

The Ideas Letter

An African View of Israel's War in Gaza

May 2, 2024



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MAY 03, 2024

Future geopolitical historians, reflecting on the hypothetical collapse of the liberal order, might highlight one episode in the midst of the thousand cuts dealt to it by imperial cruelty: the world's first televised and livestreamed mass-murder unfolding in Gaza against the backdrop of decades of colonial occupation in Palestine.

More specifically, future historians might focus on how this seismic shift was given further emphasis by South Africa's charge of genocide against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). With Western powers arming Israel in Gaza, South Africa – a country with an intimate history of racial oppression – sought to give voice to the tens of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children who have been consumed by the catastrophe. Israeli forces have killed more than 34,000 Palestinians in Gaza since it launched reprisals for Hamas's October 7th pogrom in Israel in which 1,200 people were murdered.

South Africa's case against Israel at the ICJ is borne out of its own historical struggle with racism. Many Israelis reject characterizations of their country as an apartheid state. Yet the similarities between Israel and the defunct Boer regime in South Africa are difficult to ignore. Like South Africa did, Israel keeps a subject population under conditions of less than equal citizenship and whose people are notionally accorded rights which can be summarily and arbitrarily circumscribed. Just like the white minority regime in South Africa which used to claim to be "the only democracy in Africa," Israel claims to be the only democracy in the Middle East. In both instances, their self-description as democracies was and remains undermined by the existence of large populations that were colonially excluded from modernity and democracy.

As detailed by Sasha Polakow-Suransky in his book, *The Unspoken Alliance*, a close ideological kinship and common geostrategic interests informed the cooperation between Israel and South Africa's apartheid state. In 1972, both nations ratified a pact to assist each other if either of them was attacked. The Israeli intelligence agency Mossad formed a close partnership with South Africa's Bureau of State Security (BOSS) under the terms of a secret accord between Prime Minister Golda Meir and the Pretoria regime. Consequently, the Mossad and BOSS orchestrated a clandestine campaign of attrition against liberation movements in Southern Africa. Using intelligence provided by Mossad, which detailed links between the African National Congress

(ANC) and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), BOSS arrested and tortured hundreds of ANC members.

In the mid-1970s, South Africa's apartheid regime saw itself as being in a position analogous to that of Israel after 1967. It was locked in an internal conflict with the anti-apartheid movement spearheaded by the ANC and an external war against Black Nationalist liberation forces in Namibia, Angola, and Mozambique. Like Israel, the apartheid regime was surrounded by enemies and, in the long run, outnumbered by them. Like Israel, the apartheid regime opted to develop a nuclear arsenal as a weapon of last resort, in the event that front-line defenses were breached.

The apartheid regime considered Israel the best model for confronting the resistance to its racist dictatorship, which it considered a terrorist insurgency. The Boers' treatment of Black South Africans and Israel's treatment of its Arab citizens and the Palestinians can be credibly compared. As the late scholar Ali Mazrui argued, Israel was born out of a fusion between Zionism and the European concept of the nation-state, while the state of apartheid in South Africa was born out of a fusion between racism and the European concept of capitalism. "The Jews under Zionist leaders decided that they had to have a Jewish state for 'protection.' The whites of South Africa decided they had to have a racist state for 'security,'" according to Mazrui.

No less a figure than the former US President Jimmy Carter has described the subsisting order in Israel as "a system of apartheid, with two peoples occupying the same land but completely separated from each other, with Israelis totally dominant and suppressing violence by depriving Palestinians of their basic human rights."

A Special Relationship

The US government's fidelity to Israel, even at the expense of its international credibility, bears scrutiny. Since Israel's founding in 1948, its security, military advantage, consistent economic growth, and ability to impose its will on Palestine and its neighbors would not have been possible without US military, material and moral support. And yet, American and Israeli security interests do not necessarily coincide. Unlike al Qaeda and its ilk, the terrorist groups that threaten Israel such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah do not attack the U.S. and pose little threat to U.S. vital interests.

The *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen has argued that "what makes America's relationship with Israel special is its uncritical nature, even when U.S. interests are being hurt." Worse, he says, is that America's perceived complicity in Israeli violence is "a potent terrorist recruitment tool. If America is to pay the blood, the treasure, and the lost peace of mind that comes with supporting Israel, it should be ready to speak openly and critically of Israeli mistakes when needed."

What accounts for the unquestioning American support for the Jewish state especially over the Palestinian question – a source of much ire in the Arab World and beyond? The answer is complex, entailing not only the political influence of powerful lobby groups such as the

American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) but also the virulently pro-Israel confederacy of American evangelicals, Christian fundamentalists, and right-wing Republicans that exercise influence on U.S. relations with Israel. American policymakers also, not insignificantly, see Israel as an ally, a strategic asset, and a fellow democracy with which it shares a common ideology.

