



Israel-South Africa: Relationship Shifts following the Formal End of the Apartheid Regime

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Introduction

"Israel-South African relations- journals" is the title of a 224-page file in the Israeli official archives¹ that covers the years 1961-62. The file includes various letters and many news articles. It also includes empty files and pages with the word "confidential" stamped in large block letters. These files were still classified as confidential the last time I checked (mid-November 2020), some sixty years after they were originally drafted, which indicates their "sensitivity."²

The intentional concealing of historic chapters of the relations between the two countries when South Africa was still under the Apartheid regime has preoccupied many researchers. Anyone reviewing the political literature on this topic will come across books and articles, whether academic in nature or journalistic, concerned with this shroud of secrecy covering the relationship.

The official Israeli storyline consists of two interrelated themes: Israel's relations with South Africa were tense until the early 1970s (due initially to Israel's desire to establish close relations with African states for political support, forcing it to steer away from South Africa); and Israel's policy toward South Africa was affected by its objection to the apartheid policies.

This official account was based around a range of assumptions and claims that not only were not substantiated, but are flat out false, as the political facts make clear. A number of researchers, and even former Israeli diplomats, argue that Israel's criteria for relations with apartheid South Africa had nothing to do with ethical values opposing racial discrimination but rather on cold calculations of benefit and interests in terms of international politics and power struggles as well as relevant economic and (diplomatic) advantages. As evidence they cite Israel's accelerated rush to strengthen relations with Apartheid South Africa when its relations with several African countries were no longer sustainable or beneficial. This shift in relations came specifically at a time when the apartheid regime became even more aggressive and brutal, leading the vast majority of countries around the world to impose sanctions (which amounted to total boycott) to express their contempt for the regime.

Israel-South Africa Relations: The Early Years

Alon Li'el, a former Israeli researcher and diplomat, worked in areas associated with Israel-South Africa's relations in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1986 he served as head of the South Africa desk and later in 1992 became Israel's ambassador to South Africa. After leaving his position, he wrote a book, *Black Justice: The South Africa Coup*,³ large sections of which were devoted to the evolution of relations between Israel and South Africa. Li'el provided grim details on the various forms of military "cooperation" between two countries; the details reveal the extent of the racist and aggressive stance adopted by the white minority South African government toward its neighbors.

National Party in South Africa: "Shared Fate" with Israel

The book begins in 1948, the year that Israel was established and the National Party re-assumed power in South Africa. The author says that the leaders and supporters of this party saw a "shared fate" between South Africa and the state of Israel since its establishment. This was based on two considerations: first, the white minority surrounded by a vast black majority was similar to Israel, a country for a Jewish minority within an Arab majority region; and second, the South Africans saw their country and Israel as "western capitalist minorities surrounded by a communist majority," as Li'el puts it. Each Israeli "victory in battles strengthened a belief among the whites in South Africa that their ability to hold on in the face of a black majority was possible and that they could ultimately win a struggle that they deemed fair and just."

It is fair to say here that the self-image of the two dominating groups was influenced by an orientalist view of superiority over their surrounding environment and that this constituted the pedestal and the legitimization process for the relations formed later between Israel and South Africa. The official account (and even some academic perspectives) have tried to argue that ethical and principled positions prevented Israel from establishing relations with Apartheid South Africa until the early 1970s, yet the self-image (of the besieged being surrounded by inferior enemies) had always been present.⁴ This self-image probably prompted the close military ties between the two states; both Israel and apartheid South Africa claimed to be located in a “hostile environment” that posed an “existential threat.”

“Islands of Modernity,” “the Backward Enemy,” and the “Massada Complex”

Black Justice: The South African Coup describes how parts of the dominating white political class in South Africa had drawn “parallels between their history and the Jewish history, and between their fate in South Africa and that of Israel.” They viewed themselves as “islands of modernity” fighting for survival “against a backward enemy supported by an additional enemy in the form of communism.” The author claimed that these politicians had “a siege strategy” similar to the “Massada complex” in Israel which continued to evolve until it became some form of religion and constituted another solid layer to the general approach and orientation of the dominating white forces.”

