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## **Israel and Rwanda's Emerging Alliance: A Mutual Strategic Choice**

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Avigdor Liberman's visit to Rwanda on March 18 2018, the first ever such visit made by an Israeli Defense Minister, took place almost under the radar, with limited publication on the content of his meetings with President Paul Kagame and other senior Rwandese officials. Yet as far as bilateral relations are concerned, this visit symbolizes the deep evolution of the relationship that has been forged in recent years between Jerusalem and Kigali at the highest levels. In fact, Rwanda has become one of Israel's main interlocutors on the African continent.

### **Before and after 1994**

Israel and Rwanda established diplomatic ties in 1962, soon after Rwanda gained independence. These ties included the signing of an agreement for technical cooperation, which generated some small joint projects. Diplomatic relations were severed in 1973, following the Yom Kippur War, but resumed in October 1994, following the conclusion of the Rwandan genocide. Rwanda sent its first ambassador to Tel Aviv in late 1994 but was forced to close its mission a few years after for budgetary reasons. The embassy was reopened in 2015, with a resident ambassador. On the Israeli side, the ambassador to Ethiopia also serves as non-resident ambassador to Rwanda.

In fact, the 1994 genocide constituted a watershed moment in Rwanda's relations with the international community, Israel included. During his years as opposition leader, Paul Kagame was supported by the US and the UK (in contradiction to the Hutu regime, backed by France and Belgium). The American position became part of the 'battle of influence' between Western powers over the resource-rich Great Lake region. After the genocide, when Kagame took over the government (first as Vice President and then as President), he made the strategic decision to reinforce his alliance with the US (for instance, Rwanda has abandoned French as an official language in favor of English, which is spoken alongside the Kinyarwanda language). Following that line of logic, he identified Israel, America's faithful ally, as potential partner. For Kagame, the way to Washington passes (also) through Jerusalem.

In the years prior to the genocide, Rwanda under Juvenal Habyarimana entertained trade ties with Israel, though no Israeli embassy was operating in Kigali. Publications in recent years, such as the 2000 book "The Arms Fixer,"<sup>1</sup> claim that Israel supplied arms to Rwanda's Hutu regime before the genocide and also during it, while Israeli authorities argued that arms sale to Rwanda had stopped by October 1993. Israeli human rights activists have petitioned to the court several times in past years, for the defense

ministry to reveal the extent of arms sales to Rwanda, but these petitions were rejected. A 1995 Amnesty International report argues that surplus Israel weapons (left over from the 1973 war) were transported to Rwanda, via Congo-Brazzaville, in April 1994.

Despite these allegations, Rwanda's post genocide regime rarely confronted successive Israeli governments on the issue, unlike its attitude towards other partners of the former regime, such as France or Belgium. On the contrary, Kagame quite rapidly reached out to Israel, and by doing so turned the page on whatever relations Israel had had with the former regime. Rwanda campaigned for the genocide to be recognized by the international community in much the same way as the Shoah, estimating that Israeli support would advance that cause (as a moral authority on the matter and also because of the strong pro-Israeli lobby in Washington). Kagame was also adamant in reconstructing the country's economy and identified Israel as a potential partner for cooperation and development projects. Moreover, in meetings with PM Netanyahu, President Kagame stressed Rwanda's desire to cooperate with Israel against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Africa.

### **A shift in approach on Rwanda genocide/Shoah remembrance**

Much like the Washington-based Armenian lobby's approach, Rwanda leaders had often used Shoah - driven terms to describe the 1994 genocide. This was an approach that was rejected during the first post-genocide years by Israeli authorities, who were careful to preserve the uniqueness of the Shoah vis-à-vis other genocide campaigns.<sup>2</sup>

But current Israeli policy on the issue reflects a significant turnabout, with speakers emphasizing the similarities between Jewish and Rwandese massacre victims who confront the horrors of the past. Already in 2005, Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Remembrance Center hosted a delegation of Rwanda genocide survivors; the dialogue focused on rehabilitation of individuals and societies after genocide. Yad Vashem staff arrived in Rwanda in the years that followed on several occasions to lecture about genocide remembrance and teaching. Another Rwandese delegation arrived at Yad Vashem in 2016.

