



ISRAEL-AFRICA RELATIONS

What Can We Learn from
the Netanyahu Decade?

Benjamin AUGÉ

November 2020

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ISBN: 979-10-373-0345-5

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How to cite this publication:

Benjamin Augé, “Israel-Africa Relations: What Can We Learn from the Netanyahu Decade?”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, November 2020.

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Abstract

Since he came to power eleven years ago, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has taken the opportunity to develop his diplomatic relationships with the African continent. Although the Israeli leader has undoubtedly achieved some milestones regarding the recognition of his country by almost all African States, he has not yet succeeded to fill these relationships with tangible content. Benjamin Netanyahu has chosen not to provide his diplomatic corps with sufficient financial resources to further strengthen its involvement in Africa and has thereby failed to deploy his political gains by enhancing his influence on the continent. Even though some businessmen have become influential stakeholders in the security and mineral sectors in Central Africa, most Israeli companies are still having a hard time finding their place in Africa.

Résumé

Au pouvoir depuis onze ans, le Premier ministre israélien Benyamin Netanyahou a eu tout le loisir de mettre en place sa diplomatie à destination du continent africain. S'il est incontestable que le dirigeant israélien a obtenu d'importants succès au regard de la reconnaissance de la quasi-totalité des pays africains vis-à-vis de son pays, il n'est pourtant pas encore parvenu à donner du contenu à la relation avec ce continent. Benyamin Netanyahou n'a pas souhaité donner les moyens financiers à son appareil diplomatique pour peser davantage en Afrique ne permettant pas à ses gains politiques, bien réels, à se muer en influence continentale. Si certains hommes d'affaires israéliens sont devenus très influents dans les domaines liés à la sécurité et aux minerais en Afrique centrale, la plupart des entreprises israéliennes ont encore du mal à trouver leur place en Afrique.

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Introduction

After they broke off diplomatic relations with Israel following the Yom Kippur War in 1973,¹ most African states – besides Malawi, South Africa (apart from between 1975 and 1979), Swaziland and Lesotho – finally resumed relations with the Jewish state during the 1980s and 1990s² and more recently for some others. The resumption of diplomatic ties was gradual, as peace efforts were initiated regarding Palestine. The Oslo Accords in 1993 were a powerful driver for resuming relations with some African countries. However, the second intifada (2000–2005), marking a new uprising by the Palestinians, weakened these ties again: some diplomatic missions opened in the 1990s in Morocco and Tunisia, for example, closed in 2000, and Algeria and Libya still have not recognized Israel's existence.

Israel now enjoys diplomatic relations with more than 40 sub-Saharan African states, but only has 12 embassies throughout the entire continent, including in Cairo. The last ones to be opened were in Kigali (Rwanda) in 2019³ and Accra (Ghana) in 2011. However, the opening of the embassy in Rwanda was contingent upon the closure of another one in Latin America, an obligation imposed by the Ministry of Finance, that sought at all costs to avoid spending more on embassies abroad. With regard to honorary consuls, Israel officially has fewer than ten in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Gambia, Madagascar, Mauritius and Mozambique.

1. This decision was made under pressure from the Organisation of African Unity, which was heavily influenced by the oil-producing countries of the Persian Gulf and the Arab League. Prior to this, Ahmed Sekou Toure's Guinea, which was very close to Egypt, decided to break off relations in 1967 following the Six-Day War. For more on this topic, see A. B. Nouhou, "Lente progression d'Israël en Afrique", *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2017. Congo, Chad, Niger, Mali and Burundi also broke off relations with Tel Aviv between 1972 and 1973, or before the Yom Kippur War.

2. Nevertheless, over the years when diplomatic relations were broken off, Israel's foreign intelligence service (Mossad) maintained ongoing dialog with many states, thus preserving a link between their country and Africa, which officially condemned Israel's policy towards the Palestinians.

3. Israel had about 30 embassies in Africa before the Yom Kippur War. As Minister of Foreign Affairs (1956-1966) and then Prime Minister of Israel, (1969-1974), Golda Meir generally supported cooperation with Africa through Mashav, the development cooperation agency. Golda Meir made several trips, particularly to Liberia in 1958 and the Gold Coast that became Ghana upon its independence. She was instrumental in getting the South African apartheid regime condemned by the United Nations in 1962 while the relationship with Pretoria was later one of the cornerstones of Israel's foreign policy.

Thirteen African countries have also opened new embassies in Tel Aviv⁴ as well as 15 honorary consulates. Only Niger, Mali,⁵ Djibouti, Somalia and Comoros do not currently have any diplomatic relations with Israel – Mauritania⁶ had an embassy in Tel Aviv from 1999 before closing it in 2009 and breaking off all official contact. On October 23, 2020, it was Sudan's turn to recognize Israel under pressure from the US president Donald Trump. Other Arab and African countries could go down this route after Bahrain's and the United Arab Emirates' decision to also normalize relations with Jerusalem in 2020. Some African states use their diplomatic missions in Cairo (Burundi and Burkina Faso) or Paris (Republic of Guinea) to manage their relations with Israel. In some circumstances, they only maintain a chargé d'affaires in the country since the resumption of relations (the case for the two Congos) or make contact without designated representatives (Madagascar).

Cameroon was one of the first countries to resume relations with Israel in 1986 following the break-off after the Yom Kippur War, just beaten by Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire in 1982 and by Samuel Doe's Liberia in 1983. The Cameroonian government still refuses to recognize the existence of a Palestinian state. Its president, Paul Biya, entrusts his personal security to former Israeli army personnel, and the country's elite unit (the Rapid Intervention Battalion (RIB)) is still led by a former Israeli soldier. Côte d'Ivoire, whose president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, was very close to Israel, also resumed relations in 1986, as did Gnassingbe Eyadema's Togo. Like Daniel Arap Moi's Kenya, or Ghana during the military period of Ignatius Kutu Acheampong or Jerry Rawlings, or Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire, these countries' relations with Israel never completely ceased: since the early

4. Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia. The most recent embassy is Equatorial Guinea's that opened in 2019; its ambassador, Luciano Ncogo Ndong, is a former official at the Ministry of Mines and Energy. However, Tanzania has had diplomatic representation since 2017, headed by Job Daudi Masima, a former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence. Meanwhile, Zambia opened its embassy in 2015.

5. The now former Malian president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK), who was removed from office by a *coup d'état* in August 2020, met Benjamin Netanyahu during an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) summit in Monrovia in 2017. The two leaders then promised to work on resuming relations that had been broken off since 1973. The organization of a visit by IBK to Israel was scheduled for the first six months of 2019, but did not take place in the end.