This perspective did not differ greatly from Israel’s self-image. “Israel, too, portrayed itself as a small island of modernity and progress fighting, with great courage, hundreds of millions of Muslim enemies. White South Africa loved us for all the wrong reasons” according to Le’il, acknowledging the blatant controversial aspects of these relations. Furthermore, apartheid leaders began to appreciate, even revere, Israel’s technological achievements, particularly or primarily the military-related achievements.

One relevant anecdote: In a lecture at Tel Aviv University in 1999, former South African President Frederick Willem de Klerk described his feelings “towards the Jewish people” as follows: “when I come to Israel, it’s like I am coming back home. The Holy Land was the first country that I got to visit outside my own country. I’ve heard about Bethlehem and Nazareth before London and Paris. I knew the Jewish history before learning about my own history and the British and French history.”

Israeli governments have rarely revealed to the Israeli public the extent to which the leaders of Apartheid South Africa admire the Nazi party. The Israeli establishment, which knew how to turn Nazi crimes and atrocities to their advantage, had their own considerations for relations with those who revered this barbaric legacy. The pro-Nazi background of some of the leaders of the National Party who assumed power in South Africa at the time did not prevent the Israeli ruling class from establishing extensive relations with South Africa as will be clarified here. The National Party went through phases of anti-Semitism and support for Nazis during and after World War II. Some of the party’s leaders were accused of anti-Semitic tendencies, complicity, and collaboration with Nazi Germany, including John Vorster, Eric Louw, and Dr. Breyer.

The 1950s-1960s: Cold Relations under an Ethical Cover

Israeli official documents⁵ describe Israel’s relations with South Africa during the 1960s as increasingly tense. Israel adopted a policy of coolness toward South Africa for political reasons, mainly because it wanted the political support of Black Africa countries, which required that it distance itself from apartheid South Africa.

However, Israel had to walk a fine line in its relations with South Africa, because of the large and strong South African Jewish community that maintained close ties with Israel. The Israeli account describes how “fear of retaliation against the Jewish community and the desire to maintain good relations with them led Israel to walk a tightrope in terms of its relations with South Africa between the years 1966-65.” In the eyes of the policy-makers, Israel pursued “a wise two-fold policy: it avoided cutting relations with South Africa, yet worked against it in international forums. Israel constantly voted at the UN against the Apartheid policies in South Africa, but refrained from voting on the issue of expulsion of South Africa from the UN.”⁶

The official archives offer a detailed account of the relations between the two states:

In the context of Israel’s relations with African countries, South Africa

enjoyed special attention that was not positive

necessarily. Israel's relations with a state that openly and officially calls for racial discrimination gave Israel a negative image, and became a tool in the hands of Arab countries in their propaganda against it (Israel). . . .

Israel's policies towards South Africa were affected by Israel's opposition to Apartheid policies. These were not mere slogans. In the years 1963-64, and upon the initiative of Golda Meir, the prime minister at the time, Israel intensified its policies against South Africa and the relations between the two countries deteriorated.

However, in June 1967, when the war broke out and led to large-scale Israeli occupation of Palestinian, Egyptian, and Syrian territory, it constituted a 'turning point' in the relations between the two countries. South Africa provided support to Israel in the period prior to the war, and Israel decided to improve relations with South Africa. Thus, Israel toned down its criticism to South Africa and avoided public criticism as much as possible. Israeli policy shifted yet again: as Israel faced growing accusations that it was establishing an Apartheid regime in the Arab territories it occupied, Israeli leaders rushed to oppose the Apartheid regime in South Africa, creating a serious crisis in relations with the government in South Africa.

Transformation and Revenge

Benjamin Neuberger of The Open University of Israel. describes himself on his official university page as a political and social sciences specialist and researcher in the following areas: African nationalism, racial conflicts, regimes and politics, Africa in international relations, and Israeli-African relations. A substantial chunk of his book *Africa in the International Relations* is devoted to Israel-South African. ⁷ Professor Neuberger believes that the significance of Africa in Israel's foreign relations was manifested, inter alia, in the "reserved relations" toward white South Africa. Neuberger describes the struggle within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between two factions: the supporters of policies driven by interests and the realpolitik who advocated for the establishment of close relations with South Africa even at the expense of relations with the rest of African countries, and the "Africanists" who rejected any close ties with South Africa. Neuberger claims that the latter wing was stronger, at least for a particular period of time.

