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Volume 6, Number 4, October 28, 2021

For Israel's Acceptance to the AU as Observer Reveals Continental Divides

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Two decades of Israeli diplomatic efforts ended successfully on July 22, when the African Union (AU) granted Israel observer status.¹ Israel had held observer status for several years at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) that preceded the AU. But when the OAU was disbanded and the AU founded in its stead in 2002, Israel was expelled under pressure from the Libyan leader at the time, Muammar Ghaddafi. Since then, on two separate occasions (2013 and 2016),² Israel had officially asked to (re)gain its status as an observer state and was denied despite expending considerable diplomatic effort. Given these delays in the past, it is important to understand the reasons behind

¹ Yair Lapid, [Twitter](#), July 22 ("For the first time since 2002, Israel joined the African Union as an observer. This is a day of celebration for Israel-Africa relations. The diplomatic achievement is the result of an effort by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Africa Division, and the Israeli embassies on the continent").

² Ismail Akwei, "[It's in the interest of Africa for Israel to be reinstated in AU – Netanyahu](#)," *Africa News*, June 4, 2017. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called on African leaders to reinstate Israel's observer status in the African Union (AU).

Israel's recent return to the AU, and to what extent this move is expected to bolster Israel's presence and influence within the African sphere.

Israel's acceptance to the AU is connected to shifts in regional power structures in Africa, and to changes in Israel's status in the international arena. Zooming in, the AU decision to grant Israel observer status should be examined on two different levels. On one level, ongoing changes in Israel's status within the African continent in the past two decades has included the resumption of ties, officially and unofficially with several African countries. This has coincided with growing divides within the AU, which had affected bi-lateral ties with Israel. For example, in the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam construction, Egypt views Israel as a supporter of Ethiopia.³ Without any real stake in the matter, Israel is perceived as supporting one camp against the other in what has become a regional African dispute. And on another level, the AU has taken note of more recent changes in Israel's international status following the September 2020 signing of the Abraham accords for normalization of ties with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.

The majority of African countries severed their ties with Israel shortly before or after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Nevertheless, even as ties were officially cut, Israel continued to maintain relations with some African countries, either commercially or through multi-lateral projects. In the last three decades, Israel gained a reputation as the start-up nation, among other things, over its expertise in agricultural technology and new water-management techniques. Several African countries adopted a more practical approach vis-à-vis Israel (contrary to the ideological Arab boycott) due to an acute need for such technology to help manage climate changes and demographic growth.

In Africa, friction with the Arab-encouraged boycott of Israel was evident before the Abraham accords. The most pertinent example was that of Chad. In 2018, Chadian President Idriss Deby visited Israel, reviving relations that were severed in 1972. A year later, in 2019, then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Ndjamena, and officially announced together with Deby the resumption of ties.

³ Haisam Hassanein, "Egypt, Israel, and Nile Water Conspiracies," *The Washington Institute*, August 9, 2021.

Thus, by the time the AU agreed to grant Israel observer status, a majority of AU members entertained full diplomatic relations with Israel. Only eleven state members out of the 54 did not have full relations,⁴ and of those eleven, several countries enjoy various agreements or understandings with Israel. For instance, Djibouti has no diplomatic relations with Israel, but reports over the years indicate an understanding between the two countries that allows Israeli ships to pass through Djibouti waters.⁵ Moreover, the decision for Israel to join the AU was made by AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, and not through a vote. Faki did not divulge the extent of consultation he conducted before reaching the decision, but it should be noted that the majority of AU members did not protest publicly against it, at least not immediately after the publication. Their tacit acceptance of the move clearly reflected Israel's growing influence on the continent.

The scope of diplomatic relations with Israel was certainly one of the major reasons, next to the Abraham Accords, in the AU making the decision to grant observer status. Faki acknowledged that in the communiqué he issued, Aug. 6, a few days after the decision: "It (the decision) was taken on the basis of the recognition of Israel and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Israel by a majority greater than two-thirds of AU member states, and at the expressed request of many of those states."⁶

So why did it take so long for the AU to come to this decision? Israeli experts⁷ identified reasons for the blockage within the AU:

Ghaddafi was behind the original decision to reject Israel from the newborn AU in 2002. As one of its principal patrons, he applied pressure against Israel gaining an observer seat. Former Israeli diplomats claim that Ghaddafi pressured the AU financially, threatening to withdraw Libyan contributions if Israel was to be accepted as observer. In fact, throughout his rule, Ghaddafi continued to push against having ties with Israel, including in his appearances in African Union forums.

⁴ African Union Member States (54 UN-recognized states, plus the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) [Member States | African Union \(au.int\)](https://www.au.int/en/about/structure/member-states).

⁵ Moshe Terdiman, "[The Boiling Water of the Red Sea: Power Struggles and Israel's Interests](#)," *Mitvim: The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, September, 2018.

⁶ [Communiqué of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the Accreditation of the State of Israel](#), [PDF] *Union africaine (au.int)*, August 6, 2021.

⁷ Interviews conducted by the author with former and with (unnamed) serving senior Israeli diplomats, including former Head of the Africa Division at the Foreign Ministry Ambassador Avi Granot.

Still, there were also other forces operating over the years to prevent any change to this decision. Evidently, the Palestinians, who have held the status of an observer state since 2013, were against the acceptance of Israel. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and his successor Mahmoud Abbas nurtured close ties with the OAU and the AU. Arafat addressed the OAU back in 1975. Abbas has been regularly invited by the AU to address its summits. On the backdrop of developing ties between Israel and some African countries, Abbas requested at the 2019 AU summit for the group to hold to its position against offering Israel a seat. After the July 22 decision, the Palestinians were very active in campaigning for an African alliance against Israel.