6. During his term in office (1984-2005), the Mauritanian president, Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, wanted to establish relations with Israel, mainly to move closer to the United States, even though this decision was extremely unpopular with the citizens of his country. Finally, when Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz came to power in 2008, he shut the embassy and broke off relations with Israel, fully aware that this choice would be widely supported by the population. In a private meeting in February 2020, the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman asked the new Mauritanian president – elected in 2019 – Mohamed Ould Ghazouani to consider resuming relations with Israel. See "Comment 'MBS' a tenté de rapprocher Ghazouani d'Israël", *Africa Intelligence*, May 13, 2020.

1980s, Israeli interest sections were based in Belgian or Swiss embassies, before relations officially resumed with the Jewish state.⁷

The Israeli government today views Africa either as a longstanding sphere of influence (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Cameroon, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda and for the last two decades Rwanda) that needs to be strengthened, or as a new sphere of influence to be developed (the Sahel countries, central Africa, etc.) These relations operate through various conventional channels, including some that have been significantly weakened by Benjamin Netanyahu when he was Israeli prime minister between 1996 and 1999 and since 2009. This is particularly true for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its counterpart, Mashav, responsible for development cooperation. However, the security and intelligence sectors (Mossad), controlled by the Prime Minister's Office, are strong drivers of Israeli foreign policy, hence Benjamin Netanyahu's dominance over foreign affairs in general, and Africa in particular.

The objective of this paper is to explain how political, economic and security relationships between Africa and Israel have developed in practice during the decade 2009-2020. The aim here is to go beyond a mere account of the history of these relationships. Since 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – still in power at the time of writing – has frequently talked about his country's return to the African stage,⁸ without necessarily providing his government with the financial resources to achieve this.

We will firstly explain which different seats of state power drive Israel's African policy by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of these different stakeholders. We will then describe what significant milestones have been achieved on the continent by Netanyahu's government, as well as the failures of this policy. Finally, we will conclude this study by examining the economic sectors that benefit from closer relations between Israel and Africa, as well as the economic actors who support it. It should be noted that this study will not address the issue of the Falasha from Ethiopia, who make up the largest African community in Israel, as their settlement there predates our timescale.

7. Discussion with an Israeli diplomat who headed their country's interest section in Africa, March 2020.

8. The slogan specifically launched in February 2016 during Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta's visit, "Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is returning to Israel," is repeated constantly by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Stakeholders in Israel's African policy

Since 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has gradually increased the concentration of power within his office by specifically weakening the ministries traditionally responsible for foreign affairs. Africa has not been exempted from this approach.

The all-powerful Prime Minister's office

Israeli foreign policy compared to that of other developed countries and members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which Israel has been a member of since 2010, is characterized by the precedence of the security/intelligence pair over more conventional diplomacy conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its network abroad. This bias became even more pronounced since the beginning of Benjamin Netanyahu's second term. Both through his personality and his previous diplomatic career – as a former Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations (UN) in New York after having been the ambassador in Washington's deputy – Benjamin Netanyahu has been able to form personal relationships with many heads of states on different continents, including Africa. He is sometimes admired by Israeli diplomats for his ability to communicate with and convince international leaders. For this reason, the prime minister prefers direct contacts, without necessarily referring to the relevant organizations, relying more on the members of his office.

The role of the National Security Council (NSC) in all security matters, but also international politics, was emphasized by most of the diplomats interviewed by the author of this paper. The NSC was established by Benjamin Netanyahu in 1999 during his first term in office and is attached to the Prime Minister's Office. The NSC has been led by Meir Ben-Shabbat since 2017, after Yossi Cohen's stint from 2013-2016 – the latter is currently the Director of Mossad (the Israeli foreign intelligence agency). Meir Ben-Shabbat is a former officer in the domestic intelligence service Shin Bet. The NSC is made up of three sections: security policy, foreign affairs and counter-terrorism. Reuven Ezer, the current head of the NSC's foreign affairs' section, coordinates everything relating to security abroad. Some civil servants in the Prime Minister's Office also deal with relations with

Africa – under the NSC’s leadership – but many of them also work with the Middle East and therefore cannot devote all their time to African issues. The Prime Minister’s Office specifically works on preparing visits by ministers or presidents from the continent to Israel or even Benjamin Netanyahu’s trips to Africa. Therefore, there is no department or unit solely focused on relations with African states within the Prime Minister’s Office.

Furthermore, Benjamin Netanyahu has regularly sought to have his office assume the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ functions (see below). As in 2016 when he appointed the former ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren, as Deputy Minister for Public Diplomacy attached to the Prime Minister’s Office. This announcement was very poorly received by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that felt it had been deprived of some of its functions again.

The foreign intelligence service, Mossad, is also directly attached to the Prime Minister’s Office. Its role in Africa is essential for both helping Israeli businessmen based on the continent – in exchange for information – and for the security of African leaders – listening, training, providing agents (see the “security/defense” section below) – or helping African security services with a view to building cooperation. Mossad is often consulted when politicians visit Africa. It also builds bridges between former agents who work in the private sector and the Israeli state, that greatly facilitates the transfer of information.

A very weak Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Foreign policy was even more under the control of the Prime Minister’s Office as Benjamin Netanyahu held the role concurrently for several years. Benjamin Netanyahu was the Minister of Foreign Affairs for six years from 2009, and was therefore able to conduct the foreign policy he wanted. For three years, he was also the Minister of Finance and for one year Minister of Defense. Furthermore, there has been a deep misunderstanding between Benjamin Netanyahu and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2009. The prime minister thinks this ministry is partly made of civil servants, who are classed as somewhat left-wing and therefore fundamentally opposed to him, as Likud, which he is Chairman of, is to the right of the political spectrum.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ increasing impotence is well documented in a late 2019 article in the journal *Foreign Policy*.⁹ This ministry’s budget, or \$ 367 million – which fell from 0.6% to 0.4% of the

9. S. Sokol, “Benjamin Netanyahu Is Bleeding Israel’s Foreign Ministry to Death”, *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2019.

state's budget between 2009 and 2019¹⁰ – has become meager in relation to its role, and this has resulted in several strikes by staff, publicly supported by several ambassadors.¹¹ There are still several ambassadors based in Jerusalem to avoid setting up new diplomatic missions in capitals. For instance, this is the case for South Sudan or states in the southern African region (Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia) where there is no permanent representation on the continent. Moreover, the two ambassadors in question scarcely travel to the areas they are responsible for, mainly due to a lack of resources.¹² Many functions that were previously the preserve of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been assumed by other ministries, such as the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs or the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy, which manages the fight against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement with a budget of \$ 33 million.¹³ This transfer was perceived by civil servants at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a weakening of their organization.