In the 1960s, there was no Israeli embassy in Pretoria and no South African embassy in Tel Aviv. According to Neuberger, Israel had systematically voted against Apartheid policies of South Africa at the UN. That would change in 1973.

Israel's relation with Africa, 1973

The 1973 war (known in the Israeli lexicon as the "Yom Kippur war") created a "transformation" in Israeli-African relations. The war was preceded by a set of signs that indicated a deterioration of relations: between March 1972 and September 1973, seven African countries cut their ties with Israel. However, the collapse came during the war and immediately after it end, when twenty-one African countries cut their relations with Israel as a sign of solidarity with Egypt (which was commonly referred to as the "Egyptian sister country") and in protest of Israel's closing of the Suez Canal militarily, which was portrayed as an "Israeli invasion of Africa." Only four non-central African countries maintained relations with Israel: Swaziland, Malawi, Lesotho, and Mauritius. (Mauritius cut off relations in 1976.)

The new situation created a turnabout in Israel-South Africa relations. The position of Israeli foreign affairs staff who supported realpolitik became stronger, since there was no need to take the rest of Africa into consideration (their actions being described as "treacherous"). In fact, there might have been retaliatory motivations against African countries for cutting their ties with Israel. In 1974 Israel and South Africa opened embassies in Pretoria and Tel Aviv. The South African prime minister was invited to visit Israel, and the security and economic relations between the two states were strengthened. ⁸

Revenge: Apartheid South Africa- an Alternative to the Continent

John Vorster, South Africa's prime minister, traveled to Israel in 1976, at a time when much of the international community was boycotting his country. He was the guest of Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin of the Labor Party. Following

this visit, security relations between the two countries expanded so much that eventually Israel would train the South African infantry, navy, and air force; military support included military and research exchanges and the development of military industries, particularly air military industries. Since that moment in time, economic and military relations between the two countries accelerated at a fast pace, and soon reached the level of “special relations.”

Professor Neuberger argued that the UN Resolution of 1975 equating Zionism with racism was a sort of “a red flag for Israel in terms of what to expect if it maintained its relations with South Africa, which would mean a deterioration of its status in the third world.” However, “many Israeli leaders saw in South Africa- Apartheid South Africa- a strategic and economic alternative to all of the rest of the continent, almost like a revenge of the defeated gesture,” according to Le’il. The two countries viewed themselves as two isolated islands within the international system. In March 1974, Israel decided to upgrade the relations to the level of exchanging embassies.⁹

Soon after this alliance was established, the international press started to expose the large deals between South Africa and the network of security industries in Israel, as well as Israeli support for the development of the South African army’s weapons and warplanes. Despite verbal condemnations by Israel’s leaders of the apartheid policies in international forums, the bi-lateral relations between the two countries couldn’t be concealed. In the eyes of many actors around the world-including liberal countries and not only the pro-Soviet Union powers and allies –these bi-lateral relations were a sort of “alliance of the lepers.” Similar to Neuberger’s commentary, Le’il the diplomat says: “this was increasingly the perception especially with the passing of the UN Resolution of 1975 equating Zionism, racism, and Apartheid.”

Deepening Military Relations

The ruling party in South Africa saw itself as a threatened power in the face of national liberation forces in the neighboring countries; in particular, it felt besieged by Angola and Mozambique led by communist government controlled by Moscow. The policy of feeding and transmitting this sense of being besieged helped the Apartheid regime mobilize nationalist white constituencies.

Developing a Network of Military Relations

The military relations between Israel and South Africa continued to run behind the scenes but initially the press reported explicit military details:

- Building “Reshev”-type ships that carried Gabriel missiles for the South African navy. (In South Africa, the ships were called “Minister” and the missiles “Scorpions.”)
- Replacing South Africa artillery by larger 105mm artillery weapons, transforming tanks into the main attack weapons on the war front with communist Angola.
- Providing South Africa with the knowledge base needed for the system of night vision and firing. This served as the basis for the development of the Tiger system, the system of firearms control in South Africa.
- Forging deals and agreements to provide ammunition for warplanes bombs and missiles in addition to providing technical advice to military colleges in South Africa. Israel helped build airports and improve warplanes units including 50 Mirage plans, drones, licenses for making drones, and alarm Boeing 707 planes with the Israeli Flacon system installed on them.