A third actor in that arena, at least until recently, has been Egypt, which played a significant role in keeping Israel away from the AU. While the two countries signed a peace treaty as early as 1979, Egypt continued advocating for the Palestinian cause, including in AU forums. In that respect, Israel now gaining observer status clearly reflects a change in bilateral relations between Jerusalem and Cairo. Still, the change is not clear cut. Israeli diplomats believe that Faki would not have taken the decision without at least tacit approval by Cairo, which had always enjoyed significant political clout in the organization. And indeed, when the decision was first made public, Cairo refrained from reacting to it publicly. Then, two weeks later, in a gesture that was disappointing for Israel, Egypt joined other countries in publicly calling for the AU decision to be overturned.

South Africa has also played a central role against Israel within the AU, though with some nuances. When South African Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma (currently serving as minister of cooperative governance and traditional affairs) was appointed AU Commission chairperson in 2012, Israeli diplomacy estimated that the group's policy against Israel would only harden. But with all of South Africa's longstanding anti-Israeli positions, which have grown stronger in recent years, Dlamini-Zuma herself did not completely block having ties with Israeli representatives. For instance, she authorized her deputy Kenyan Erastus Mwencha to meet with then-Israel's foreign ministry deputy director general for Africa, Ambassador Avi Granot. Dlamini-Zuma approved the meeting, fully knowing that Israel would request at this meeting to gain an observer seat to be presented at the next AU summit. And while the request was ultimately not presented, the meeting went ahead on friendly diplomatic terms. That

being said, South Africa's declared policy has been against granting Israel an observer status.

The decision for Israel to gain an observer seat was made by Faki in a speedy procedure, and not by a general vote at the AU annual summit. Israeli diplomats were actually surprised by the rapidity of the decision but estimated that this procedure made the decision possible. In other words, putting it up for vote would have compromised the outcome.

We have already mentioned the outcry by several countries against the decision. More precisely, the embassies of Algeria, Egypt, Comoros, Tunisia, Djibouti, Mauritania, Namibia and Libya in Ethiopia sent July 29 a letter of protest to Faki, objecting to the measure and blaming him for politically abusing his allegedly executive authority.

It was after this letter of objection that Faki published his August 6 communiqué, justifying his move. One day after his communiqué, 14 African countries,⁸ including South Africa, Algeria, Tunisia, Eritrea, Senegal, Tanzania, Niger, Comoros, Gabon, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Mali and Seychelles, decided to form a block to overturn Israel's acceptance. Currently, 21 AU members have rejected, one way or another, Israel's acceptance as observer. Several of them, such as South Africa, Botswana, Senegal, and Gabon, maintain bilateral relations in Israel, including embassies.

The driving force behind this new campaign for rejecting Israel is Algeria, and its Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra. On July 26, the Algerian Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying, "Taken without the benefit of broad prior consultations with all the Member States, this decision has neither the vocation nor the capacity to legitimize the practices and behaviors of the said new observer which are totally incompatible with the values, principles and objectives enshrined in the 'Constitutive Act of the African Union.'" ⁹ After the August 6 communiqué by Faki, Lamamra said, "Moussa Faki Mahamat sought to defend himself [in the face of growing condemnations over the step]

⁸ "14 African states agree to reject 'Israel' membership in African Union," *Quds News Network*, August 1, 2021.

⁹ Michael Sauer, "[Algeria Denounces African Union Decision to Admit Israel as Observer](#)," *Morocco World News*, July 26, 2021.

and accordingly made the latest remarks. He is unaware of the consequences that the decision will cause.”¹⁰

Algeria has taken an especially harsh tone against Israel in recent weeks, with several regional and strategic issues adding fuel to the flames. Morocco agreed to join these accords following American recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara, contrary to the Algerian stance. More recently, Algeria has partially blamed Israel for its evolving diplomatic crisis with Morocco. Inter-African conflicts are influencing alliances for and against Israel.

Even if AU votes in favor of Israel’s acceptance, the organization is not expected to abandon its support for the Palestinian cause. Faki made that clear in his Aug. 6 communiqué, expressing the commitment of the AU to the Palestinian national struggle. Experience has already taught Israel’s diplomacy, that even African states with whom it maintains diplomatic ties, do not necessarily vote in favor of it at the UN or at other international forums. AU observer status would not necessarily guarantee more favorable votes there.

Israel could benefit from the AU decision on a practical level. For instance, now that Israel can participate in open sessions of the AU’s Peace and Security Council (PSC) and at the opening and closing sessions of AU summits. It could also have limited access to AU documents, and participate at other AU meetings, upon invitation by the commission chairperson. The participation in PSC sessions is important. It would offer Israel a better understanding of the issues at hand, and a foothold in the management of regional conflicts in Africa.

As mentioned, the decision to bring Israel back reflects a policy change, towards a more pragmatic approach on Israel. It reflects the realization that if Arab-Muslim countries like the Emirates and Bahrain can abandon the boycott of Israel, so can Africa. For Israel, the observer status means that it will no longer be considered solely through the Israel-Palestinian-conflict prism, but as a nation among the nations.

¹⁰ “[Algeria Slams The African Union For Granting Israel Observer Status](#),” *Albawaba News*, August 8 2021. Quote of Algerian FM Ramtane Lamamra translated into English from Arabic-language Algerian daily newspaper *Al-Fadjr*.

Israel wants to increase its economic ties and its security cooperation in Africa. Observer status would offer Jerusalem closer contacts with African policymakers. Israel can now expect this policy of pragmatism to expand in Africa and to grow stronger. It could affect its relations with AU members, as well as perhaps its relations with the numerous external partners of the organization.¹¹

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¹¹ See, "[External partnerships between the AU and organisations, regions or countries](#)," African Union.