

Commentary

AFRICA'S STANCE ON THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT: A CONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Israel-Hamas conflict escalated significantly with Hamas launching an offensive against Israel, causing over 1300 deaths and a severe hostage crisis. This marked a major intensification in the longstanding conflict. The African Union attributed the violence to Israel's denial of Palestinian rights, while African nations responded variably. Some aligned with Israel, others with Palestine, and several remained neutral. Diplomatic relations with Israel, influenced by historical and developmental ties, were evident in the varied UN voting patterns. Israel's extensive developmental aid and covert influence in Africa have shaped its role on the continent, amidst recent shifts like the Abraham Accords

Mohanasakthivel J*

Introduction

On 7 October 2023, the Israel-Hamas conflict witnessed a significant escalation as Hamas launched a violent offensive against Israel, resulting in over 1300 fatalities and a severe hostage crisis. This offensive, aimed at securing the release of Palestinian political prisoners, targeted both Israeli citizens and foreign nationals.¹ In response, Israel declared war on Hamas and imposed a blockade on Gaza. This marked a considerable intensification of the longstanding conflict between Israel and Hamas, garnering global attention and eliciting diverse responses from African nations.

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Divergent Reactions to the Conflict

The African Union (AU) issued a statement on 7 October 2023 attributing the conflict to Israel, citing the "denial of fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, particularly that of an independent and sovereign state is the main cause of the permanent Israeli-Palestinian tension".² Despite this official stance, several member states diverged, adopting

* Research Analyst, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean and United Nations Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi

positions aligned with their national interests. Countries such as Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Zambia, and Cameroon have aligned with Israel. Conversely, South Africa, Algeria, Sudan, Chad, Tunisia, and several North African countries have attributed the violence to Israel, citing grievances related to the illegal occupation. Nigeria, Uganda, Angola, and Tanzania have adopted a neutral stance, advocating for a cessation of hostilities

and a return to negotiations. The conflict's repercussions for Africa are significant, encompassing economic, security, and humanitarian dimensions. The varied responses underscore historical ties and diverse geopolitical interests, highlighting the intricate dynamics within the continent concerning this complex conflict.³

The evaluation of Israel's standing in Africa during the conflict was significantly reflected in the United Nations votes on 27 October 2023⁴ and 12 December 2023.⁵ These resolutions, which called for an immediate ceasefire and did not condemn Hamas, faced opposition from Israel and its allies. Nevertheless, these resolutions received considerable support from African countries, including those traditionally friendly to Israel, such as Kenya and Ghana. Conversely, a number of African nations demonstrated support for Israel. Liberia, for example, voted against the 12 December 2023 resolution, while Cameroon, South Sudan, Malawi, Cabo Verde, Equatorial Guinea, and Togo abstained in both votes. Additionally, Ethiopia and Zambia abstained in the first vote but supported the subsequent resolution.

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These votes were complemented by Western-sponsored amendments aimed at condemning Hamas, which are essential for assessing Israel's position in Africa. The results of these votes were somewhat more favourable to Israel. On 27 October 2023, six countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Cabo Verde, and South Sudan) voted in favour of the amendment condemning Hamas, while nine countries, including Angola and Ivory Coast, abstained, and 15 countries refrained from voting on the amendment. The 12 December 2023 vote yielded slightly improved outcomes for Israel, with eight countries supporting the condemnatory amendment.

This included three nations that had previously abstained or not voted on 27 October 2023: Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Liberia. Furthermore, Guinea, which had opposed the 27 October 2023 amendment, abstained on 12 December 2023, and Nigeria shifted its stance from supporting the 27 October 2023 amendment to opposing it on 12 December 2023. Although a majority of the UN General Assembly supported both amendments condemning Hamas, the required two-thirds majority was not achieved. In both instances, the absence of votes from African countries close to Israel, such as Cameroon and Zambia, could have potentially altered the outcome in favour of Israel.