Two offices are responsible for managing African affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Africa 1” (North Africa, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Eritrea, Nigeria, DRC, Republic of Congo and Tanzania) and “Africa 2” (South Africa, Eswatini, Namibia, Botswana, Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Mauritius and Madagascar). The number of civil servants within the ministry responsible for relations with the various African countries is around eight to ten people. Twelve ambassadors, including the one in Egypt, can be added to this number and the ambassador to Eritrea subtracted, as the government has been unable to find a candidate to go to Asmara for several years. In fact, only about 20 diplomats – at the most 30 – work full time on African issues, that on the whole demonstrates rather limited interest and resources.

Benjamin Netanyahu has traveled to Africa several times as prime minister, particularly for regional summits, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in June 2017, or for bilateral visits, such as in 2016 to Rwanda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda.¹⁴ He attended the Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta’s inauguration in 2017, and visited Uganda again in February 2020 to meet President Yoweri Museveni,

10. Interview with an Israeli ambassador, March 2020.

11. The lack of consideration for ambassadors and the diplomatic profession by the prime minister is not only confined to Africa. Since the end of 2019, there has been no ambassador in France, or Russia, or Canada, but only *chargés d'affaires*. Some argue that the main reason for this has been the endless election period for the past year, but that cannot fully explain this situation.

12. Interview with an Israeli ambassador, March 2020.

13. “Is Netanyahu Out to Destroy Israel’s Foreign Ministry?”, *The Jerusalem Post*, September 16, 2016.

14. For more on the treatment of illegal migrants in Israel and their return to Uganda, see S. Brabant, “Que faire des migrants africains? L’étrange solution israélienne”, *Afrique décryptages*, Ifri, February 11, 2015.

as well as other East African leaders. His former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman (2009-2012), undertook two official visits: one in September 2009 (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana), which was the first visit in 20 years by an Israeli diplomatic head to the continent, and the other one in 2014 (Rwanda Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya and Ethiopia). During these two official visits, Avigdor Lieberman focused more on political issues, including the need to condemn the Iranian nuclear program.¹⁵ Consequently, most visits by Israeli officials focused on English-speaking countries, apart from Côte d'Ivoire. From February 2019 to May 2020, a new foreign minister "took over" from Benjamin Netanyahu: Israël Katz, a loyal supporter of the Prime Minister and a hardliner in Likud – as soon as the latter came to power in 2009, he was appointed Minister of Transport. Israël Katz has no foreign policy experience apart from having been a member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and has been a member of the Knesset since 1998. He has never undertaken an official visit to Africa nor specifically discussed the continent in interviews. On May 17, 2020, the former Chief of Staff (2007-2011), Gabi Ashkenazi, became the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is still too early to make any judgment about his African policy, but it is quite unlikely that the Prime Minister's Office will relinquish the most sensitive African issues, especially as the practice of managing them directly is so firmly entrenched. Perhaps the new coalition which will come after the last election of March 2021 will, however, change the process of governance on the sidelines.

Mashav, an underfinanced development cooperation agency

Mashav, the Foreign Ministry's development cooperation agency, was founded in the 1950s by the former head of diplomacy and prime minister, Golder Meir, and has been going through a difficult period for several decades. While cooperation aid was 0.2% of Israeli gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1970s, it is nowadays around 0.1%¹⁶ – or \$ 319 million. It should be noted that the OECD countries' objective in terms of development assistance is to reach 0.7% of GDP.¹⁷ Although only Luxembourg, Norway, Denmark, Great Britain and Sweden achieve this, Israel is on a par with Poland and the Czech Republic¹⁸ in terms of percentage. Mashav's budget is thought to be only a few million dollars of

15. "Lieberman to Make First Trip to Africa by Israel FM in 20 Years", *Haaretz*, September 1, 2009.

16. L. Landman, "Left Behind: Who Will Rescue the Israeli Foreign Aid Agency?", Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy (AEI), May 29, 2018.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "Official Development Assistance (ODA)", 2019, available at www.oecd.org.

which a third is used to finance salaries. Led by the former ambassador to Kenya, Gil Haskel, the development cooperation agency is particularly active in agriculture-related programs that Israel has a real technological lead in, especially in water-stressed countries. Whereas there were still thousands of these aid workers in the 1960s – 2,500 in total were posted to Africa – and nearly 9,000 Africans were trained in Israel,¹⁹ the major break-off following the Yom Kippur War in 1973 disrupted this process. Mashav now favors ad hoc training in the field, or more often in Israel. Therefore, it has become more of an organization for training and sharing practices than a project sponsor.

In July 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu established an inter-ministerial committee to examine the future of Israeli development cooperation. This group submitted its report in 2019, but the general elections – four votes were held in succession between 2019 and 2021 – delayed the process and the project was postponed. Although the committee's findings were not made public, conversations with some of the members help to identify some of the report's main outlines. One of the proposed courses of action would be to create a financing tool with the possibility of mobilizing loans for Israeli companies, supporting cooperation efforts – on the lines of the French Development Agency (AFD) or the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) – and of exploring more synergies with the World Bank to conduct joint projects in the field. Israel is also trying to establish itself as a board member of regional banks. However, until now, the African Development Bank (AfDB) has always refused to allow the Jewish state to become a shareholder, thereby depriving it of any influence in this key organization for financing projects on the continent.

State institutions ill-equipped to help Israeli companies in Africa

The Ministry of Economy and Industry relies on trade missions abroad to help Israeli companies develop their business outside the country. However, out of the 55 offices supporting Israeli companies around the world, only four are in Africa (Egypt, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa). The South African office in Pretoria – which reopened in 2008 after shutting for budgetary reasons – has been established for a relatively long time and covers the entire South African Development Community (SADC)²⁰ region. In contrast,

19. Y. Gidron, *Israel in Africa: Security, Migrations, Interstate Politics*, London, Zed Books, 2020.

20. The business sectors promoted by the South African office are high tech, telecommunications and new media, medicine and science, agricultural technology, water and clean technology. This trade mission has a staff of five and manages the entire SADC region. Each year, the mission director decides

those in Nairobi (Kenya) – for East Africa – and in Accra (Ghana) – for West Africa – have only been in operation since 2018. The location of these two new branches was chosen on purpose. Kenya is a major market for Israel, particularly in the digital sector. Ghana was preferred in West Africa rather than Nigeria, mainly for security reasons. Setup costs in Lagos – Nigeria’s economic capital – would have been much higher than in Accra. Setup in Côte d’Ivoire was also considered, before being rejected on the grounds of incompatibility with the Israeli market in terms of business sectors and languages. Most managers of these offices are from the Ministry of Economy and Industry. Despite Benjamin Netanyahu’s proactive political discourse, the continent is actually still secondary in terms of resources available to help Israeli companies. The eight embassies where there is no trade mission, such as Nigeria, sometimes only employ local contractors to monitor the economic sector in their respective countries and no new setups are currently planned.

