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[Mali: A Diplomatic Opportunity for Israel](#)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France's military intervention against Mali's Islamists has provided Israel with an opportunity to improve its relations with France and restore its ties with Africa's non-Arab Muslim countries. This opportunity should be seized by Israel's next foreign minister.

France intervened in Mali to protect its vital interests. For years, al-Qaeda has been trying to overtake the countries of the Sahel region, and Mali is its main target. Without the French military intervention, Mali would have become the first Islamic state of the Sahel region, followed by neighboring Niger, a country on which France heavily depends for its uranium imports. Yet, by defending its interests, France has opened a diplomatic opportunity for Israel.

Mali, Africa, and the Arab World

Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traoré had very harsh words for the Arab members of the African Union on the closing day of the organization's summit in Addis Ababa on January 27, 2013. Addressing the Arab states that had condemned France's air attacks against the Islamists – such as Egypt and Tunisia – Traoré questioned their refusal to condemn the horrific actions inflicted by the Islamists on the people of Mali, but willingness to express outrage against a French intervention.

Mali's political leaders and opinion-makers openly express their feeling of betrayal by the Arab countries, especially those run by Islamist regimes; after cutting ties with Israel under Arab pressure, they expected those same Arab states to aid them in their fight against the Islamists. Instead, the Arab countries condemned France, not the Islamists. A recent article in the Malian daily *Le Matin* directed its critique specifically at the Palestinians and their

ambassador to Mali, Abu Rabah. In addition to being the PLO's ambassador, Abu Rabah is the head of Mali's diplomatic protocol. He is ubiquitous in the media and has managed to put the "Palestinian cause" on top of Mali's national agenda – including the naming of a public square in Bamako, Mali's capital, after the "Palestinian Martyr" Mohamed al-Dura. Yet Abu Rabah did not have a single word to say against the Islamists. *Le Matin* not only lashed out at Abu Rabah, it claimed that the Islamists are backed by the Arab and Muslim countries. Since Mali has been duped by its so-called Muslim brethren, *Le Matin* concluded, it should change its foreign policy.

Mali's feeling of betrayal is reminiscent of Africa's disappointment in the Arab and Muslim world in the 1970s, when Libya and Saudi Arabia tried to use financial incentives to encourage African countries to cut ties with Israel. After the Yom Kippur War, the Arab League threatened to apply its oil embargo to Africa. As a result, all African countries (except Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, and Swaziland) severed their ties with Israel. But they soon realized that their move had no benefit, and that the Arab League was willing to share its enemies but not its oil. More and more African leaders and opinion-makers openly charged the Arabs of racism, reminding them of their past slavery trade in Africa. They were also concerned by Muammar Gaddafi's expansionist and destabilizing policies.

In the 1980s, Israel proactively re-engaged Africa under the leadership of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Ministry Director-General David Kimche. Most African countries restored their ties with Israel in the 1980s and 1990s. However, some African states changed course in the following decade. Niger severed its diplomatic relations with Israel in 2000 at the outbreak of the Second Intifada, and Mauritania in 2009, after Israel's military operation in Gaza. Both countries are Muslim, and both were influenced by Iran.

Iran's Influence in Africa

In 2008, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that his country intended to develop ties with Africa. One year later, he visited many African countries with Iranian diplomats and generals, signing commercial, diplomatic, and defense deals. Israel lost a project of water sewage in Senegal after Iran promised to carry out the same work at lower cost. Iran's influence in Africa also relies on Lebanon's rich and influential diaspora in countries such as Congo, Guinea, and Senegal, which donates money to Hizballah.

However, with the electoral victory of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia, and with the nearly takeover of Mali by al-Qaeda, more and more African countries are becoming fearful of Iran and of its Islamist allies. Ethiopia,

forced to confront Islamist militias backed by nearby rebels in Somalia, has become one of Israel's closest allies in Africa, as well as a major buyer of Israeli defense equipment. Kenya, which also faces Islamist terrorism from neighboring Somalia, is interested in strengthening its military ties with Israel. Even Nigeria reportedly spent about \$500 million on Israeli military equipment in the past few years.

Israel's Opportunity in Mali

Mali's anger at Arab countries, especially Egypt, is part of a wider African fear of Islamic influence and of Iranian meddling on the continent. Even though France's military intervention in Mali is only meant to serve French interests, it opens a window of opportunity which Israel should seize to improve its relations with Africa and with France itself.

French military strikes against Mali's Islamists are in stark contrast with France's backing of the Muslim rebels in Côte d'Ivoire during that country's civil war in 2002-2011. There, President Laurent Gbagbo, a Christian, started challenging France's strong economic grip over his country. His defiant policy created a community of interests between France and Côte d'Ivoire's Muslim rebels led by Alassane Ouattara. Hence did France support the Muslim rebels from Côte d'Ivoire's northern region against Gbagbo and the Christian south. The embattled Ivorian president, a close friend of Israel, sought and obtained Israel's logistical help. France and Israel ended up confronting each other by proxy in Côte d'Ivoire. In April 2011, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy ordered a French military commando to oust Gbagbo from his bunker, allowing Ouattara to take the presidency.

While France and Israel collided in Côte d'Ivoire, the policy of President François Hollande in Mali creates a new community of interests, since France is now fighting forces that are hostile to Israel. Thus, the Malian crisis constitutes an opportunity for Israel to improve its relations with France and with former French colonies in Africa. This opportunity should be seized by Israel's next foreign minister.

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