THE ARABS, ISRAEL, AND BLACK AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF COURTSHIP

By Dr. C. Owusu Kwarteng*

Introduction

Black Africa and the Arab world have been economically and culturally linked for a dozen of centuries. For the past three decades, however, increased tension in Africa and in the Middle East has brought conflicts, cooperation and confrontation in the relationship between the Arabs and Black Africa and has also affected the nature of Arab-Israeli penetration in Africa. As a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the need to mobilize Africa’s diplomatic support, Black Africa has been a target of Arab-Israeli competition. Mitchell Bard noted that:

while there is no doubt that Israeli leaders have always had philanthropic attitudes towards Africa, their primary interest in the continent rested on the more tangible grounds of Realpolitik. Just as Africa has been the scene of a battle of influence among the superpowers, so too has it been a battlefield between Israel and the Arabs.

A senior official at the Israeli Foreign Ministry noted that the struggle for Africa was “a fight of life and death for us.” Analysts of Afro-Arab relations often put much emphasis on the role of Arab petro-dollar power as an influence on Black Africa’s policy towards Arab-Israeli issues. Others also explain Black Africa’s position on Arab-Israeli issues in terms of Black Africa’s efforts to please the Arabs. For example, Opoku Agyeman, concluded that:

Since African states maintain diplomatic relations with France, West Germany, Britain, Japan and the U.S. (all these powers have strong ties with South Africa) this insistence on the ostracism of Israel cannot logically have anything to do with Israel’s relations with South Africa, but only with the Africans’ compulsion to please the Arabs at the expense of their own best interests.

The arguments often brought forth to explain Africa’s position on Middle East issues are often parochial, since they fail to address some fundamental questions: what was the basis of Afro-Arab relations prior to the Arab oil embargo in 1973 and what explains the inability of Arabs, in some cases, to influence Africa’s policy towards Middle East issues? Similarly, an attempt to explain the rupture in diplomatic relations between Black Africa and Israel, solely in terms of the Middle East conflicts, misses other essential factors. While many African countries broke ties with Israel following the 1972 war, some of them broke relations based on reasons not necessarily connected with Arab pressure or the 1972 Arab-Israeli-war. For example, Chad broke links with Israel, partly to reduce Arab involvement in the Chadian civil war that involved the Frolinat, the Muslim separatist

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2. For an overview of the conflict, see for example, Aaron David Miller, “The Arab-Israeli conflict: A Retrospective,” *Middle East Journal* 41, #3, (Summer 1987).
movement of the North.  

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the major political, economic, cultural, and strategic factors that have influenced Black Africa's relations with both Israel and the Arab world, in the context of Arab-Israeli competition and rivalry in Africa. Using some relevant examples, this paper examines some of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the methods and strategies that Israel and the Arabs have used to woo Black Africa. A principal assumption underlying this paper is that the outcome of both Israeli and Arab efforts to woo Black Africa depends on the strategy to secure the support of, or at least, not to alienate the Black Africans.

Israel and Africa: The Politics of Penetration

When the State of Israel was created in 1948, its primary diplomatic attention was not focussed on African countries, but on the colonial powers that controlled Africa: Belgium, Britain, France, and Portugal. Several developments were to occur in international politics that would intensify Arab-Israeli competition, and Arab-Israeli diplomacy in courting Black Africa. At the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955, a resolution was adopted that condemned Israeli occupation of Arab lands. The Bandung Conference was a diplomatic set-back for Jerusalem. The fact that the Jewish state was not invited to the Afro-Asian meeting meant that, seven years after its foundation, the state of Israel still remained isolated. To end its diplomatic estrangement, Israel was to mount an aggressive diplomatic incursion into the independent Black African nations.

Israel became the first country to establish an embassy in Ghana, less than a month after Ghana's independence in 1957.  

Two years later, Israeli Premier Golda Meir, made an official visit to Africa and held talks with leaders such as Nkrumah, Tubman of Liberia, and Houphouet-Boigny of the Ivory Coast. A major motive was behind this trip: to sell to the African leaders Israel’s interest in African liberation.

Political decolonization of Africa, which largely occurred in the 1960s, also saw the emergence of an African constituency at the UN, where votes were taken on both the Arab-Israeli conflict and apartheid in South Africa. The formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963 provided another problem for Israel, since unlike the UN, Israel is not represented in the Afro-Arab organization. On the other hand, by virtue of their dual membership in the Arab League and in the OAU, Arab radicals such as Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt, could forge alliances with other radical black African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

An examination of Ghana’s policy towards Israel and the Arab world (under the Nkruman regime, 1957-1966) suggests that Black African leaders were cautious in dealing with both the Arabs and the Israelis. Though he developed close identification with the Arab cause, President Nkrumah never completely severed ties with Israel. In 1964, at the OAU summit in Cairo, Kwame Nkrumah, a leading pan-Africanist, agreed that Egypt alone could not solve the problem of the Middle East, but a united Africa could. Nkrumah's cautious diplomacy not to alienate the Arabs could be seen from the fact that he never made an official visit to Jerusalem, even though he was in Cairo on

