



Israel in Africa: Old and New Partners

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel is making a serious political-diplomatic effort to strengthen relations with African countries, particularly several key northern and sub-Saharan states. The parties are seeking enhanced cooperation in trade, energy, food security, climate security, water security, agriculture, cyber security, and defense. These efforts come at a time when Israel's global diplomatic network is expanding significantly. The political realignments taking place in the Middle East could open up opportunities for trilateral or multilateral partnerships involving Israel, its African partners, and other like-minded countries from the region and beyond.

In Israel's foreign policy calculus, Africa was and remains a vital continent with which it strives to strengthen cooperation and build new partnerships. Recent developments suggest that the Israeli government is reengaging with northern and sub-Saharan African countries in a host of key areas from trade to defense.

Israel had a strong presence in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s, when it focused on training programs in agriculture, primary healthcare, joint economic enterprises, and trade. Israel sought at the time to secure the diplomatic support of African states during its conflict with the Arabs, and this remains a foreign policy objective for Jerusalem as its global diplomatic network expands.

African states began to reexamine relations with Israel following the Six-Day War of 1967, and almost all vestiges of Israeli-African cordiality ended with the 1973

Arab-Israeli War and the resulting oil crisis. At that time, most African states (except for Malawi, Lesotho, and Swaziland) cut diplomatic ties with Israel. This reflected the political agenda of oil-rich Arab Gulf countries that used their political and economic clout to press African countries to isolate Israel politically.

Later, however, the 1978 Israel-Egypt Camp David Accord, the 1982 Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, and growing disappointment over unfulfilled Arab promises of economic assistance in the form of [cheap oil and financial aid](#) led to a recalibration of African strategies towards Israel. The need to remain neutral in the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to take part in Middle Eastern peace talks laid the groundwork for a reestablishment of diplomatic ties with Israel between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Since then, bilateral relations have existed, if lackluster (until recently). Israel now has diplomatic ties with [46 African countries](#) and has [12 embassies](#) on the continent.

The rising frequency of high-level reciprocal political visits and agreements has demonstrated a mutual interest in strengthening Israel-Africa ties. This is occurring at a time when more than half the world's fastest-growing economies are in Africa, making it a sought-after [destination for international trade and investment](#) and a key market for goods and services for many countries, not just Israel. Israel is present in Africa in the fields of agriculture, water management, cyber technology, climate and food security, and the military-security domains.

Israel's efforts to strengthen ties with African countries have been noticeable, particularly under the leadership of PM Benjamin Netanyahu. During his address to the [ECOWAS Africa-Israel Summit in Liberia \(2017\)](#), he said, "[Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is coming back to Israel,](#)" and pushed to reestablish ties with old partners. The Israeli normalization with [Morocco of December 2020](#), which occurred during Donald Trump's presidency, was a breakthrough. In 2022, both countries agreed to deepen cooperation in [trade and economics, renewable energy \(including rechargeable batteries\), recycling, solar energy, the hydrogen economy, aerospace,](#) and other sectors.

Chad, another Muslim-majority country, opened an embassy in Israel in [February 2023](#) following a rapprochement agreement in [2019](#). Security threats faced by both countries led to this reconciliation, and [Israel's subsequent military assistance,](#)

including training, counterterrorism measures, and weapons sales, will likely deepen these ties.

In 2016, Netanyahu visited [Kenya](#) (and again in 2017), as well as Rwanda, [Ethiopia](#), and Uganda. In a reciprocal move, Kenyan president [William Ruto](#) visited Israel in May 2023, and during the visit the sides agreed to a greater collaboration in agriculture, trade, education, climate change security, tourism, and security/defense. [Full normalization of ties](#) between Israel and Sudan was expected by the end of this year, but the emerging dynamics of the politico-security crisis in that northeastern African country could affect this normalization. Still, Israel is making unrelenting efforts to enhance its political ties with African states that have sizeable representations in fora like the UN.

As most African countries are currently undertaking infrastructural and economic modernization programs, it makes sense that they build partnerships with economic and technological giants like Israel. Over many years, Israel has developed some of the world's best technologies pertaining to water, irrigation, agriculture, cyber, defense, and security. This technical prowess has led several African governments to shed past inhibitions and show some flexibility towards cooperating with Israel. Mounting problems regarding water and [food insecurity](#) in the region could lead to the finding of collective solutions. Furthermore, Israel's state-of-the-art water desalination technologies are being sought out by countries like [Morocco](#) and [Kenya](#) and will likely appeal to other African countries as well. Nigeria, an important country with whom Israel would like to advance ties, is especially interested in [entrepreneurial innovations and technologies](#).