Another organization helps Israeli firms to trade abroad: the Israel Export Institute (IEI). Founded in 1958, the IEI is used to facilitate contacts with various Israeli organizations and investors. The IEI mainly organizes themed events in Israel and abroad. It also publishes economic statistics on trade between the Jewish state and some African countries, however, these are quite limited. Exports to South Africa have even fallen from \$246 million in 2014 to \$186 million in 2018 (machinery, plastic, chemicals), an amount to put into perspective with Israel’s \$111 billion’s worth in exports (goods and services) in 2018.²¹ At the same time, Israel’s modest imports from South Africa increased from \$ 78 to \$ 98 million (vegetables, fruits, machinery, gasoline).²² However, the number of Israeli companies with operations in South Africa is increasing according to some civil servants at the Ministry of Economy and Industry. The figures on their own do not fully reflect trade, particularly in goods and services. Also, many flows are not recorded in the statistics: some products may leave Israel and be modified in other countries before arriving in South Africa. However, Africa represents such a small proportion of Israel’s trade – \$ 860 million in exports in 2017, or 1.6% of the total – that the continent is not even included in the main aggregates in some IEI presentations. Mostly, the IEI simply highlights trade with Europe, the United States and Asia.

on a country, besides South Africa, that will have resources specifically allocated to it and where a specific sector will be targeted. A conference between Israeli business people and those from the relevant country is then organized to increase trade.

21. Israel Export Institute, “The Israeli Economy: From Economic Crisis to Stable Growth”, May 2019, available at: www.export.gov.il.

22. Israel Export Institute, “Economic Review South Africa 2019”, available at: www.export.gov.il.

There is also the Israel Foreign Trade Risks Insurance Corporation (ASHRA), which was established in 1957, and is used to guarantee foreign investments made by Israeli companies abroad. The amounts for Africa are modest, in the region of \$150 million for Kenya, \$105 million for Nigeria, \$70 million for Uganda, \$60 million for Cameroon and \$33 million for Ethiopia.²³ In total, according to officials from the Ministry of Economy and Industry, it is estimated that half of the funds guaranteed by ASHRA are meant for Africa, or nearly \$2 billion.²⁴

Israeli firms can also rely on a United States' Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance mechanism, signed in December 2017, to finance power projects in Africa for \$60 million through the Power Africa Program launched by former US president Barack Obama.

With fairly limited support from their state, Israeli companies sometimes have to organize differently to increase their exports to Africa. For example, in November 2018, an Africa-Israel Forum was planned in Nigeria with support from Tel Aviv University (TAU) and financed by money from the South African research center, the Brenthurst Foundation (established by the Oppenheimer family), as well as the former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo's foundation.

The latter was also the guest of honor at the summit that was held in his foundation's headquarters in Abeokuta (Ogun State).

The economic relationship with Africa is also supported by the Israeli employers' association, The Manufacturers Association of Israel (MAI), and the Israel-Africa Chamber of Commerce, which was founded in 1996 and has some branches in Africa, including offices in Angola and South Africa, although the latter has no direct institutional link. MAI promotes the organization of summits and meetings to put Israeli and African businessmen in contact with each other, but it is limited in terms of resources and a lack of a clear economic vision for the continent on the part of the Israeli authorities.

23. "Israeli Businesses, Exporters Encouraged to Expand Africa Operations", *Jerusalem Post*, October 17, 2018.

24. Conversation with an official from the Ministry of Economy, April 2020.

Netanyahu's political gains and failures

Netanyahu's more than ten years as prime minister have resulted in significant progress in terms of recognition of Israel, however without necessarily being accompanied by a real ambitious African policy.

The successes

One of the Israeli Prime Minister's latest African successes relates to the Democratic Republic of Congo: its president, Felix Tshisekedi, announced in Washington on March 1st 2020, during the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), that he would open an embassy in Tel Aviv with a trade office in Jerusalem as soon as possible. Up until now, Kinshasa settled for a chargé d'affaires in Tel Aviv. Obviously, although Felix Tshisekedi made this gesture, it was more to please the Americans. In early January 2020, Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, had just presented a two-state peace plan for Palestine and Israel, favoring the latter by legalizing a large number of its colonies in the West Bank. The DRC is, however, the first African country to officially state that a part of its diplomatic representation, namely the trade mission, will be based in Jerusalem – the United States has also already transferred its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The newly-elected Malawian president, Lazarus Chakwera, also announced in September 2020 that he also intended to open his future embassy in Jerusalem.²⁵ And during his last visit to Entebbe (Uganda) in February 2020, Benjamin Netanyahu asked President Yoweri Museveni to consider the idea of an embassy in Jerusalem – Uganda currently does not have one in Israel. The Israeli prime minister has forged a special bond with this head of state and his country: he lost his brother, Yonatan Netanyahu, there in 1976 during operations undertaken by Israel to neutralize Palestinian militants who had taken an Air France airplane hostage and landed at Entebbe.

The Israeli Prime Minister has also achieved several other breakthroughs in diplomatic relations with African states. For instance, in July 2016, relations between the Jewish state and the Republic of Guinea

25. "Malawi to Open Its First Diplomatic Mission in Israel in Jerusalem", *Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2010.

were consolidated at a ceremony in Paris: until the eventual opening of a mission there, the Guinean Ambassador to France was responsible for managing relations with Israel. This decision is symbolic as the Republic of Guinea was the first African state to cut all its diplomatic ties with Israel in 1967 during the Six Day War.²⁶ Most of the African countries that maintained relations with Israel indeed did not break off their ties before the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Israel was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the newly-established state of South Sudan, founded after a referendum on seceding from Sudan in July 2011. In fact, Israel was heavily involved in the move towards this partition, and also has been since 1967, with the idea of weakening a Moslem Sudan that had officially supported Egypt during the Six Day War and remained very hostile towards the Jewish state.²⁷ Tangible assistance, managed by Mossad intelligence services, was provided in the form of arms, gasoline and natural resources in the 1970s, and then stepped up with the creation of an armed force, John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in 1983. Israel subsequently pushed hard for the signing of the 2005 peace agreement between the SPLA and Khartoum,²⁸ sponsored by the United States during George Walker Bush's presidency. This agreement ended the second civil war and paved the way for self-determination. As evidence of this special relationship between the two states, the South Sudanese president, Salva Kiir made his first state visit abroad to Israel, and Benjamin Netanyahu decided to appoint a representative for South Sudan in 2012 – the former Ambassador to Egypt, Haim Koren. However, the Israeli prime minister did not want to open an embassy in Juba, the South Sudanese capital, primarily for economic reasons. The current holder of the post, Hanan Goder, is therefore in Jerusalem.