Le’il recounts the following incident to indicate the depth of the military relations between the two governments:

“South African parliamentarian and ambassador to the U.S. at the time, Harry Schwarz, revealed that during one of the tours organized for parliamentarians to a South African military ship, he saw ammunition and missiles with Hebrew

writing on them. The parliamentary delegation was told that the ship and its weapons were made in South Africa. At that point, Schwarz addressed the Minister of Security Affairs Mallan, and said sarcastically that he was happy to see South Africa becoming 'a bi-lingual country,' which makes it easier for the Jewish soldiers serving in its army. Schwarz later said that Mallan 'was not happy with this information.'"

The press reported on intelligence services as well as armored vehicles provided to the South African police for dispersing protests and demonstrations that the South African police, made by the industrial complex of Beit Alfa Kibbutz. However, what raised concern in Israel at the time was not the cozy relations with a repulsive regime but rather South Africa's willingness to sell the weapons to other countries, thereby making a profit at Israel's expense and depriving Israeli manufacturers of business.

The Israel media wrote in 1987 that "it was revealed that scores of experts and engineers in the field of military air industries in Israel were engaging in negotiations at varying levels with their counterparts in the Pretoria Apartheid regime in order to work there. The draft work agreements were in the hands of Israeli engineers and experts, and the South African military air industries were proposing to pay the Israelis through banks in Switzerland. The South African authorities started to recruit the Israeli experts prior to Israel's decision to terminate the Lavi warplane project through ads in newspapers and special agents. One of the members of the management of Israeli air industries said that scores of the workers had taken advantage of their annual leave to travel to South Africa and learn directly about the offers made to them and push the negotiations with the authorities in Pretoria forward. He added that candidates for moving and working for South Africa included the best Israeli experts."¹⁰

"Huge Flash of Light Shines over the Indian Ocean": Weapons of Mass Destruction"

Military cooperation shifted from the realm of traditional weapons to the extremely dangerous area of nontraditional weapons, including nuclear weapons. Over the years, South Africa had developed nuclear weapons and the press insisted that this was made possible through Israel's support. In February 1980, the American CBS news agency reported that an American spying satellite in the Philippines had captured water movements in September 1979 following a major flash of light that appeared over the Indian Ocean. The CIA suspected that this was due to a nuclear test. It believed that the South African navy had carried out this nuclear test and that this was a joint test between Israel and South Africa. Another account claimed that the Israeli engagement was limited to the "presence of experts who remained on one of the accompanying ships to examine the outcomes of the experiment."

The military cooperation included anti-tank missiles, as well as Python air missiles. The American TV network NBC reported on a maneuver in June 1989 at Arniston site in South Africa involving the use of a medium-range ballistic missile in one of the experiments that was based on the Israeli Jericho 2 missile. The investigative report revealed pictures of experiments with ballistic weapons. This triggered angry statements even from George H. W. Bush, the U.S. president at the time, who said that nuclear relations between Israel and Pretoria will complicate US-Israel relations.

In fact, several African countries had accused Washington together with Israel and France of being complicit in assisting South Africa to obtain nuclear weapons as early as the 1970s. The Organisation of African Unity in 1976 condemned "the transforming of South Africa into a major nuclear country." In a statement issued in the Ethiopian capital, the organization accused France of providing the nuclear oven to South Africa, the U.S. of providing highly enriched uranium, and Israel of providing scientific expertise. The statement added that transforming South Africa into a major nuclear country would threaten peace not only in Africa but in the whole world. The acting secretary general of the organization, Nour Eldeen Zaydi, summoned the ambassadors of France and the U.S. and protested their governments' assistance to South Africa to strengthen its military and nuclear powers."¹¹

