations, <http://eipa.eu.com/2016/07/another-golden-era-in-israel-africa-relations/>; Israeli-African Relations, Now and Then, <http://sheldonkirshner.com/israeli-african-relations-now/>;

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Jerusalem-Report/Return-to-Africa-447993>

organization such as the African Union. Israel is now seeking to gain observer status in the 54-member regional organization of the African Union which shows how far it is going in its diplomatic relations around the world<sup>27</sup>. In joining other parties like Palestine, Turkey, Haiti, Serbia and Ukraine this would give it greater political prestige and credibility to Israel and give it greater say in regional blocs. Countries like Libya and South Africa have always objected to Israel's wish to gain observer status. Now this objection is being made loud by Algeria, Sudan and Egypt and again South Africa, an issue that may lead to a rift in the African Union<sup>28</sup>. It is difficult to see how long this will continue because of pressure being exerted from the other side from Kenya and Ethiopia and especially since Addis Ababa headquarters the AU<sup>29</sup>.

International relations is no longer about diplomacy but the impinging of non-state actors on the world order like terrorism, violence, extremism and extremist groups. And like other parts of the world, Africa is having its fair share. As part of his Eastern African tour Netanyahu attended a conference on terrorism in Uganda where he met also with leaders from

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<sup>27</sup> Ethiopia backs Israeli bid for AU "observer status", <https://asokoinsight.com/news/ethiopia-backs-israeli-bid-for-au-observer-status>, <http://hamodia.com/2016/07/07/ethiopia-backs-israeli-bid-observer-status-african-union/>; <http://www.theworldweekly.com/reader/view/storyline/2016-07-08/ethiopia-and-kenya-back-israels-bid-for-au-observer-status/8586>; <http://adiszena.com/ethiopia-backs-israeli-bid-for-au-observer-status/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160712-algeria-and-sudan-leading-efforts-to-block-israels-bid-to-regain-african-union-observer-status/>; African writer Kevin Mwanza says that Israel's bid for an observer seat could divide Africa, see <http://www.ayyaantuu.net/analysis-israels-bid-for-au-observer-seat-could-divide-africa/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://au.int/en/VisitAUHQ>

South Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia<sup>30</sup>. Israel's participation was designed to project an upbeat image of countries suffering from such bouts of violence whether in Kenya and/or through Somalia's Al-Shabab movement and which is an Al-Qaeda affiliate and Boko Haram in Nigeria.

### *Looking to the UN*

The bigger picture to this is indeed Israel's rehabilitation at the UN. Its first major success at the world body was when it got its envoy Danny Danon elected to head one of the General Assembly's six permanent committees, the prestigious Legal Committee<sup>31</sup>. At the same time it got one of its legal academics, Professor Yuval Shany, re-elected on the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva<sup>32</sup>. Although he is quoted as saying that he will not be seen as Israel's man at the UN, this is still seen as ironical by many because of Israel's continued military rule of different parts of the West Bank and Gaza which has been under an Israeli-imposed blockade since 2007 together with its dire consequences<sup>33</sup>. This was clearly a

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<sup>30</sup> <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/a8fd1bec82ce4ba7bc743414fb0de68c/israels-netanyahu-be-feted-uganda-during-africa-tour>, <http://www.breakingisraelnews.com/71214/netanyahu-african-counter-terrorism-summit-believe-africa/#iLEB8ZbbueswRpz4.97>; for joint declaration of the conference see

<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/Uganda-regional-counterterrorism-summit-joint-declaration-4-July-2016.aspx>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-un-idUSKCN0YZ2FT>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/10/i-am-not-going-to-be-israels-man.html>

<sup>33</sup> For the humanitarian impact of the Gaza blockade one year after the 2014 Israeli war on the Strip, see

<http://gaza.ochaopt.org/2015/07/the-gaza-strip-the-humanitarian-impact-of-the-blockade/>; <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/palestine/gaza-blockade.htm>; <https://www.amnesty.ie/wp->

major diplomatic success and gives it a boost to bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2019-2020, a position it may well get because of its support by the UN West European Group and others<sup>34</sup>. On its side, is Ethiopia which starts its two-year stint at the Security Council in 2017<sup>35</sup>.

Israel is clearly playing high stakes politics. This maybe the climax to Israel's East Africa visit, of a set of foreign policy objectives starting from one continent, and ending up in an another, of gaining greater say and power in the affairs of the United Nations and its Security Council.

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content/uploads/2016/05/Suffocating-The-Gaza-Strip-under-Israeli-Blockade.pdf.

<sup>34</sup> For analysis of why Israel is running under the West European and Others Group and not under the Asia-Pacific Group, see <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-council-israel-idUSBRE99213O20131003>; The same article suggests Israel has been planning for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council since late November, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4826006,00.html>