As for relations with the Republic of Sudan, they have been completely transformed. In February 2020, Benjamin Netanyahu met the leader of the Sudanese transitional council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan,²⁹ in Entebbe.

This meeting was widely publicized, even though many Israeli diplomats felt that a more discreet and less visible approach would have been preferable initially. However, this normalization process with Sudan is

26. Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Israel and Republic of Guinea Sign Agreement Renewing Diplomatic Ties", July 20, 2016, available at: <https://mfa.gov.il>.

27. For more information, see the former Israeli Ambassador to South Sudan's paper: Haim Koren, "South Sudan and Israel: A Love Affair in a Changing Region?", Moshe Dayan Center, February 28, 2019.

28. This agreement specifically allowed for a referendum to be held in 2011 in South Sudan with a view to independence.

29. It should be noted that this official meeting was demanded by US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in exchange for his own availability for a meeting with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

very important for Israel to further weaken the Arab League countries that deny its right to exist. In this respect, Israel can count on its relationship with the United States, which can be described as “transactional”, and particularly with Donald Trump: any effort by Washington is indeed conditional for some countries upon specific actions towards Israel. Therefore, this link appears to be the driver helping Israel normalize its relations with many countries seeking US support. American pressure paid off, with Sudan recognizing Israel on October 23, 2020 and diplomatic relations were resumed between the two countries. Sudan had already begun to waver at the very end of Omar Al-Bashir’s regime (1989-2019): his foreign minister, Ibrahim Gandhour, said in 2016 that Khartoum’s attitude towards Israel could be reviewed.³⁰

With regard to Rwanda, relations between President Paul Kagame and Benjamin Netanyahu are also very unique. As of 2019, the Israeli embassy in Kigali was the country’s second diplomatic mission to have been established in Africa during the current term in office. Before this, only the one in Accra (Ghana) re-opened in 2011 – the last Israeli ambassador had left the country in 1987. While Rwanda has had a diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv since 1996, relations with Kigali were officially managed from Addis Ababa by the Israelis. In 2019, the opening of the Israeli embassy was accompanied by the launch of a direct air route between Tel Aviv and Kigali. The ambassador, Ron Adam, was number two at the embassy in Geneva after several stints in multilateral missions, such as New York. The Rwandan ambassador in Tel Aviv is currently Joseph Rutabana. He was previously ambassador to Sudan, military attaché to Pretoria, and primarily Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defense. Therefore, it is very obvious – and not surprising – that the ties between the two countries are based on the security, defense and intelligence sectors.

Netanyahu’s failures

Israel’s real political influence in Africa can be measured by specifically studying Palestine-related issues in international organizations. In 2018, when the United States called for UN condemnation of Hamas, following rocket attacks on Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, only seven out of 54 African countries voted for the resolution: Rwanda, South Sudan, Eritrea, Malawi, Liberia, Lesotho and Cape Verde.

30. “Goodbye Iran, Hello Israel? Sudan Changes Its Approach”, *Ynetnews.com*, January 21, 2016.

Twenty-eight states voted against it, ten abstained and ten were absent³¹. Another UN vote demonstrated Israel's real political weakness in Africa. In November 2009, member states were asked to vote on whether to open an independent inquiry into violence committed by Israeli forces during the Gaza War in early 2009, that claimed the lives of more than 1,400 Palestinians. On this occasion, Israel could only count on support from a handful of African countries: no state voted against the investigation, only eight countries abstained and eight others were absent on purpose. The other African countries voted to establish a commission of inquiry led by the South African judge Richard J. Goldstone (see the table below).

**Summary Table of African Countries' Votes in favor
of Establishing a Commission of Inquiry into the Gaza War
(November 2009)**

| Yes (37) | No (0) | Abstentions (8) | Absent (8) |
|---|--------|---|---|
| Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Republic of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Libya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, DRC, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tunisia, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe | | Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Uganda | Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Togo |

Source: according to Y. Gidron, Israel in Africa: Security, Migrations, Interstate Politics, London, Zed Books, 2020, Chapter "Old Battles, New War".

31. Y. I. Abramowitz, "The Soul of Israel's Schizophrenic Africa Strategy", *Jerusalem Post*, October 25, 2019.

As can be seen above, Africa is still heavily dominated by countries under the influence of the Arab Gulf states³² as well as some regional powers like Algeria, South Africa and Nigeria, that (quite) regularly take positions against Israel. Another significant episode highlighting the reservations of most African countries towards Israel dates back to November 2012 when

Resolution 67/19 granting Palestine the status of a non-member observer state at the UN was voted on. At the time, 47 African countries voted to adopt the resolution. None voted against it, and only Cameroon, DRC, Malawi, Rwanda and Togo abstained, while Equatorial Guinea, Liberia and Madagascar were absent. A Palestinian bias persists in a number of countries led by a ruling party with a Marxist past, often close to a discourse condemning the Israeli state's settlement policy.

The US state department lists all member countries' votes during UN plenary sessions and their coincidence with its own very favorable stance towards Israel. The last available figures are for 2018 in which 21 votes relating to Israel took place. The scenario is telling: no African country has more than 50% voting coincidence with Washington. The country that voted most favorably regarding Israel was South Sudan (50% coincidence with the United States), followed by Cameroon (48%), Rwanda (47%), Liberia (45%), Togo (45%) and Côte d'Ivoire (38%). The overwhelming majority of African countries were within 10% of voting coincidence with the United States on votes regarding Israel in 2018.³³

Historically, Israel's real lack of influence in international organizations has always been shown in the same way. In one of the few contemporary books written about Israel-Africa relations, *Israel in Africa: Security, Migration, Interstate Politics*, published in April 2020, the Israeli researcher, Yotam Gidron, clearly explains how, from the initial decades following Israel's foundation, the African states, influenced by their relations with the Arab countries, gave very little support to the Jewish state in international organizations.³⁴ However, the 1950s and 1960s are routinely portrayed by Israel as a golden age in ties with Africa due to Prime Minister Golda Meir's work, particularly through Mashav's cooperation. Similarly, it should be

32. However, this antagonism between the Gulf countries and Israel is tending to become increasingly less relevant. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, Israel has mainly been making common cause with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – with the latter having just announced the official normalization of relations with Israel in August 2020 – to fight the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. This unofficial cooperation was further intensified with the rise of the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in 2015, and then with Donald Trump's election to the White House in 2017. For more information on this subject, see É. Marteu, "Israël et les pays du Golfe: les enjeux d'un rapprochement stratégique", *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, January 18, 2018. MBS has also become an active proponent of rapprochement between Africa and Israel. He asked some of the African Arab countries to make a move towards Israel, as was the case for Mauritania.