This turnabout in Israel's outlook was accompanied by an important movement within the US Jewish community, transforming relations between the Jewish people and the people of Rwanda into a priority cause championed by the US community's leaders. Several American Jewish leaders referred to kinship between two peoples who share post-traumatic reconstruction processes. The Rwanda Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village for genocide orphans<sup>3</sup>, founded and financed by American Jewish philanthropists (most specifically the late Anne Heyman) reflects these special relations. Moreover, the American Jewish community maintains a close dialogue with President Paul Kagame, who was invited to the March 2017 AIPAC annual congress; a clear sign of the importance accorded by Israel and the Jewish world to ties with Rwanda. American Jewish spokespersons have characterized Rwanda on numerous occasions as a diplomatic ally of Israel<sup>4</sup>. Another example of Jewish-Rwanda joint projects on genocide remembrance is the series of activities taking place for the last decade at the Johannesburg Shoah & Genocide Centre<sup>5</sup>, founded by Israeli-South African Tali Nates, involving Israeli and Rwanda personalities, with visits of South African students to both countries.

Israel's new policy towards Rwanda and towards the 1994 genocide was also introduced in the diplomatic arena, when on January 26, 2018 Israel sponsored a Rwanda-initiated UN decision designating April 7th as the International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda<sup>6</sup>. This resolution replaced a former 2003 UN resolution establishing the International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda. The 2018 decision was contested by the US and other countries, claiming that Rwanda wishes to rewrite the genocide narrative, ignoring dozens of thousands of moderate Hutus who were killed alongside Tutsi victims (most researchers estimate that 800,000 people, most of them Tutsi, were killed in the 1994 massacre). Israeli press reported at the time that Israel supported Rwanda's initiative, despite US objections, after Rwanda agreed to accept illegal immigrants deported from Israel.

## **The question of immigrants**

Israeli publications in January 2018 about Rwanda signing a secret deal with Israel to take in illegal African immigrants (reportedly for the sum of \$5,000 per immigrant) cast a cloud over bilateral relations and sparked a public campaign against the plan.<sup>7</sup> Israeli writers, doctors, high-tech people, politicians and academics signed petitions<sup>8</sup> against the expulsion plan, arguing that the Jewish people cannot morally expel Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers and abandon them to great dangers (throughout the campaign the terms used in Hebrew were ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’, in contrast to government use of the word ‘infiltrators’). The campaign prompted press reports<sup>9</sup> about deported immigrants suffering in Rwanda and Uganda, contradicting Israeli authorities’ earlier statements that the illegal immigrants were deported to safe destinations. Israeli pilots published posts stating that they will refuse to fly the illegal immigrants to their destination.

While information from different sources insists that an agreement of that sort was reached, Rwanda spokespersons were quick to formally deny it, and to announce that Kigali will not take any immigrant expelled by force. These publications endangered Kagame’s aspirations of becoming a key country in the African continent and to become even a regional power, especially vis-à-vis the African Union organization (Kagame was slated to take over chairmanship of the African Union at the end of January 2018). In a 25 January meeting that took place between Netanyahu and Kagame on the margins of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, PM Netanyahu agreed with President Kagame, who made clear that he would only accept a process of welcoming illegal immigrants that fully complies with international law.<sup>10</sup>

This controversial issue was raised during Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Liberman’s recent visit to Kigali, and might even have been the principal reason behind it. In that respect, it is interesting to note that it is Liberman taking the relay on the topic. The Israeli foreign ministry received instructions not to communicate on Israel-Rwanda bilateral relations, considering the sensitivity of the immigrants’ case.

### **Bilateral ties: a personal affair?**

Though the fast-track rapprochement between Rwanda and Israel after the genocide includes strong emotional elements, it is clear President Kagame has opted for a considered approach concerning Israeli ties with the pre-genocide regime. He now considers Israel as a strategic ally, even on the security level. In fact, hardly no parallel demands were made in Rwanda about disclosing details of alleged arm sales between the two countries before and during the genocide period.

Kagame visited Israel in 2013, on the occasion of the fifth Israel Presidential Conference and President Shimon Peres’ 90<sup>th</sup> birthday; his presence at this dual event marked his personal engagement in bilateral ties. But it was then-Foreign Minister Liberman’s visit in 2014 which emphasized his own and PM Netanyahu’s commitment to developing a partnership with Rwanda. During his visit, the two countries signed a Joint Declaration upgrading relations and the creation of a framework for cooperative agricultural projects. Liberman’s tour to Rwanda opened the way for a series of mutual visits between senior officials, with Rwanda Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo visiting Israel in October 2014 (subsequent to Operation Protective Edge and while Rwanda was serving as a non-permanent UN Security Council member). Kagame visited Israel in July 2017<sup>11</sup> and Netanyahu visited Rwanda two years later, in 2016. In 2017, Netanyahu announced the opening of an Israeli embassy in Kigali. Kagame’s commitment is also expressed in the very fact that it has an ambassador stationed in Tel Aviv; in the Middle East Rwanda holds embassies only in Turkey and the UAE.