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7 See Michael Williams, "Nkrumah and the State of Israel," *TransAfrica Forum* 7, #1, (Spring 1990), 43.
8 Ibid., 48.
many occasions. On the other hand, Nkrumah never developed any anti-Zionist positions in his writings and speeches as President of Ghana. In addition to established cultural links between Ghana and Israel, the Black Star Line, Ghana’s shipping company, was jointly owned by the Ghana government (with a 60 percent share) and Zim Israel Navigation (with a 40 percent share). There was an Arab boycott of the Ghana Black Star Line because of Israeli joint ownership.

The 1970s also saw the emergence of Third World Solidarity groups, such as OPEC and the Group of 77. Israel confronted both the Arab oil weapon and pro-Arab solidarity in the Third World. In 1973, President Hovari Boumedienne of Algeria became the Chairperson of the Non-aligned Movement. At the Algiers Conference of the Non-aligned Movement in 1973, resolutions were passed which supported Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in regaining their lost territories from Israel. These resolutions welcomed those countries that had broken ties with Israel because of Israel’s occupation of Arab lands, and called on those countries which had not broken ties to do so. Cuba, Togo and Zaire were the first countries to act.

Togo’s decision to break ties with Israel did not please Nigeria which had maintained that in order for the OAU to continue mediation efforts in the Middle East conflict, it was politically expedient for it to retain diplomatic relations with both sides of the conflict. Neither did Nigeria’s position please Algeria, since General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria’s Head of State, was at that time, the Chairman of the OAU. Algiers particularly saw Lagos’ position as paradoxical. Unlike the Israelis who supported Biafra’s secession from Nigeria, the Arabs, including Algeria, supported the federal government’s position on the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970).

In 1974, the following year, the Algerian Foreign Minister, Abdul Aziz Butaflsika, was nominated president of the UN General Assembly. The Arabs, backed by their petro-dollar power, could increase the political legitimacy of the PLO and at the same time delegitimize the state of Israel. Therefore, it was not surprising that on 13 November 1974, the leader of the PLO, Yasin Arafat, was invited to address the UN General Assembly and, contrary to UN precedents and procedures, was “treated as a head of state.”

Against the obvious diplomatic odds, the success of Israeli penetration in black Africa can be partly attributed to the effectiveness of the methods that it has adopted. Jerusalem chose to assist the African countries in the area of technical assistance. Israel’s focus on technical assistance and developmental projects reflected its weakness, in terms of competition with major powers such as France, the Soviet Union, and Britain, as a donor of economic aid to Africa. Unlike the aid given by the superpowers, Israeli aid came without many strings attached. This was because Israel feared that Egypt, its Arab rival in Africa, might fill the vacuum if Israel did not step in. Israel would also sponsor visits by African leaders and officials so they “could see for themselves what Israel had achieved in such a short time.”

Israel has also provided arms to African countries in addition to military training. This has involved providing assistance to individuals who are either influential or potentially

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9 Ibid., 43.
10 Colin Legum, "‘African, the Arabs and the Middle East,”’ African Contemporary (1973), A5.
11 On this issue see, for example, Avi Beker, "‘UN North-South Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,”’ Jerusalem Journal of International Relations 10, #1, (1988), 48.
influential. Such was the case of the Israeli-trained soldier, Mobutu Sese Seko, who was to be the President of his country and a reliable ally of Israel. Jerusalem also invests much diplomatic capital in the African countries that are of strategic importance:

Where these countries shared common borders with Arab countries, Israel concentrated on military assistance, intelligence training and police training, in addition to the normal diplomatic and economic assistance. For example, in Ethiopia, where the country shared borders with Egypt, the Sudan, Somalia and was a vital strategic outlet to the Red Sea, Israel was heavily involved in military cooperation. Similarly in Zaire, Uganda and Kenya, which all share a common border with the Sudan, Israel provided military or para-military training as well as police and intelligence training.13

The “Islamic factor” in Israeli African diplomacy becomes clear by examining Jerusalem’s policy towards African conflicts with Islamic background. Israel’s aid to the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), in anti-Sudanese rebel group, falls within this analytical context. The SPLA constitutes the southern resistance to northern Arab and Islamic domination in Sudan.14

In 1972, when President Idi Amin visited Libya, the Libyan leader, Colonel Qaddafi, allegedly told Amin that Milton Obote’s group had approached him not to recognize the new Amin regime—the regime that had overthrown the Obote government—because it “was not acting in the interest of the Arab cause.”15 Qaddafi also reportedly revealed to Amin that Obote’s group had approached him for financial and material assistance in order to topple the Amin regime. Amin was reminded that his flirtation with Jerusalem which afforded Israel a strategic presence in Uganda, a country bordering Sudan and an Arab League member, was a “threat” to the Arab world. In a joint communiqué, Amin and Qaddafi pledged to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level and to cooperate diplomatically, economically, and militarily in the name of “Afro-Arab solidarity.”16