33. US Department of State, "Voting Practices in the United Nations, 2018", September 2019.

34. Y. Gidron, *Israel in Africa*, *op. cit.*, Chapter "An African Adventure".

emphasized that in international organizations, on issues not related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel sometimes sides with the Western bloc and may hold positions contrary to African countries' interests. Therefore, Israel may often choose to align itself with its Western allies, even though this entails weakening its relations with Africa, for example on migration issues.

Another example of the weakness of Israel's position on the continent is the difficulty in holding a major summit with African heads of state – like France does every two years, China, the United States, but also Japan and South Korea, or Russia since 2019 and Turkey in various formats. Until now, it has not been possible to hold such a summit.

However, in October 2017, Lomé, the capital of Togo, was supposed to host the first event that was finally canceled at the last minute. It was Benjamin Netanyahu's idea to hold the summit in Africa, and the Togolese president Faure Gnassingbe was initially enthusiastic about it. However, as the event drew nearer, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office was unable to obtain information about the number of African presidents who had already said yes to Togo's invitation, that was responsible for protocol and invitations. Faced with the fear of a failure, Israel finally decided in the summer of 2017 to postpone the event that still has not taken place.

Several reasons can be put forward to explain this failure. When interviewing the organizers, it seems that some countries in the region did not look favorably upon the summit in Lomé. This was particularly true of Nigeria. Furthermore, many Israeli businessmen worked behind the scenes to prevent the event from taking place. While a delegation of more than 120 Israeli companies had already registered to come to Lomé, some Israeli businessmen who had been well-established in Africa for several decades and were jealous of their private fiefdom, did everything to avoid facing new competition from their own country.³⁵ Finally, a few weeks before the decision to postpone the event, major demonstrations broke out in Togo, directly challenging President Faure Gnassingbe. However, contrary to what many analysts claimed at the time, the demonstrations did not really have an impact on the summit's organization. Nonetheless, the news worked out well for both parties to avoid explaining the real reasons for the event's postponement/cancellation. Some Israeli newspapers also referred to pressure from Palestine to explain this failure;³⁶ however, the Palestinian authorities did not, according to the Israeli organizers, play an active role in seriously undermining the event's credibility. Neither did the Gulf countries, the two most powerful of which, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have opened up official channels – going as far

35. Discussion with one of the organizers of the Lomé summit, March 2020.

36. "Le sommet historique Israël-Afrique annulé après des menaces de boycott", *The Times of Israël*, September 11, 2017, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

as official normalization for Abu Dhabi – to discussions with Israel, as we have already mentioned.

Although many African states are willing to establish diplomatic or even economic relations with Israel after the freeze of the 1970s and 1980s, not all of them seem ready to support the Jewish state on the highly sensitive issue of Palestine.

In this respect, Nigeria, the continent's leading economic power and most populous country with around 200 million inhabitants, is a typical example. It opened an embassy in Tel Aviv in 1993, but does not under any circumstances want to change its position regarding Palestine, that its government – via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a kind of custodian of what is taught at the diplomatic academy in Lagos – considers as an occupied zone. Israel opened its embassy in Lagos in the 1960s, before having to close it between 1973 and 1992 following the Yom Kippur War. Relations between the two states have always been difficult, except for a brief period of rapprochement under Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan (2009-2015), whose Pentecostal faith led him to have strong sympathy for Israel, considered as a promised land in some interpretations of the Bible. Several thousands of Nigerians, Ugandans and Ghanaians go on pilgrimage to Israel every year. However, since President Muhammadu Buhari came to power in 2015, the level of security and political communication has dropped significantly. The same can be said of South Africa³⁷ and the African National Congress (ANC) party – whose ministries are sometimes unapproachable for Israeli diplomats – as well as Algeria – that still does not recognize the Jewish state. The Israeli civil servants interviewed³⁸ believe there is a real desire for stronger ties with Israel on the part of African decision-makers without this necessarily resulting in political support.

37. Although political relations between Israel and South Africa are very complex because of the apartheid period, they are longstanding, and Israel has had an embassy in the country since the 1950s – with only one notable exception, the lack of diplomatic representation for four years from 1975 to 1979 after the Yom Kippur War in 1973. However, up until the 1970s, the partnership was not very strong, but after this date when new leaders came to power in Israel, economic cooperation increased, particularly in arms sales – 35% of total Israeli arms exports were sold to South Africa in 1979. During the apartheid period, Israel continued to have ongoing relations, even helping South Africa – under UN sanctions – to obtain oil mainly from Iran – also under sanctions – via the famous US Jewish trader, Marc Rich, who was very close to Tel Aviv. For more on this subject, see D. Ammann, *The King of Oil: The Secret Lives of Marc Rich*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2009. Several Israeli ambassadors to South Africa had ties with the intelligence community. This was true of Yossef Harmelin, ambassador from 1979 to 1981, who had been Director of the Domestic Intelligence Service, Shin Bet (or Shabak), from 1964 to 1974 and again from 1986 to 1988. He was also ambassador to Iran before the Islamic Revolution. When the African National Congress (ANC) came to power in 1994, nearly a quarter of South African Jews – out of approximately 120,000 people – left for the United States, Australia, Canada and to a lesser extent Israel. Although Nelson Mandela visited Israel in July 1996 for a two-day state visit, this did not prevent South Africa and primarily the ANC's politburo from maintaining the same pro-Palestinian stance in international organizations.

38. The interviews took place between March and May 2020.

The main economic sectors and the businessmen who support them

Some Israeli products or services are highly sought after by many African countries, such as security-related ones. Mining and diamonds are also raw materials that have enabled very powerful Israeli businessmen to exert a very high-degree of influence with some sub-Saharan African leaders.

Security/defense: sectors of excellence valued in African presidential palaces

For several decades, Israel has been playing the security expertise card to gain contracts in Africa. The most iconic security relationship is probably that with Cameroon. Since the early 1990s, the Israeli intelligence services have handled the “electronic surveillance” of the Etoudi and Mvomeka’s palaces³⁹ where President Paul Biya lives and works when he is not in Geneva. The Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR in French), an elite Cameroonian unit established in 1999, is still led by a former Israeli soldier. A former colonel in the Israeli Defense Forces and military attaché to the Israeli embassy in Yaoundé, Ivan Abraham Sirvan was paid by the Cameroonian presidency for security services for a long time after his retirement. He had become the focal point of the Israeli defense industry until his death in 2010 in a helicopter crash.⁴⁰ For the last four years, the Israeli Brigadier General, Baruch Mena, has been running this operation for the Cameroonian presidency.⁴¹

Ongoing cooperation is also in place with Kenya. It started in the 1970s when the two intelligence services worked together after the failed 1976 attack in which an Israeli El Al airplane was almost hit by a rocket at Nairobi airport. The four people responsible for this action were tried in Tel Aviv. The Kenyan services also provided Mossad with information when an Air

39. “Cameroun: ‘maintenance’ israélienne pour les palais d’Etoudi et de Mvomeka’a”, *La Lettre du Continent*, No. 177, December 10, 1992.