As a preliminary step, Israel founded an initiative in 2020 called [IMPROVATE](#) with the aim of improving food security in Africa. The goal of the initiative is to "provid[e] a collaborative platform for governments and Israeli technology companies with expertise in finding solutions for a broad range of challenges." It has begun similar assistance programs of supplying [agricultural needs, modern seeds](#), and pest control systems and equipment to eastern Africa, a region that has been threatened by an [acute food shortage](#) in recent years. This cooperation is imperative, as agriculture contributes significantly to the economy of sub-Saharan Africa. [Morocco in the north and Kenya in the east](#) have explored the possibility of similar cooperation with Israel, which has provided technical expertise to

mitigate climate-related challenges like drought and rapid [desertification](#) in the Sahara region even to countries that do not have diplomatic ties with Jerusalem. With its innovative tech skills, Israel is making a major contribution towards combating climate change in the region and is helping African states generate electricity using [clean energy sources](#) like solar.

In view of the unabated security threats coming from state and non-state armed actors in the [Sahel](#) region, which is an epicenter of terrorism and extremist activity, Israel and several African states will boost military-security cooperation. The scourge of terrorism remains a grave challenge to both Israel and Africa, necessitating an intensification of ties. In the past, Israel's military connection was a striking feature of its ties with Ethiopia, Zaire, Uganda, Ghana, and South Africa. Today, sub-Saharan Africa could emerge as a lucrative market for the Israeli arms industry (though limited for now). According to the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) (SIPRI), Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Nigeria, Rwanda, the Seychelles, South Africa, and Uganda received weapons from Israel during 2006-10, with [40%](#) of Israel arms exports going to African countries in 2014. In 2015-2016, Israel reportedly exported arms worth [\\$275 million](#) to African clients. In 2021, Africa accounted for 3% of Israeli defense exports. This is crucial for Israel as it continues to search for markets for its armaments, security partnerships, and defense industry collaborations.

Israeli-African defense cooperation has made progress. In late 2021, [Israel and Morocco](#) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) formalizing intelligence-sharing, defense industrial cooperation, joint exercises, and arms sales. Similarly, [Kenya](#) and [Uganda \(through an MoU\)](#) decided in 2022 to reinvigorate defense ties with Israel. Beyond the traditional areas, cybersecurity cooperation is increasingly pivotal. In this area, the [Israel National Cyber Directorate](#) coordinates with its [Moroccan](#), [Kenyan](#) and Ugandan counterparts, among others. Israel's involvement in building [cybersecurity infrastructures](#) in these countries, where digital attacks are escalating, will likely grow.

Notwithstanding these developments, Israel and its African partners are treading cautiously in the area of military-security cooperation (mostly related to arms supply). This is mainly due to constant monitoring by regional and international

watchdogs, including media and human rights organizations, over weapons and security-related technology supplied by Israel to African regimes.

While there are efforts underway to strengthen bilateral ties, it remains politically challenging for Israel to establish cordial relationships with the continental body, the African Union (AU). This is because several AU members are strongly anti-Israel. For instance, South Africa, which was once a staunch partner of Israel, has been critical of Jerusalem's Palestinian policy. Algeria, too, is vehemently pro-Palestinian and has criticized the wave of normalizations between Israel and Arab countries. Israel's attainment of "observer status" at the AU in [2021](#), which was suspended in [February 2023](#), was viewed negatively by these countries. As a result of this reality, Israel has had to work continuously towards amassing political support from other African countries. This is an opportune moment for Israel as there are growing convergences of political, economic, and strategic interests with several key African countries, facilitating an overall expansion of ties.

The winds of change sweeping across the wider Middle East (mostly the thawing of Israel-GCC ties) could also open avenues for trilateral and multilateral partnerships involving like-minded African states. GCC countries like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have engaged in increasing economic, investment, and security activities in the sub-Saharan region in recent years. Israel's normalization of relations with these Gulf countries should push them and the African states to explore collaborations in sectors like security, climate change, renewable energy, food security, and so on.

On a similar note, within the framework of multilateral diplomacy, countries like India could be brought in to cooperate on common issues and challenges in both the traditional and non-traditional security realms. For instance, Israel, India, and the UAE are jointly working on the creation of an [India-Middle East food corridor](#). This important initiative has the objective of increasing inter-regional connectivity and ensuring a smooth food supply chain. Such an arrangement could be extended to other spheres, including trade and commerce, healthcare, and renewable energy in the African region by bringing together investments from affluent Gulf states, Israeli technology, and Indian manufacturing skills. Additional countries might also wish to collaborate on the development of sustainable technologies.

For these endeavors to come to fruition, political and security stability are crucial. It is therefore essential that Israel keep up the momentum and strengthen its political ties with African countries, which could result in the expansion of overall relations. Israel should be forthcoming in providing economic as well as technological assistance to its African partners, which are developing their economies amid many challenges. Israeli stakeholders, both state and private, and the relevant ministries, particularly foreign, innovation, science and technology, defense, economics and industry, infrastructure, energy, and water should play proactive roles. Robust educational, cultural, and academic exchanges could also help boost mutual understanding of each other's peoples, histories, and traditions. Further, regular strategic dialogues and consultations could prove beneficial. It is equally important that person-to-person connections be strengthened between the two sides. Israel and the aforementioned African countries possess the goodwill to make their ties as strong and comprehensive as they were in the past.

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