A few weeks later, Amin gave an ultimatum that all Israeli nationals in Uganda should pack up and leave the country. Under the pretext that Israeli nationals were engaging “in subversive activities,” the Israeli embassy in Uganda was ordered closed, and the Embassy buildings were later turned over for use by the PLO, Israel’s arch enemy.17

Phillippe Decreane suggested that the impact of Libyan aid on Amin’s decision was important because Amin had sought financial aid from Jerusalem and had been unsuccessful because Uganda had incurred a huge debt with Israel.18 In 1976, Amin suffered a humiliating defeat when an Israeli commando released Israeli nationals taken hostage by Palestinian hijackers at the Entebbe airport in Uganda. The Entebbe episode was exploited by the Soviets, who invoked Israeli “aggression” against Uganda as a way of securing diplomatic leverage in Uganda. What even worsened the Israeli position in Uganda was that Amin was also concerned that the Israelis who had aided him in the overthrow of Milton Obote, could turn their back on him.19

Another key Israeli encounter with the Arabs occurred in Ethiopia. For a long time, Ethiopia was concerned about the threat posed by the radical Nasserite regime in Cairo.

13 Ibid., 26.
15 Tsiko, Intervention in Uganda, 64.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
While President Nasser vowed to expel Israel from Africa, Israel increased its presence in Ethiopia. Mossad, the Israeli secret service, sent agents to train the Ethiopian police.

In May 1973, Libya used the OAU meeting in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, to put pressure on Ethiopia to break ties with Israel. Pressure also came from moderate Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia. Some Arab members of the OAU, particularly Libya, threatened to move the headquarters of the OAU to another capital such as Cairo, if the host, Ethiopia, failed to sever ties with Israel. Ethiopia was able to retain the OAU seat. Nevertheless, Emperor Haile Selassie was warned about his close relations with the Israelis. To wean Addis Ababa away from Jerusalem, President Boumediene of Algeria held confidential discussions with officials in Addis Ababa, where he promised to use his influence to halt Arab support for the anti-Ethiopian secessionist movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front, support that mainly came from Syria, Iraq and South Yemen, provided that the Emperor would sever ties with Jerusalem.

Even with the exit of the Selassie monarchy in Ethiopia and the institution of a Marxist regime in Addis Ababa, relations between Ethiopia and Israel remained friendly. For example, Ethiopia abstained from voting for the Arab-sponsored resolution in the United Nations in 1975 that equated Zionism with racism. What strengthened the Ethiopian-Israeli alliance even more was that the Arabs supported Eritrean insurgency while the Israelis supported the central government of Ethiopia. Mengistu Haile-Mariam, the Marxist leader of Ethiopia, secretly invited Israeli military advisors to return to Ethiopia in December 1975. Israel also negotiated an exchange of arms for Ethiopian Jews in 1977.

There are some geo-political elements as well. Ethiopia’s location and its frontage to the Red Sea is an attraction to Israeli strategists. Part of the strategic coastline is occupied by Eritrea, and Israel has always supported Ethiopia’s effort to prevent Eritrean secession. For the Mengistu regime, which was fighting hard to repulse the Eritrean insurgency, there were political incentives in accepting Israel military aid, particularly in view of the new Gorbachev policy of reducing Soviet commitments (in terms of military and economic assistance) to Soviet proteges.

Probably one of the most dramatic cases involving Arab-Israeli penetration and counter-penetration in Black Africa was President Mobutu’s sudden defection from and dramatic comeback to the Israeli camp. Zaire, an ally of the West and strategically important for Israel, broke ties with Jerusalem in a speech delivered by President Mobutu at the U.N. on October 4, 1973. Mobutu’s decision was politically delicate. Though a committed ally of Israel, Mobutu nevertheless saw an “African dimension” of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Zairian leader had to support Israel.

Mobutu’s defection from the Israeli camp was a dramatic set-back for Israeli-African diplomacy and was celebrated in the Arab world. Mobutu was gracefully rewarded with the honor of being the only Black African Head of State specially invited to attend the Arab Summit in Algiers in 1973. Since then, Jerusalem invested a lot of diplomatic capital in order to win back the ‘Prodigal Son’—an effort that involved several trips by David Kimche, the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry to Kinshasa and that

21 Takeo, Intervention in Uganda.
culminated in Ariel Sharon’s own visit to Kinshasa in November 1981. During the visit, contracts for arms sales and economic development were signed, and diplomatic relations were resumed in 1982.