PM Netanyahu ascribes rapprochement with Rwanda to be part of the framework of his overall strategy of renewing ties with Africa. This strategy has three goals in mind: building up African diplomatic support for Israel in UN institutions, collaborating with African countries against the spread of fundamentalist

Islam (against the backdrop of the Islamic State presence in the Sinai Peninsula), and opening African markets to Israeli companies.

### **Following the Israeli example: Rwanda aspires to become Africa's "start-up nation"**

Israel-Rwanda partnership has developed and expanded since 1994. While bilateral trade numbers are fairly low<sup>12</sup>, cooperative projects carried out in Rwanda, whether by Israel's foreign ministry cooperation branch Mashav or by private actors, are of economic strategic importance to Rwanda.

During his 2014 visit, Liberman, together with Rwanda Agriculture Minister Agnes Kalibata, inaugurated the Rwanda-Israel Center of Excellence for Horticultural Development. An Israeli expert was dispatched to the center in Rwanda in 2017, for an initial period of two years. Rwanda's Ministry of Agriculture aims to open four more centers operated by Israel's Mashav and which will be financed by international donors in the near future. Mashav has also established an agro-tech greenhouse on the grounds of the Agahozo-Shalom youth center, which has become identified with Israel and Israeli excellence.

On Rwanda's side, these projects reflect Kagame's (successful so far) strategy of following the Israeli high-tech model, supporting infrastructure for technology initiatives and investing in education.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Wood & Johan Peleman, "Brokering Arms for Genocide", *The Arms Fixer. Controlling the Brokers and Shipping Agents*, NISAT/PRIO/BASIC Report, Oslo, 2000, Accessed: 20 March 2018.

[https://files.prio.org/Publication\\_files/NISAT/ArmsFixers/Chapter3.html](https://files.prio.org/Publication_files/NISAT/ArmsFixers/Chapter3.html)

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion on this issue, see: René Lemarchand, "Disconnecting the threads: Rwanda and the Shoah reconsidered", *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2002, Pp. 499-518.

<sup>3</sup> The Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village website <https://asyv.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Guttman, *US Forward magazine*, March 28 2014, Accessed: 20 March 2018.

<https://forward.com/news/israel/195368/rwanda-leader-paul-kagame-gets-jewish-embrace-bu/>

<sup>5</sup> *The Johannesburg Shoah & Genocide Centre website*, Accessed: 20 March 2018. <http://jhbShoah.co.za/>

<sup>6</sup> General Assembly Designates 7 April International Day of Reflection on 1994 Genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda, Amending Title of Annual Observance, 26 January 2018, Accessed: 20 March 2018. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12000.doc.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Facebook page (Hebrew) of public campaign against the expulsion of African asylum seekers, Accessed: 20 March 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/Otsrim.et.Hagerush/>

<sup>8</sup> Petitions (Hebrew) against the expulsion of asylum seekers, Accessed: 20 March 2018.

<https://www.atzuma.co.il/vahavtem> ; <https://www.atzuma.co.il/hitechforrefugees>

<sup>9</sup> Ilan Lior, "Asylum seekers deported from Israel to Rwanda warn those remaining: 'Don't come here'," *Haaretz*, 2 February 2018, Accessed: 20 March 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/asylum-seekers-who-left-israel-for-rwanda-warn-those-remaining-don-t-1.5785996>

<sup>10</sup> *Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Statement: PM Netanyahu meets with Rwandan President Paul Kagame*, 25 January 2018, Accessed: 20 March 2018. <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2018/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-meets-with-Rwandan-President-Paul-Kagame-25-January-2018.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Israel welcomes Rwandan President Paul Kagame*, 10 July 2017, Accessed: 20 March 2018. <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2017/Pages/Israel-welcomes-Rwandan-President-Paul-Kagame-10-July-2017.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> "Foreign Trade Statistics Monthly - Table D 1. - Trade Countries -Imports and Exports ", *Israel Central Bureau of Statistics*, January 2018, Accessed: 20 March 2018. [www.cbs.gov.il/www/fr\\_trade/td1.pdf](http://www.cbs.gov.il/www/fr_trade/td1.pdf)