

## Israel's War in Gaza Also Impacts African Geopolitics

Africa's polyvalent response to the war since Oct. 7 indicates a dramatic shift in the continent's relation to the Middle East.

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For Anas and Muhsin, two Nigerian youths **allegedly killed** on Nov. 16, 2023, during a pro-Palestine protest in the country, Israel's war on the Gaza Strip war is more than a distant echo. According to Sayyid Ibraheem Zakzaky, the leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), the two were reportedly killed when police **opened fire** on a procession the group organized to draw attention to Israel's invasion of Gaza. A **video clip** of the incident on X (formerly Twitter) shows protesters clashing with the police on a highway in Kaduna State, in northwestern Nigeria, as shots rang out in the background.

Local police spokesperson ASP Mansur Hassan **denied** the killing happened, adding that the police were dispersing the protest because the group is — **controversially** — banned. "They were protesting against the Israel-Palestine war, but this is not Israel, this is Kaduna," Hassan said.

The deaths add to the unfolding situation across Africa since the war in Gaza began on Oct. 7, 2023. The conflict could further complicate Israel's standing in Africa, where **opposition to the war is growing** amid a rift within the continent's governing body, the African Union (AU).

Africa has always held strategic importance for Israel and Palestine. The AU's 55 member states represent a vital voting bloc in the United Nations and other international bodies. And both Israel and Palestine have prioritized foreign policy with African states throughout their history.

Throughout two months of bloodshed in Gaza, the bloc has **split** into three broad camps divided by clashing stances on the war. On the one hand, **Zimbabwe** and **South Africa** along with the Arab League states of **Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan** and **Chad**, have expressed support for Palestine. **Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Cameroon** and the **Democratic Republic of Congo** openly backed Israel. Smack in the middle are **Nigeria** and Uganda, whose neutrality consists of supporting neither side while calling for de-escalation.

In recent years Israel has made **major inroads** in the continent, after a lengthy downturn in relations following the 1973 Israeli-Arab war.

But recent events demonstrate that Israel risks **overplaying** its hand. The escalation in Gaza threatens to undo Israel's diplomatic gains in Africa. In late October 2023, some 35 African states voted in the UN General Assembly for a Jordanian resolution calling for "**protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations**" in Gaza. Morocco and Sudan, two countries that normalized ties with Israel as part of the **Abraham Accords** in 2020, were among the countries that voted for the resolution. Meanwhile, Chad, another Muslim-majority country that recently restored diplomatic ties with Israel, has recalled its Chargé d'Affaires to Israel, citing the "**loss of numerous innocent civilians**" and the need for a "**ceasefire for a durable solution to the Palestinian issue**." In the same vein, Kenya, Israel's biggest ally in the Horn of Africa, has since **retreated** from its initial statement of solidarity with Israel, while Rwanda, another Israel ally, **sent humanitarian aid** to Gaza.

### A Polyphonic Response

Two years ago AU Commission Chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat unilaterally **granted** Israel observer status in the body after two decades of Israel's diplomatic attempts. That decision split the continental body. Critics and member states like South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, Namibia, Botswana and Tunisia pushed back. **Citing** the AU's Constitutive Act's opposition to apartheid and colonialism, those countries launched a campaign that eventually forced the AU to **suspend** the controversial decision at a summit in Addis Ababa in February 2023, when an **Israeli envoy was kicked out**.

Now, the AU has taken a more hardline stance against Israel's war. In a **statement** released on the day of the Hamas attack, the AU placed responsibility for the conflict on Israel, saying that the "denial of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, particularly that of an independent and sovereign State, is the main cause of the permanent Israeli-Palestinian tension." This stance shows the AU trying to connect with its traditional approach to the Middle East conflict, but also highlights the outcome of the last row in the body. Responding to the suspension of its observer status, Tel Aviv had singled out two countries, South Africa and Algeria. "It is saddening to see the African Union taken hostage by a small number of extremist states like Algeria and South Africa, which are driven by hatred and controlled by Iran," a spokesperson from the Israel foreign ministry **said** at the time.