Israel's Relations with Post-Apartheid South Africa

Israel's success in maintaining relations with South Africa after the fall of the Apartheid regime and the rise to power of the Black majority in 1994 was considered by the Israeli political establishment to be "a major diplomatic achievement."¹² In light of the close relations, particularly the close security ties between Israel and the Apartheid regime, it seemed likely that South Africa would cut its ties with Israel, but this did not happen. In 1987, Israel had joined the system of international sanctions against South Africa and engaged in relations with the leadership of the new regime in advance through non-government bodies and entities such as the Histadrut and the Institute of International Relations. The Oslo Agreements (1993) sent a signal to Nelson Mandela and his comrades in the African National Congress (ANC) that change was happening in Israel. If the PLO, an ANC ally, had established relations and agreements with Israel, it was not logical for South Africa to shun relations with Israel.

Neuberger believed that Israel's renewed relations with African countries was made possible by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war. Many countries, now without their traditional Soviet ally, had lost major sources of support; so too did countries that feared the rise of domestic radical forces. Thus, Israeli-African relations were driven particularly by personal trade interests and interests of businessmen, many of whom were former military officers working in arms trade. Supporting interventions in such areas as irrigation, medicine, and agriculture came also from the Organization for International Cooperation.

Shifts in Relations after 1994

According to sociologist Ran Greenstein, professor at Wits University in Johannesburg, the year 1994 marked the end of close ties between Israel and South Africa.¹³ The new government led by the African National Congress Party did not need an exclusive partnership with Israel. The military needs identified by the political elites were different from the needs of the apartheid regime, and they could be met through other sources (primarily from countries and companies in Western Europe). Despite the pragmatic position adopted by the ANC party government in its diplomatic efforts and international relations, rewarding the "main military partner of the Apartheid regime" was not a priority, particularly after the lifting of sanctions.

Greenstein has posited that even if the new government had no interest in exacting revenge for Israel's former collaboration with the hated Apartheid regime, it had no interest-driven political or economic reason to grant Israel preferential treatment. The Israeli military establishment too was cautious. South Africa developed good relations with countries that were considered among the biggest enemies of Israel (Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria), and Israel feared that its technology and weapons' systems would find their way to those countries. This dampened Israel's enthusiasm to sell its military products. When South Africa itself became a manufacturer and major exporter of weapons, thus a competitor in foreign markets, Israeli state and army officials were hesitant to re-establish close ties with their former partners.

At about the same time, new clients (China and India in particular) emerged with an almost insatiable appetite for security, military, and technical systems. In order to understand the post-1994 conditions, we need to go back to the question about why Israel was the only country that maintained such extensive military relations with the Apartheid regime in South Africa. We can offer two main and interrelated reasons for this military alliance:

- Tactical: the similar position of the two countries from the early 70s to the early 90s, as outcast countries in the international arena.
- Strategic: the similar roots of both countries in terms of the prolonged conflict between the indigenous populations and the colonizers' political parties. It is obvious that the first reason became irrelevant. It emerged as a result of a particular condition that disappeared with the collapse of the ex-USSR bloc and the end of the cold war.

New Configuration of International Relations

Greenstein believes that the relations that were re-established between the two states had repercussions in three main

areas:

- The historic similarities between the two conflict situations made South African political forces particularly sensitive to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Consequently, the South African government and independent activists tried to play the role of mediators and leaders of political initiatives. For example, the South African Ministry of Trade and Industry identified products of Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. The South African government sponsored a study to determine whether Israeli rule over the occupied territories was a form of colonization and Apartheid; and the ANC party recently supported the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel.
- The great interest in the conflict led to a clash among local groups that take sides with one party of the other. This points first and foremost to elements within the Jewish and Muslim communities in the country, but also among other activists and solidarity movements. Despite the fact that both ethno-religious communities are small in South Africa to some extent and the clash did not affect the majority of the population belonging to each one of them, yet the issue has raised concern in certain areas.
- The symbolic legacy of the struggle against Apartheid made comparisons with Israel/Palestine very strong politically as an analysis of the situation and a prescription for desired change. This symbolism has played an important role in international solidarity policies and debates surrounding them. The role played by South African activists in all of this was very evident- particularly in terms of famous highly regarded activists such as Desmond Tutu and Roni Carlisle- who explicitly drew on their experiences of oppression and resistance during the apartheid period.