The Arabs took steps to contain the situation, reminding other African leaders about the dangers of the Zairian move to Afro-Arab solidarity and the negotiations on Namibia’s independence. Qatar and Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Kinshasa; Syria called for a special meeting of the Arab League to discuss the situation, which was followed by a joint meeting of the Arab League and the OAU.22 The Arab Bank for Economic development of Africa (BADEA) suspended all aid to the Mobutu regime. Given the high incidence of dissident activities in Zaire, Mobutu particularly valued the Israeli offer of military training and weapons.

In the 1960s, major Arab propaganda against Israel was focused on Israel’s alleged collaboration with South Africa. During the Yom Kippur war, South African troops were reportedly dispatched through Portuguese territories to join the U.S. planes in the Azores to fly supplies to the Israelis. African leaders considered this collaboration as a threat to the security of Africa.26 Far from being mere “Arab propaganda,” the OAU agreed that there existed links between Israel and South Africa. The Eighth Extraordinary Council of Ministers of the OAU, which met in November 1973 to discuss the war and its impact on Africa, noted in a preamble to the resolution that was passed that this collaboration among Portugal, South Africa, and Israel constituted a threat to Africa’s security.27

The Arab nations’ attempt to identify Israel with South Africa’s interests must be explained beyond Israel’s support for South African policies. There is an ethnic dimension. The Jewish Community in South Africa was described by J. Leo Cefkin in the following terms:

About 118,000 Europeans in South Africa are Jewish. They are white, urban, and affluent and are also an important source of support for Israel. Their religious and ethnic association with the Jewish homeland obligates Israel to take an interest in their welfare. Israel’s ties with South African Jewry have remained close over the years despite Jerusalem’s attacks on apartheid. The Jewish Board of Deputies, the body which speaks for the South African Jewish community, agreed with Israel’s stand on apartheid as a matter of principle with being loyal South Africans.28

The State of Israel was founded by Jews in Europe; South Africa was established first by the Dutch and later by English immigrants. It is the only white-ruled country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, both Israel and South Africa are perceived as intruders.29 Critics of Israeli policies compare Israel’s treatment of Arabs in the West Bank with South Africa’s treatment of its black population.30

Phillippe Decreane noted some of the paradoxes of the criticisms of Israel when he noted that:

Critics of Israel blame her for having supported separatists movements, notably Biafra against Nigeria and the Southern Sudanese. Yet at the same time, those critics attack her for backing Mobutu Sese Seko’s government against the Simba rebels in Zaire, President Tombalbaye against the Chadian nationalist movement.

22 Ibid., A125.
27 Ibid., A9.
30 Ibid.
Even though other major powers sell arms to South Africa, principal attention has been placed on Israel’s arms sales to Pretoria. Mitchell Bard suggested an explanation for this double-standard in criticism, when he noted that:

Although it is the Arabs who fuel the apartheid regime in South Africa with their oil, it is Israel which continues to receive the opprobrium of the Africans because of Israel’s highly publicized relationship with Pretoria. 31

**Black Africa and the Arabs**

Black Africa and the Arab world share some common interests and sentiments that emanate from their common experience of colonialism and exploitation. In the era of decolonization, Egypt, one of the first African countries to achieve independence in the post-World War II era, supported national liberation not only in Algeria but in Black Africa. 32 Ghana, the first Black African country to achieve political independence (in 1957), also supported liberation movements in North Africa. At the first Conference of Independent African States held in Ghana in 1958, both Arab and non-Arab countries, (Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Liberia, Morocco and Sudan, were brought together under the banner of anti-colonialism. It was the extension of such cooperation, particularly in the Casablanca Group, that resulted in the formation of the Organization of African Unity in May 1963.

In courting Black Africa, the Arabs have also tried to amplify the cultural bonds that exist between the Arabs and Black Africa. Both Arab and Black African leaders manipulated the symbol of Afro-Arab unity. 33 For example, President Nkrumah of Ghana was married to an Egyptian woman who became the First Lady of independent Ghana. President Sadat’s assertion that Egypt is both Arab and African could be explained in its cultural context. Sadat was the son of an African-Sudanese mother and a semitic-Arab father. 34

The introduction of Islam into Africa helped forge a common identity among Africa and the Arab world. 35 Similarly, the introduction of Arabic language helped stimulate other African languages, namely Swahili and Hausa. Arab oil diplomacy and aid policy has always emphasized this cultural component. Saudi Arabia has, for example, supported the building of Islamic schools and communities in Black Africa. The annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca has helped forge identity among Black African moslems and the Middle East.