According to Irit Back, a professor and expert on Middle East and Africa studies at Tel Aviv University's **Moshe Dayan Center**, the "split reflects the various geo-strategic, historical and political circumstances of African countries, for example, the traditional alliance between the ANC in South Africa and the [Palestine Liberation Organization]."

This alliance stems from a shared history of enduring colonialism and oppression and Israel's support for South Africa's brutal apartheid regime in the 1970s. As the American journalist and author Sascha Polakow-Suransky uncovered in his book, "**The Unspoken Alliance**," Israel offered various forms of support to the racist regime, including **training of the latter's elite military units, provision of tanks, Galil rifles and aviation technology, as well as a joint pursuit to produce nuclear weapons**. Shortly after his release from prison in 1990, anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela **declared**, "The people of South Africa will never forget the support of the state of Israel to the apartheid regime."

Algeria's hardline anti-Israel stance also falls in line with its own history. As one of the first countries in the world to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Algeria shares deep emotional and religious ties with Palestine as well as a shared history of resisting colonialism. "We were occupied by France, and this history of brutality is similar," Zine Labidine Ghebouli, a researcher with the European Council on Foreign Relations, **has observed**.

Also an Arab League member state, Algeria has long backed the Palestinians in their fight against Israeli occupation. Algeria sent some military support to the Arab armies fighting Israel during the wars of 1967 and 1973, and backed Palestine on the diplomatic front. In 1975, the North African country **voted in favor** of a UN General Assembly resolution **equating Zionism with racism**, and after the PLO declared a Palestinian state in 1988, Algeria **emerged as the first country to recognize it**.

Even as some North African countries **warmed up to Tel Aviv throughout the decades**, Algeria has remained steadfast in its refusal to recognize the state of Israel. In 2020, while the Abraham Accords began to bring together Israel and some Arab countries, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune insisted his country would "**never participate**" in the "**scramble toward normalization**."

Egypt became the **first Arab country to sign a peace treaty** with Israel in 1979, followed by **Jordan** in 1994. Since 2020, four more Arab League countries — the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco — have signed the Abraham Accords to normalize relations with Israel.

The quid-pro-quo deal gave Khartoum a chance to be **removed** from the US terrorism blacklist. But unlike Morocco, Khartoum's normalization process has moved at a **snail's pace**, in part due to the civil war in Sudan. As of February this year, Israel's foreign minister, Eli Cohen, was still optimistic that a "**historic peace agreement**" would be signed by year's end. But when Khartoum decided, two days after the outbreak of the war in Gaza, to **restore ties with Iran**, a known backer of Hamas, the move cast doubt on the likelihood of an agreement.

For its part, Morocco has refrained from publicly condemning Israel, **instead merely expressing** its "deep concern over the deterioration of the situation and the outbreak of military operations in the Gaza Strip." Yet the country has witnessed **some of the largest pro-Palestine protests** on the continent, with tens of thousands reported marching. Rabat's nuanced stance demonstrates its hesitation to jeopardize relations with Israel. At stake for Morocco is **Israel's recognition** of its sovereignty over the **disputed** Western Sahara — a claim opposed by the Algerian-backed Polisario Front and other supporters of Sahrawi independence.

In the same vein, Kenya's pro-Israel stance reflects the country's strategic importance in the Horn of Africa, especially its role as the first line of defense in a region **beset** by growing hardline Islamist groups. Kenyan President William Ruto's **pro-Israel stance, which, though toned down** in recent weeks, has sparked significant backlash amid a **crackdown** on pro-Palestine protests.

Since Israel and Kenya established ties six decades ago, the countries have collaborated on economic development and security. Kenya is East Africa's largest and **most important economic hub and a vital buffer** for the entire Horn of Africa's stability. This is also true for countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea, whose access to the Red Sea is strategically and economically important to Israel. Since 1976, when Nairobi gave **operational support** to an Israeli military task force during the **Entebbe hostage crisis** in Uganda, Kenya has suffered a **slew of attacks** on its soil. Several of those were linked to plots against Israel. This includes the **1980 bombing** of the Jewish-owned Norfolk Hotel, the **US embassy bombing** in 1998, the **bombing of the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel** in Mombasa in 2002, and the 2013 **attack on the then Israeli-owned Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi**.