40. International Crisis Group, “Cameroon: The Dangers of a Fracturing Regime”, *Africa Report*, No. 161, June 24, 2010, p. 9.

41. “Cameroun: Encadrés par Israël, les commandos du crépuscule de Paul Biya suscitent la jalousie de l’armée”, *Africa Intelligence*, July 26, 2020.

France airplane, which landed at Entebbe airport in Uganda, was hijacked in 1976 by Palestinian militants. Much later, in September 2013, an Israeli counter-terrorism unit assisted the Kenyan authorities during the hostage-taking in a Nairobi shopping mall by Somali Al-Shabab militants.⁴² For a long time in Rwanda and Uganda, the contact point for the business and security sectors was the businessman Hezi Bezalel,⁴³ Rwanda's Honorary Consul to Israel. Still in the security field, the former Israeli air force lieutenant-colonel, Gaby Peretz, has been heavily involved in the sale of military equipment to West and Central African governments since the 1980s via his company AD Consultants. He has mainly supplied Gabon, Senegal, the Republic of Guinea, Rwanda, Central African Republic and Chad⁴⁴.

Finally, some security and intelligence companies have focused extensively on Africa. This is true for the MER Group, whose founder, Chaim Mer, has invested heavily in telecommunications- and intelligence-related services with the opening of subsidiaries in DRC (since 2006), Tanzania (since 2007), Zambia (since 2014) and Kenya (since 2016).

For some African governments, using Israeli equipment and its services' expertise is a guarantee of independence and security from former colonial powers – suspected of wanting to influence political processes when they can – and provides strong protection against attempted *coups d'état*. By using Israeli security firms, regularly led by former Israeli Defense Forces and/or Mossad personnel, African leaders are buying a certain degree of stability. A *coup d'état* removing an African leader protected by Israeli firms, would be a serious blow to Israel's reputation as a state providing excellent security solutions (army and intelligence). Therefore, these relations cannot necessarily be explained by a deep sense of friendship with Israel. Very early on, Paul Biya chose Israel to manage his personal security arrangements to demonstrate his independence from France and to ensure some peace of mind in view of the many threatened power grabs. Furthermore, the good relations between France and Israel prevented this strategy from being misconstrued by Paris.

42. "Nairobi Attack: Israel Takes Lead Role in Advising Kenyan Forces!", *The Guardian*, September 23, 2013.

43. "Sortez de la tombe, le Rwanda se remet des cicatrices et regarde vers l'avenir", *Maariv*, February 8, 2016.

44. "Israël: AD Con, toujours plus présent en Afrique", *Intelligence Online*, No. 757, April 14, 2016.

Mining sector: historic links with leading Israeli businessmen

Trade between Israel and Africa remains rather low in value. However, some Israeli businessmen, although few in number, conduct almost all of their business on the continent where they are either based for part of the year, are resident, or were born there. These businessmen do not necessarily come under Israeli official figures, as they may ultimately only have a tenuous link with Israel. Sometimes, they are even unwilling to support other Israeli companies as they consider their position in some African countries as a private fiefdom. In some cases, these businessmen have acquired significant political influence in their country of business. The most powerful and prosperous among them have made a fortune in mining⁴⁵ and arms sales⁴⁶ – the first business sometimes also being beneficial for the latter. One of the most typical examples of this type of profile is the diamond merchant Dan Gertler. A former DRC Honorary Consul to Israel, he has been one of the main providers of funds and arms to the Congolese president, Laurent-Désiré Kabila (1997-2001) and then his son Joseph Kabila (2001-2019), since the late 1990s. He gained major holdings in the country's mines, particularly in diamonds and cobalt. In 2010, Dan Gertler also purchased the country's most promising oil blocks, located on and around Lake Albert, off which offshore on the Ugandan side, more than one billion barrels have been discovered since 2006. However, since the elections in late 2018 in DRC and the election of Felix Tshisekedi as president, Dan Gertler's star has largely faded. In May 2018, the United States also imposed sanctions on him personally, along with 14 of his companies.⁴⁷ Washington accused him of having made his fortune through opaque mining and oil transactions. Dan Gertler is very influential in Israeli, ultra-orthodox, Jewish circles with substantial resources. He is also very close to his country's intelligence community.

Still in the mining sector, other powerful Israeli businessmen's profiles should be highlighted, such as billionaire, Lev Avnerovich Leviev, who is very involved in diamonds, construction (with his Africa-Israel group) and chemicals. He is a competitor of the mining giant, De Beers, whose holdings in Angola he has taken over part of through Ascorp.⁴⁸ Since the 1990s, Lev

45. Israel is a hub for diamond cutting. This accounted for more than 10% of the country's exports in 2016, and the Israel Diamond Exchange is one of the world's most dynamic diamond trading centers.

46. In Angola, the Israelis provided the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) with significant amounts of weapons. The intelligence for locating and killing Jonas Savimbi, allegedly came from the Israeli services, although the latter never confirmed this. See Y. Gidron, *Israel in Africa, op. cit.*, sub-section "The Business of State Building".

47. "US Targets Israeli Businessman Dan Gertler with Fresh Sanctions", *Financial Times*, June 15, 2018.

48. "Angola: L'Angola règle sa dette envers De Beers", *Africa Mining Intelligence*, No. 3, December 1st, 2000.

Leviev has purchased a significant share of this country's diamond production. He has also invested in Angola's largest mine, Catoca – which produces nearly 80% of the country's diamonds – that he holds an 18% stake in via the Catoca Mining Company. Another deposit, Luaxe, is partly owned by him through his shares in the same company. And this businessman still currently controls diamond cutting factories in Angola, Namibia and South Africa.