African Diplomatic Relations with Israel

Despite emerging as a nation in 1948 while most of Africa remained under colonial rule,

Israel actively courted ties with newly independent African states in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ This “peripheral doctrine” aimed to build alliances with non-Arab Muslim nations.⁷ However, the 1973 war and peace with Egypt refocused Israel on the Israeli-Palestinian

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conflict, an issue where many African countries, influenced by their own history, sided with Palestine. The end of the Cold War saw a thaw in relations, with many African states restoring ties with Tel Aviv. Israel's peace treaties with Jordan and the Oslo Accords further facilitated this détente with the African countries.⁸ Today, 44 out of 54 African countries recognize Israel's statehood, and nearly 30 have embassies or consulates in Tel Aviv.⁹ This shift is partly due to Israel's advancements in technology and agriculture, which appeal

to African nations facing challenges like drought and extreme weather. While several African nations have officially recognised the State of Israel and established diplomatic relations in recent decades, many others remain steadfast in their historical solidarity with Palestine.

Israel's Role in African Development

In 1958, during a visit to Western Africa, Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir identified the potential for Israel to assist African nations facing significant developmental challenges. These challenges included food security, water safety, sanitation, healthcare, education, economic development, community building, and gender equality. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion shared this vision, which led to the creation of MASHAV – Israel's Agency for

International Development Cooperation within the Foreign Ministry.¹⁰ MASHAV's mission combines the Jewish value of *tikkun olam* (bettering the world) with the aim of fostering political goodwill. Today, MASHAV operates in over 40 African countries with which Israel maintains diplomatic relations.

MASHAV's influence extends across various sectors such as agriculture, health, and education. Recent initiatives include surgical missions sponsored by hospitals in Ethiopia and Uganda, the PICO Kids food security makeathon in Tanzania, and collaborations on paediatric cardiology in Ivory Coast. MASHAV's capacity building, including the establishment of healthcare facilities across Africa and continuous training for local medical staff. Beyond infrastructure development, MASHAV focuses on sustainable human capital development through extensive training programs. Over 350,000 individuals from Africa and other developing regions have benefited from these initiatives, supported by MASHAV's three dedicated training centers in Israel.¹¹

Additionally, initiatives at Ben-Gurion University reflect MASHAV's broader influence by engaging students from diverse backgrounds in programs focused on environmental, economic, social, and cultural sustainability in African regions. These initiatives empower local communities and enhance global understanding and collaboration, embodying Israel's commitment to shared prosperity and lasting impact in Africa. Recent efforts have expanded Israel's impact beyond agriculture, such as the introduction of drip irrigation in Senegal through partnerships with local and international agencies. This initiative demonstrates

Israel's pragmatic approach, emphasizing tangible results and effective resource utilization to enhance agricultural productivity across West Africa.¹² Despite regional complexities, Israel has cultivated positive relations with Muslim-majority countries like Senegal, fostering engagement through shared projects and mutual respect, even when political alignments differ on international issues.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Israel's engagement spans diverse sectors, including healthcare and disaster response in Tanzania and environmental sustainability projects in Kenya. This multifaceted approach not only enhances Israel's international standing but also significantly contributes to Africa's socio-economic development and resilience in the face of global challenges. Israel's commitment to capacity building and sustainable development in Africa positions it as a constructive partner in the continent's journey toward prosperity and stability. Through initiatives like agricultural training centers and collaborative projects, Israel continues to play a pivotal role in shaping Africa's future through impactful and enduring partnerships. Although Israel's developmental aid is modest compared to other Western countries, its influence in Africa extends beyond financial assistance.

Israel's Covert Influence in Africa

Israel's diplomatic ties with African countries conceal a more intricate and discreet layer of interaction. This hidden dimension includes a network of businessmen, consultants, and firms with extensive operations throughout Africa, participating in back-channel diplomacy that advances Israel's interests. These individuals have direct access to African presidents and are skilled in intelligence, surveillance, cybersecurity, and arms trading, acting as intermediaries for Israeli companies seeking to penetrate the African market.