Ironically, the Islamic element, which has helped forge identity among Arabs and Africans has also been criticized. Opoku Agyeman cited cases where in October 1973, President Bongo of Gabon “was compelled to change his name from Albert-Bernard to Omar.” 36 Another example was Idi Amin, who, following Colonel Qaddafi’s visit to Uganda in 1974, was asked to “Islamize” Uganda at all cost. Amin later admitted that he had even declared Fridays into days of prayer and rest because he needed Arab

33 On Arab support for African liberation, see for example, Africa Report 27, #3, (May-June 1982), 33.
petro-dollars. Amin’s gesture was reciprocated when at the Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore, Pakistan in 1974, Uganda was admitted as a “Muslim” state, even though it had a relatively small Muslim population. 38

The establishment in Khartoum, Sudan of the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) is the institutional underpinning of Arab petro-dollar diplomacy in Africa. Even though the Arabs were behind the technical expertise that Israel provided, they had the petro-dollar power to buy arms. With dwindling oil prices, the salience of petro-dollar diplomacy has faded dramatically. Black African countries, most of them being dependent on oil imports, have been critical of Arab oil and aid policies. Criticizing Arab oil policy from African perspective, Baffour Ankomah who noted:

...they did not even give us oil price concessions when we needed their help most. They kept selling oil to us at the same price as they sold to their ‘enemies’ in Europe and America, and when we had committed more than 50% of our national budgets to buying oil from them...they came back to us with some loans which...should have been rejected.”

Another divisive factor has been Black Africa’s fear of Arab dominance in the OAU, the main diplomatic forum for Afro-Arab relations. In Mogadishu, Somalia in 1974, Afro-Arab tension was reinforced when the Arabs lobbied for the Somali Foreign Minister to contest for the post of the next OAU Secretary-General. The Black Anglophone countries rallied behind the Zambia foreign minister to contest for the same office. Since the Somali Head of State was at that time the Chairman of the OAU, this would have been the first time that the two most prestigious posts of the Afro-Arab body would have been held by the same country. Thanks to divisions within the ranks of the black Francophone countries (divided because Somalia is Muslim and Zambia is non-Muslim), the OAU was not torn asunder. 40 That the Arab initiative to assert influence in the OAU was successful is evidenced by the accession to the OAU chairmanship by President Moktar Ould Daddah of Mauritania in 1971, King Hassan of Morocco in 1972, and of an “Islamicized” Idi Amin in 1975.

The OAU has also been a theater of intra-Arab feuding that Israel could exploit. A major one was the irredentist claims involving the admission into the OAU of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), at the abortive OAU Summit in Tripoli, Libya in 1982. Algeria and Morocco, two Arab countries with divergent ideological leanings, began to contest the status of Western Sahara at the Malagasy Summit of the OAU in 1977. The conflict revolved on the Algeria-initiated admission of the SADR into the OAU and Morocco’s determination to preempt the SADR’s independence.

Superpower influences have equally played a part in Black Africa’s position on Arab-Israeli and Afro-Arab issues. Uche Chukwumerije, saw the OAU’s stalemate in Tripoli in 1982 as having been engineered by the Reagan White House. In an article titled “Roots of OAU’s Malaise”, Chukwumerije noted that:

Between 1981 and August 1982, the month of the Summit, a month rarely passed without a ‘distinguished’ African visitor on his way to the White House. Said Barre [of Somalia] [March], Mobutu [of Zaire] [June], Sekou Toure [of Guinea] [July] and Aihidjo [of Cameroon] [August].

Former U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig described the Polisario as a

38 Ibid.
“Soviet-Libyan surrogate.” Washington was convinced that the independence of Western Sahara could lead to the overthrow of King Hassan of Morocco who had staked much economic and psychological resources in the irredentist war with the Polisario and had used the war as a rallying point against internal opposition. Washington calculated that domestic turmoil that was fatal to royalty could mean defeat. The U.S. did not want to take chances after the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979. Saudi Arabia’s strategy of Islamic confraternity and financial aid also played a part. The influence of Rabat’s petro-dollar diplomacy was to end new recruits like Chad, Guinea and Gabon to join the anti-Tripoli camp that boycotted the OAU summit.

For Israel, the Tripoli summit would have had important diplomatic consequences. Most importantly, it would have conferred an automatic chairmanship of the OAU and its accompanying prestige to the host, Muammar Qaddafi. Given Libya’s anti-Israel credentials, it is likely that Qaddafi’s chairmanship could have hurt, rather than help Israel’s diplomacy in Africa.

Israel: South African Relations

Relations between Israel and South Africa go back to 1948 when the State of Israel was created. South Africa was one of the first countries to accord official recognition to the new Jewish state. The then South African Prime Minister, Daniel F. Malan, was the first Head of State to pay an official visit to Israel. Ironically, as a way of muting Africa’s criticism of Israel’s relations with South Africa, Jerusalem supported resolutions “condemning” apartheid at a time when African countries were less effective at bringing pressure on South Africa.