Quote: "In the last 10 years, Israel has made significant efforts to build relationships with Africa, but these are mostly transactional and a way to hopefully win support in the UN and other international forums."

Antony Loewenstein

The case of Nigeria illustrates the ebbs and flows in African-Israeli ties throughout history. While Nigeria has taken a neutral stance on the current Gaza war, the West African giant has alternated between standing with Palestinians and offering support to Israel. Adeola Soetan, a **student leader** in the late 1980s, recalled the countless rallies he attended as a University undergraduate. "Pictures of Yasser Arafat adorned several campuses," he recalled, adding: "Nigeria's support for nationalist movements like the PLO used to be bold and ideological."

Following the 1973 Israeli-Arab war, Nigeria broke ties with Tel Aviv. Relations were only **restored** two decades later, in September 1992, a move that led to **flourishing trade and commerce** between both countries. In 2013, former president Goodluck Jonathan became **the first Nigerian head of state to visit Israel**.

### Diplomatic Offensive

Africa's response to the Israel-Palestine war also shows the result of Israel's diplomatic offensive to reconnect with Africa. In recent years, Netanyahu has **spearheaded an Israeli push** to make inroads in Africa. He stopped over in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda during a **state visit** in 2016. The following year, Netanyahu **addressed** the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Heads of State and Government Summit in Liberia — becoming the first leader outside of Africa to do so. So far, Israel has **strengthened relations** with a slate of African countries, particularly several key northern and Sub-Saharan African states. At least 46 AU member states recognize Israel.

"In the last 10 years, Israel has made significant efforts to build relationships with Africa, but these are mostly transactional and a way to hopefully win support in the UN and other international forums," journalist Antony Loewenstein, who was based in Jerusalem between 2016 and 2020, told Inkstick.

In his recent book, "The Palestine Laboratory," Loewenstein investigated the Israeli military hardware and technologies for surveillance, data collection, and cyber warfare **developed and battle-tested** on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. According to Loewenstein, such technology has become a currency and bargaining chip in Israel's dealings with both despoens and democracies around the world, including in Africa. One of Israel's West African clients is Cameroon dictator Paul Biya, whose 40 years in power have made him **the longest-serving ruler** in Africa. Not only is Biya's **personal security reportedly handled by Israeli operatives, but Israel has also invested heavily in phone tapping and surveillance technology** to quell dissent and keep Biya in power.

According to Israel's defense ministry, the country's defense exports to Africa **rose** to \$6.5 billion in 2016 — a staggering \$800 million increase from the previous year. These exports mean high profits for Israeli companies, but Loewenstein argues that lucrative deals are not the only goal. Israel expects client states that benefit from its weaponry and spyware technology to shift their positions toward Israel in important votes in the UN. "You scratch my back, I scratch yours — it is that kind of relationship," Loewenstein explains.

Tel Aviv has never hidden the real motivation for its foreign policy in Africa nor how far it is willing to go. In a briefing with Israeli ambassadors to Africa, Netanyahu **summed it up**: "The first interest is to dramatically change the situation regarding African votes at the UN and other international bodies from opposition to support... This is our goal."

On Dec. 30, 2014, Nigerian envoy to the UN Security Council Joy Ogwu **abstained** from a vote demanding that Israel end its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. In April 2013, Nigeria had **paid** an Israeli company, Elbit Systems, \$40 million for a telecommunications and surveillance system that could aid the regime's efforts to monitor citizens' internet activities.

Pegasus spyware, a military-grade surveillance software created by the Israeli company NSO Group, has also become widespread in Africa. Described as the "**world's most powerful cyber weapon**," the Pegasus spyware has reportedly been linked to **several abuses** by African regimes including in **Rwanda, Ghana, Morocco, and Togo**.

"There is a lot of evidence of Israel supporting repressive regimes in Africa and some of these states have come out to support Israel in the past few weeks," Loewenstein added. "I don't think that is a coincidence."

As evidenced by the lull in relations following the 1973 war, the long-term repercussions of this era may continue to echo, even when the fighting ceases. The responses of African countries as a bloc and as individual states continue to shift in the endless dance of diplomacy.

### AUTHOR BIO

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