Israeli companies have long dominated the wiretapping and electronic surveillance market in sub-Saharan Africa. Among the most prominent are Verint and NSO Group, the latter founded by Shalev Hulio and known for its spyware, Pegasus. Other notable firms include Mer Group, which operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Nigeria, and the Republic of Congo, providing services to national intelligence agencies, and Elbit Systems, which has a presence in Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa. These companies benefit from their close connections with the Israeli military and intelligence services, with many employees being veterans of Unit 8200, Israel Defence Forces' cyber-warfare unit. For instance, Shabtai Shavit, who leads the Mer Group subsidiary Athena GS3, directed Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency, from 1989 to 1996.¹³

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Shavit has extensive experience in Africa, having developed relations between Israeli intelligence services and those of Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko's regime and Cameroon. Verint, led by former Israeli army officer Dan Bodner, exemplifies how surveillance technology serves as a crucial tool in Israel's interactions with both autocratic and democratic governments worldwide, including in Africa.¹⁴ In West Africa, one of Israel's clients is Cameroon's long-time ruler, Paul Biya, whose four-decade tenure makes him the continent's

longest-serving leader. Reports indicate that Israeli operatives manage Biya's personal security, and Israel has heavily invested in surveillance technology to suppress dissent and sustain Biya's rule.¹⁵

Recent Developments and the Abraham Accords

In recent years, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has significantly intensified Israel's diplomatic outreach to Africa as part of a broader foreign policy agenda. His visits to African nations and efforts to build stronger ties with key states are integral to this strategy. The Abraham Accords, which facilitated the normalization of relations with several Arab countries, including Sudan and Morocco, have effectively gave a final blow to the pan-Arab solidarity for Palestine. In 2022, a landmark agreement between Israel and Morocco led to the deepening of trade and economic relations, with Morocco recognizing Israel in return for Israel's recognition of Morocco's claim over Western Sahara.¹⁶

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Since 2020, two Arab League countries the Sudan and Morocco—have signed the Abraham Accords, formalizing diplomatic relations with Israel. This agreement enabled Sudan to be removed from the US terrorism blacklist.

However, the normalization process in Sudan has been slow, primarily due to the ongoing civil war. Despite this, Israel's Foreign Minister Eli Cohen remained hopeful about achieving a historic peace agreement. However, Sudan's decision to renew ties with Iran, a known supporter of Hamas, shortly after the Gaza conflict erupted has cast doubt on the potential for such an agreement.¹⁷ Conversely, Morocco has adopted a more measured approach. While it has expressed "deep concern over the deterioration of the situation and the outbreak of military operations in the Gaza Strip," it has refrained from openly condemning Israel. Despite this, Morocco has witnessed some of the continent's largest pro-Palestine protests. Rabat's cautious stance underscores its reluctance to jeopardize its relations with Israel, especially given Israel's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara, a claim opposed by the Algerian-backed Polisario Front and other proponents of Sahrawi independence.¹⁸

Conclusion

Africa's stance on the Israel-Hamas conflict has shifted since the Cold War. During that era, African nations often supported the Palestinian cause, influenced by alliances and rewards from Arab states. Today, the geopolitical landscape has changed. Many Arab countries are now more open to engaging with Israel for diplomatic and economic benefits. This presents an opportunity for African nations to recalibrate their foreign policies. Strengthening ties with Israel can provide technological, agricultural, and security advantages, crucial for addressing economic challenges heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. African nations now seek a balanced approach, aligning historical partnerships and moral positions with strategic engagements that support their economic and developmental goals. However, ongoing Israeli human rights violations in Gaza could force African states into difficult choices, highlighting the need for Israel to pursue peace negotiations to maintain these diplomatic relations.

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