The demand for more militant anti-apartheid measures at the UN became stronger with the emergence of more independent African nations in the UN in the 1960s. Anxious to court the Africans in the face of Arab diplomatic pressure to isolate Israel, Jerusalem increasingly identified with Black Africa’s political aspirations. In November 1961, Israel voted for a UN resolution that called for sanctions against South Africa although it did not endorse a clause that demanded that South Africa be expelled from the UN because of her policy of apartheid. In the early 1960s, Israel also gave assistance to some African liberation movements. Apart from voting in support of UN resolutions calling for the decolonization of Portuguese territories in Africa, Israel supported a motion in 1963 that called for the expulsion of Portugal from the International Conference on Education. Olausola Ojo noted that Israel’s pro-African policies put her on a collision course with South Africa. In the face of increasing political, economic, and cultural contacts between Israel and Black Africa, Israel’s relations with South Africa deteriorated. For instance in 1963, South Africa withheld its permission for the free transfer of funds raised by South African Jews to Israel.

 Nonetheless, the Arab-Israeli War of June 1967 had a catalytic impact on Israeli-South

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 38.
46 Ibid., 39.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 38.
African relations. Israel could cultivate friendly relations with Pretoria at a minimum risk of losing favor in Black Africa. According to Olusola Ojo:

"...although relations between Israel and South Africa grew between 1967 and 1973, it did not substantially change African attitudes towards Israel. The OAU did not pass a single resolution before November 1973 which made mention of the links between Israel and South Africa."

Both South African Jews and the White population in South Africa began to show some common sentiments and drew parallels between the Arab-Israeli conflict and South Africa's situation. In 1968, the Friends of South Africa Society was formed in Israel under the leadership of Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In 1972, Israel allowed South Africa to open a Consulate-General in Tel-Aviv. On the military front, South Africa was eager to learn from the Israeli experience in combatting terrorism and advancement in military technology. Both states exchanged information on joint defense and collaborated on containing Communism.

After the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, Black Africa's perception of Israel changed. Rather than seeing Israel as the underdog (a small country and a victim of Arab aggression), Israel became associated with aggression and expansionism. One country that benefitted from the anti-Israel sentiments was South Africa, which exploited the situation to foster closer relations with Israel. Also at this time, Israel did not feel obligated to take into consideration Black Africa's reactions to Israeli policies.

The Angolan War in the mid-1970s also helped intensify Israeli military collaboration with South Africa. Confronted with Cuba, South Africa sought more sophisticated weapons from Israel. In April 1976 when South African Premier, John Vorster, paid a visit to Israel, military co-operation—including nuclear cooperation—featured high on the agenda. South Africa has been concerned about guerilla activities and communist infiltration in Southern African in the same way that Israel would worry about Soviet influences in the Middle East. Both Jerusalem and Pretoria share common interests in repulsing Soviet penetration, especially in the Indian Ocean.

Despite Israel's alleged links with the Pretoria regime, Israel has had relative success in muting Black Africa's criticisms. Part of the reason could be attributed to Israel's good relations with the West, particularly the U.S. In 1978, the World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination met in Geneva and issued a declaration that included two offending paragraphs, charging Israel with racism. In protest, the EC countries, Austria, New Zealand and Canada quit the Conference; the Nordic countries disassociated themselves from the declaration. At the 1983 Conference on the Israeli-South African relationship, only a few African countries bothered to send delegates. W. Ofuatey-Kodjo concluded that most Third World countries, especially those in Africa, are constrained by their dependency on the major powers that are also allies of Israel.

In the face of rising violence in South African townships in 1984 and the refusal of the Botha regime to dismantle apartheid, international pressure, particularly from the US mounted. The U.S. Congress adopted the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, a measure which included sanctions and which also required a report on violations of sanctions by the recipients of U.S. aid. Under pressure from Washington, Israel imposed sanctions on

49 Ibid., 43.
50 See African Contemporary Record (1876-1977), 853.
51 Cefkin, "Israel and South Africa," 39.
52 Ibid.
South Africa. Ironically, it was pressure from the U.S. more than Afro-Arab pressure or UN resolutions that largely influenced Israel to adopt sanctions against the Botha regime.

Arab-Israeli Wars and Implications

After 1967, the Arabs enjoyed a propaganda advantage based on Israel’s occupation of Arab territories, which was perceived by Africans as having a potential precedent for South Africa, or Rhodesia, in Black Africa. However, the OAU was indecisive on the stand of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and for the most part, the African body was guided by UN Security Council Resolution 242 which recognized the illegality of Israel’s occupation of Arab territories. Somalia, for example, failed in getting the member states of the OAU to hold an emergency session to take a stand on the June 1967 war. When the African body met later in September in Kinshasa, it merely adopted a declaration that mildly expressed "concern" over the partial occupation of Egyptian territory by a foreign power and offered sympathy and promise to work within the UN to secure Israeli evacuation from the territories in dispute.