The progress in economic relations between Israel and South Africa is insignificant, with the exception of the diamond trade. South African companies sell raw diamonds to Israel for polishing and later exporting to other countries. It is difficult to determine the trade volume, because usually diamonds are bought from centers of international exchanges in Europe (mainly through Antwerp and London) and not directly from South Africa. Israeli trade statistics usually disregard diamonds because the value added in Israel itself is relatively small compared to the overall trade value. (it inflates the import/export sides within the trade balance).

1. Conclusion

Ran Greenstein maintains that in the post-Apartheid era, South Africa restored its alliances and standing in international agencies, in large part due to the iconic status of Nelson Mandela as a world-class statesman. The state wanted the world to view South Africa as a modern democracy. Parallel to that, South Africa witnessed a drop in significance of an integral part of capitalist economies. However, later under the government of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa developed alliances with alternative powers as part of its strategic foreign policy. This emerged partially for economic reasons- such as the growing commercial relations with China and India- and partially out of an ideological approach that focuses on challenging the structure of the world order and western hegemony. South Africa aligned itself with Russia, China, Brazil, and several Arab and Muslim countries.

Thus in the framework of these configurations and within such an environment, relations with Israel became less of a priority for South Africa. From economic and diplomatic perspectives, it was more feasible and profitable to nurture alliances with other Africans as markets for South African goods and for diplomatic support for South Africa's efforts to speak on behalf of Africa. It was more feasible to nurture relations with Middle Eastern countries as market, oil suppliers, and partners in commercial deals, as well as with rising Asian powers such as India, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Within the context of this overall shift, South Africa has little to gain from good relations with Israel, a country that is rejected by many in Africa and Asia as a strong ally of the U.S. and western powers in general.

- 1 "علاقات إسرائيل جنوب أفريقيا - يوميات» (ح ص ١٣/٣٩٩٢)، (بالعبرية)
- 2 غالبية المواد وفقاً لقانون الأرشيفات الإسرائيلي من العام ١٩٥٥، يفترض أن تفتح في ختام ١٥ عاماً. أما المواد «الحساسة» في مجالات الأمن والعلاقات الخارجية فهي تُفتح بعد ٢٥ عاماً أو ٣٠ أو ٥٠ أو ٧٠ عاماً.
- 3 Alon Li'el, *Black Justice: The South Africa Coup* (Beni Barak: Hakibutz Haminohad Alk-ibbutz, 1999) (in Hebrew).
- 4 One can think of the symbols used by Zionist groups prior to 1948, namely the wall and the tower, which Israel implemented by erecting walls and towers in colonial pockets in the heart of residential areas for the indigenous population.
- 5 "علاقات إسرائيل جنوب أفريقيا - يوميات» (ح ص ١٣/٣٩٩٢)،
- 6 "علاقات إسرائيل جنوب أفريقيا - يوميات» (ح ص ١٣/٣٩٩٢)،
- 7 بنيامين نوبيرغر، *أفريقيا في العلاقات الدولية*، (كفار سابا: الجامعة المفتوحة، ٢٠١١) (بالعبرية)
- 8 يشير المؤلف إلى أنه على الرغم من قطع العلاقات الدبلوماسية، واصلت دول أفريقية كثيرة إقامة علاقات اقتصادية وتجارية مع إسرائيل. بل إن بعض النشاط التجاري اتسع مع بعض الدول، وواصلت إسرائيل الاحتفاظ بما يعرف بـ«مكاتب المصالح التجارية» في عدد من تلك الدول.
- 9 قبل ذلك كانت إسرائيل ممثلة بمتصل عام كان مقر إقامته جوهانسبرج وليس بريتوريا العاصمة.
- 10 "يديعوت أحرونوت»، الخبر نقلته صحيفة «الاتحاد» الحيفاوية بتاريخ (١٦,٩,١٩٨٧).
- 11 تقرير تناقلته وكالات أنباء، نشر في صحيفة «الاتحاد» (٨,٦,١٩٧٦).
- 12 ألون لينيل، *عدالة سوداء - الانقلاب الجنوب أفريقي...*
- 13 Ran Greenstein, ed., *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).