One of Lev Leviev's partners in the Africa-Israel group, Arkady Gaydamak, was also previously very influential in Angola through his relationship with the French businessman, Pierre Falcone. He reportedly introduced Lev Leviev to Angola in the 1990s. From the middle of the decade, Arkady Gaydamak and Pierre Falcone supplied Angola on a number of occasions with arms from Russia – where the businessman is originally from – in exchange for oil bought by the well-known trader Marc Rich.⁴⁹ These activities led to both men being put on trial in France, known as “Angolagate”, between 2008 and 2009. Arkady Gaydamak does little business in Africa nowadays. His latest attempt, a refinery project in Cabinda (Angola) in 2019, failed.⁵⁰

The other leading Israeli businessman involved in mining on the continent is Beny Steinmetz. He has one of Israel's largest fortunes, and has been buying diamonds in Angola since the 1990s. He also purchased mines in DRC and Sierra Leone through his group, Beny Steinmetz Group Resources. He was one of the holders of part of the massive Simandou iron deposit in the Republic of Guinea, before reaching an agreement with the government to relinquish all his rights in 2020. Beny Steinmetz was accused of not having purchased his licenses transparently in the period of the former president, Lansana Conté, who died in 2008.

Other significant economic sectors

In addition to the security and intelligence sectors and mining, some stakeholders are seeking to increase their influence in other sectors where Israel is a leader. This applies to the Israeli billionaire, Yosef Abramowitz, who is investing extensively in renewable energy through his company, Energiya Global Capital, and in projects particularly⁵¹ in Rwanda.

49. “Angola: Chirac en visite à Luanda ?”, *La Lettre du Continent*, No. 298, January 29, 1998.

50. “Angola: Gemcorp vs Gaydamak: le nouveau monde éclipse l'ancien”, *La Lettre du Continent*, No. 812, November 20, 2019.

51. See the projects on the company's website: <https://energiyaglobal.com>.

The businessman is not entirely satisfied with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's African policy, that he considers lacks a real long-term vision.⁵² State-of-the-art agriculture – agrotech – is also a sector where some Israeli firms are striving to establish themselves in Africa. However, success in penetrating African markets is still limited. Businessmen, such as the former diplomat, Daniel Pinhasi, are encouraging Israeli companies to enter this sector. He is leading several projects with his company, Green 2000, including one in Senegal.⁵³ The company, Netafim, founded in Israel in 1965 but purchased by the Mexican conglomerate Orbia in 2017, has worked on several agricultural initiatives, including irrigation solutions in Ghana, Ethiopia or Senegal.

Obviously, other Israeli businessmen are active without specifically openly discussing their activities. Some are honorary consuls, like the one in DRC, Aslan Piha, who previously held high positions in the Federation of Congolese Businesses, the Congolese employer's association. Having spent all of his career in the country, Aslan Piha can easily help Israeli companies to set up, unlike other more politically exposed businessmen.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between Israeli businessmen who have been established in some African countries for a long time, and have forged important political relationships that have enabled them to gain significant market shares (mining, defense, arms), from those trying their luck for the first time and who can only be minimally helped by the Israeli state.

52. "Israel's 'Return to Africa' Policy Faces Setback", *The Arab Weekly*, September 17, 2017.

53. "Entretien avec le Dg Daniel Pinhasi: green cartes sur table", *Le Quotidien*, June 14, 2018.

Conclusion

Clearly, there has been much progress in Africa in the Netanyahu period. More than 40 sub-Saharan African countries now have diplomatic relations with Israel. The last ones that oppose this idea, Mali – “under review” – Niger, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Comoros, as well as Tunisia, Libya and Algeria are in the minority today (Morocco opened its embassy in Tel Aviv in late 2020). However, it is obvious that Israel’s real political influence in Africa is weak and will stay so, while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains at a stalemate for at least two reasons. The first is that three of the continent’s largest economic powers, Algeria, Nigeria and South Africa, are firmly opposed to any pro-Israeli stance in international institutions, including the UN and even the African Union. Israel has not managed to obtain the most minimal observer status in this organization, mainly because of Muammar Gaddafi’s activism until his death in 2011. Conversely, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, is frequently invited to the Addis Ababa summits to give speeches. The second reason is that even heads of states reputed to be close to Israel, including the most longstanding ones, such as the leaders of Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, or more recently, South Sudan and Rwanda, do not show a real willingness to help the Jewish state in international organizations. When confronted by Israeli diplomats, these leaders justify their lack of enthusiasm by arguing that the major African countries are hostile to any full normalization as long as the conflict in the Middle East continues.

Israel’s relative impotence in African affairs is also the result of the lack of resources granted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the responsible organization: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This imbalance recalls the situation in other countries in the Gulf region, such as Qatar, however, where there is a high level of communication about Africa. However, the lack of tangible action leads to almost no ability to influence in the field. In the Israeli and Qatari cases, it is also the limited number of civil servants dealing with issues that prevents careful monitoring. Therefore, it is more the approach, which has become very personalized under Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel since 2009, that is taking control of African issues. However, in any event, Benjamin Netanyahu cannot sustain this relationship with a continent of 54 countries either alone or with the help of a few advisors. Benjamin Netanyahu is happy with occasional political coups and not with real long-term policies.

Indeed, Africa is not considered as a major growth driver for Israeli firms. Furthermore, the Jewish state's political interest in the continent is low. Apart from issues surrounding the Falasha or Beta Israel community – Ethiopians who came to Israel from the 1930s with an increase in their numbers in 1970s-1980s,⁵⁴ and now numbering around 150,000 citizens – African issues are scarcely discussed in Israel. For some years, there have been demonstrations and protests criticizing the living conditions and treatment of political asylum seekers, mainly Eritreans and Sudanese in Israel – estimated at 38,000 people⁵⁵ – but their fate is not part of the main debates during the electoral campaigns and this topic is not likely to increase Israel's interest in Africa.

Nevertheless, Israel's main objective regarding the continent: namely to obtain support in international organizations for its stance on Palestinian issues, remains a failure for the time being. Some Israeli businessmen interviewed between March and May 2020 asserted that the main thing is that business, led by the security sector, flows between Israel and many African countries. And despite the low numbers of dedicated civil servants in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Economy, the Prime Minister's Office and Mossad have got what they wanted from a growing number of African presidents. Will this type of “under the radar” operation evolve into a more comprehensive policy of influence for Israel? It is likely that under Benjamin Netanyahu this will never be the case.

54. They are now represented politically by Members of Parliament of Ethiopian origin, such as Pnina Tamano-Shata, the new minister since May 17, 2020 of “immigration and absorption” or the former member of parliament Shimon Solomon, of the Yesh Atid party, who was part of the coalition with Benjamin Netanyahu between 2013 and 2015. The latter mainly accompanied Avigdor Lieberman on his African visit in 2014. Formerly, a member of the Blue-White opposition movement, Gadi Yevarkan chose at the start of 2020 to join Likud.

55. “Over 20,000 Protest in Tel Aviv Against Plan to Deport Asylum Seekers”, *The Times of Israel*, February 24, 2018.



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