Such ambivalence on the part of the Black African states was to change in the next decade. Black Africa was disappointed by the Western powers for not supporting the OAU’s strategy to isolate South Africa, Portugal and Rhodesia, especially at a time when the Arabs had increased their support for liberation movements in Southern Africa. Israel was seen not only as an ally of the West, but as a supporter of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist forces. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation announced that Israeli mercenaries were fighting against African liberation movements in Angola and in Rhodesia.

In Black Africa, Israel’s image was particularly tarnished by its failure to favorably consider the OAU’s peace initiatives. For example, in 1971 when the pan-African body dispatched a Peace Mission to the Middle East, Israel rejected the principle of non-acquisition of territory by war. Not surprisingly, at the next OAU meeting in Rabat, Morocco in 1972, the OAU adopted a strongly-worded resolution that not only condemned Israeli occupation of Egyptian territories but also offered support for the North African country in its struggle for territorial integrity.

On October 6, 1973, Egypt mounted a pre-emptive strike on Israel and brought the Arab world into conflict with Israel. This precipitated a mass African boycott of Jerusalem. Black Africa did this at a cost; they had to forego bilateral technical programs that existed between Israel and African countries.

The Arabs polarized the OAU into “friends” and “enemies” camps and denied economic assistance to countries that were not prepared to support the Arab position on the Middle East conflict. The increase in Arab concessional aid to non-Arab countries after the 1973 war could be seen as the economic lever of Arab diplomacy of winning Black Africa’s support (see Table 1).

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54 Maddathin Abdel-Rahim, *Afro-Arab Co-operation* (Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lecture Series No. 27) 17 January 1979, 3.
55 Ibid., 4.
56 Ibid.
Table 1—Arab Concessional Aid to Non-Arab African Countries

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<td>517,234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>3,490</td>
<td>17,328</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>270,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>34,791</td>
<td>556,735</td>
<td>527,917</td>
<td>3,023,577</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There were limits to Arab petro-dollar influence though. For example, at the Kampala Summit of the OAU in 1975, black African leaders rejected the Arabs’ proposal on Israel and did not endorse the Arab-orchestrated multinational diplomacy to expel Israel from the UN. Arab countries, particularly Algeria and Libya, were entangled in a cross-fire of criticism at the Kampala Summit as Kenya and Zambia became critical about the Arabs’ stand on the oil embargo. In 1974, the previous year, the Arabs had refused to offer a preferential two-tier oil price to their African neighbors to help alleviate the balance of payment problems that were associated with the oil price hikes. Nigeria’s gestures of reducing her oil price was fiercely resisted by the Arab-dominated OPEC. In the East African Legislative Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya in 1974, it was suggested that the course of the Nile River be diverted so African countries could sell water to the Arabs in exchange for oil.  

**Peace Initiatives and Aftermath**

If wars have created problems regarding Africa’s relations with the Middle East, so has peace. The Arabs never succeeded in influencing their black neighbors to condemn Egypt for her peace overtures in the Middle East conflict. In protest over Anwar Sadat’s admission, six Arab members of the OAU, including Morocco, Algeria, and Libya, boycotted the OAU summit in Liberia in 1979.  

Largely as a result of the Camp David accord, Cairo had made peace with Israel and regained the Sinai. Israel has also made efforts to regain her lost ties with Africa. It was Zaire that made a bold attempt to embrace Jerusalem on 14 May 1982.

In an article entitled “Let us Recognize Israel,” Baffour Ankomah raises two questions: if Egypt has, since the 1973 war, found a “modus vivendi” with Israel, “why don’t African countries do the same, and why should Africa continue to take sides in a Middle East conflict?”  

In analyzing the logic behind Black Africa’s decision to break with Israel, Ankomah raised a number of paradoxes regarding post-Camp David Afro-Arab relations. The author noted that:

It was Egypt, a member of the OAU which led Africa to break with Israel. Now Egypt and Israel have exchanged ambassadors, and we, who went to mourn with Egypt over the loss of Sinai, cannot come home from the funeral. 60

Among both the Arab and African countries, attitudes toward the recognition of Israel diverge. For example, Saudi Arabia’s opposition to the Camp David Accord was grounded on the conviction that the treaty provided no avenue for the realization of Palestinian rights and autonomy. The Saudis’ sponsorship of the Fahd Plan and the subsequent 1982 Fez summit resolutions were in line with this strand of thought.

Though critical of Israeli policies, a number of African states still defend Israel’s right to exist. At the OAU Summit in Kampala in 1975, African states refused to endorse a Libyan-PLO proposal for the expulsion of Israel from the UN, and some of them disassociated themselves from the compromise resolution passed at the Summit. 61 To many black African countries, the headache of the Middle East conflict could only be cured through the swallowing of the two bitter pills: the granting of Palestinian autonomy and the PLO’s recognition of Israel’s right to exist.

Some African countries including Kenya, Ethiopia, and the Central African Republic (CAR) have reportedly resumed diplomatic ties with Israel, following the new peace initiatives involving Israel and the PLO. Jerusalem is hopeful that more African countries will use the same pretext to resume ties with it. The Nigerian government is reportedly considering restoring diplomatic ties with Israel, a hint that was dropped by the Nigerian leader, General Ibrahim Babangida, during a visit to neighboring Ghana. 62

The basis of the new Nigerian overtures towards Jerusalem is a diplomatic logic based on the reasoning that if Nigeria has recognized a nominal Palestinian state and that the PLO has explicitly recognized Israel’s right to exist then the rationale for severing diplomatic ties with Israel in support of the Arab cause has lost its importance. There is a historical analogy. President Anwar Sadat’s peace initiative in the Camp David Accord led to the argument that since Egypt was prepared to normalize relations with Israel, Black African nations should not waste time in re-establishing relations with Israel. After all, it was in solidarity with Egypt, an OAU member, that the African nations broke relations with Israel. 63

Nigeria is an important investment for the Israelis, for political and economic reasons. It is the most populous black African country and has a sizable Muslim population. As a member of OPEC (an organization largely controlled by Arab states), Nigeria is also a major foe of South Africa.

In the absence of formal diplomatic ties, Israeli companies have been quietly expanding economic links with Africa, including Nigeria, where construction, public works, and mechanized farming projects are underway. According to figures released by the Nigerian-Israel Friendship Association, Israel supplied 68 percent of all external agricultural inputs in several African countries, including Kenya, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Uganda and Nigeria between 1978 and 1990. 64 Such unofficial or economic links with Africa serve a diplomatic purpose: Israel hopes that this will mute African and Third World criticisms of Israeli policies in the United Nations and other Third World fora.

60 Ibid.
63 Ojo, “Israel-South African Connections and Afro-Israeli Relations,” 49.
64 Newsweekly (Nigeria) 1 June 1991, 1.
The current peace talks involving Israel and its Arab partners constitute a milestone in Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. The African countries that have expressed interest in resuming ties with Israel have monitored changing global trends, particularly in the Middle East. There is a possibility that the Middle East talks could provide a diplomatic cover for African nations which have hesitated so far to resume ties with Israel.

Changing Trends and Implications

The past decade has witnessed major developments and shifts in Afro-Israeli and Arab-Israeli relations. After years of diplomatic hesitation, Black African nations have begun to re-examine their positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Supporters of renewed ties with Jerusalem argue that in view of the ongoing talks involving Israel and the Arabs, severing ties with Israel is tantamount with taking sides in the Arab-Israeli dispute. It is also argued that Africa’s policy is hypocritical, since Africa has not broken ties with Western nations, which like Israel have ties with Pretoria. 65 Thus at the 1991 OAU Summit in Abuja, Nigeria, the Nigeria-Israel Friendship Association mounted a fierce campaign to lobby African leaders who had gathered there to rethink their policies towards Israel. 66

Pan-Africanism, an ideology that provided a modus vivendi for Afro-Arab co-operation, if not unity, has fallen into limbo. Namibia’s independence in 1990 closed the last chapter of colonial rule in Africa. The challenge for the Arabs will be to re-examine policy towards Black Africa in view of these developments.

If the ongoing negotiations between Pretoria and the ANC succeed in bringing an end to apartheid rule in South Africa then the Arab world would have lost a propaganda mine that of linking Israel with the support of apartheid. Also to the extent Arab oil power has been essential in the decision taken by African countries to break ties with Israel, it is reasonable to conclude that the precarious oil economy is likely to weaken the Arab world’s ability to influence Africa’s policies regarding the Middle East. More importantly, the Persian Gulf war would shift the Arab world’s attention to internal reconstruction.

Changing regional and global alignments in addition to internal political developments in Africa are bound to affect the parameters of Israel’s maneuverability in Africa. Israel is not likely to be able to regain its former status as a mentor and benefactor in Black Africa until it has mended fences with the PLO and reduced ties with Pretoria. While Israel’s lead in development assistance in Africa gave her an anchor in Africa, its reputation on the continent in the near future is likely to be based more on “the covert aid it extends and the assistance it gives insecure leaders in developing their personal security forces.” 67 If warring factions in Africa are able to find a modus vivendi for peaceful settlement, and the thaw in superpower competition in the post-Cold War era leads to a relaxation of regional tensions, then Israel’s military role and influence in Africa is likely to dwindle. In the case of Ethiopia, for example, if the exit of the Mengistu regime provides peace in the region, then Israel’s influence in the Horn of Africa will weaken as Jerusalem will only have her influence in Washington to offer Mengistu.

The policies of Black African governments and leaders must also be taken into consideration in assessing the relative weights of both arab and Israeli diplomacy in

66 Ibid., 19.
67 Ibid.
Africa. Even though the relative strengths and/or weaknesses of both Arab and Israeli diplomatic baiting could tilt the scale, governments in Black Africa could be influenced by national interests, ideological leanings, or superpower pressure.