The evolution of U.S. foreign policy in respect to Israel and Palestine has been stark. In 1982 President Ronald Reagan laid out American proposals for achieving peace in the region and explicitly disapproved of the establishment of any new Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. In 1991, Reagan's successor, George Bush Sr. took the extraordinary step of making American aid conditional upon Israel ceasing construction of settlements on Palestinian land with US money. His insistence on this position paved way for Israel to engage for the first time in direct talks with the PLO, leading to the Oslo Accords which created a degree of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza, and potentially a path to future Palestinian sovereignty. Bush's failed re-election bid in 1992 prevented him from consolidating on the window of opportunity that his approach had opened.

In the early 2000s, President George W. Bush tried to defuse anti-American sentiment in the Arab and Islamic world by pressuring Israel to cease its expansionist settlement policies in the occupied territories and by calling for the creation of a Palestinian state. But the Bush administration failed to convince Israel to abandon its hardline policies and ended up supporting its antagonistic stance towards the Palestinians. President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017 reversed nearly seven decades of American policy and pushed the Palestinian question towards limbo.

The Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani has suggested a more visceral reason for the affinity between Israel and America rooted in their historical origins – both can be interpreted to be settler colonies. Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, he suggests, has affinities with the European treatment of the Native American population in the New World.

Afrikanerdom – the ideology of the defunct apartheid South African state – is not dissimilar to other settler nationalisms, namely American nationalism, and Zionism. In all three cases, settlers populated a territory, established roots, and secured those roots through violence against extant societies and overt and covert policies of racial exclusion. These nationalisms, inspired by notions of manifest destiny, tend to romanticize the myth of the pioneer-adventurer, the spirit of the frontier and the heroic subjugation of hostile terrain as promised lands. They do this while glossing over the -at times -genocidal aspects of territorial conquest.

Africa and Israel

The fate of Israel and the Middle East could have turned out differently. In the first decade of the 20th century, the British Empire offered fertile parts of Uganda and Kenya to the Zionist movement led by Dr Theodor Herzl. At the time, the dream was, among some Zionist thinkers, to settle a people without land in a land without people. The British believed that, since Palestine was under Ottoman Muslim rule, it would be easier to settle the Jews in East Africa and avoid complications with the Ottoman Empire. As the British colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain

wrote in his diary on December 21, 1902: “If Dr Herzl were at all inclined to transfer his efforts to East Africa, there would be no difficulty in finding suitable land for Jewish settlers but I assume that this country is too far removed from Palestine to have any attractions for him.”

After consideration in the Zionist conclave, it was concluded that a Jewish territory in East Africa was possible but only as a future annex of a Jewish homeland rather than its geographical epicenter. “Our starting point must be in or near Palestine,” Herzl wrote. “Later on, we could also colonize Uganda; for we have vast numbers of human beings who are prepared to emigrate.” Having been turned down by the Zionists, the British colonialists subsequently reserved those same fertile lands for white European settlers, and they became to be known as the “white highlands of Kenya.” This seizure of prime Kenyan real estate helped ignite the Mau Mau uprising.

In 1917, the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour committed Britain to the creation of a “national home” for the Jews. Three years later, the newly formed League of Nations handed Britain a mandate to govern Palestine. Winston Churchill, a lifelong Zionist, was instrumental to the creation of modern Israel. As colonial secretary in the 1920s, he worked to ensure that no Arab majority could impede Jewish immigration and frequently argued against the possibility of Arab self-determination and representative government in Palestine.

Africa, Israel and Palestine

Afro-Israeli relations began to deteriorate in the wake of the Six Day War – during which Israel bombed Egyptian airfields and seized the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula – and African efforts to mediate in the conflict were spurned by Tel Aviv.

In 1973, African countries severed diplomatic ties with Israel following its occupation of Egyptian territory at the end of the Yom Kippur War. It was a drastic shift from the mid-1960s when Israel had diplomatic relations with 32 African countries, and African states at the UN repeatedly voted against serial attempts by Arab and other nations to isolate Israel.

By the end of 1973, only Swaziland, Lesotho, Malawi and apartheid South Africa retained links with Tel Aviv. More than a decade of diplomatic isolation followed, sustained by a sense of African solidarity with Palestine even after Egypt had made peace with Israel. From the mid-1980s, the ice began to thaw as the Israeli government actively sought a rapprochement with African nations. In the intervening years, it had built security relations with some of the continent’s most unsavory despots including Mobutu Sese Seko, Samuel Doe and the Boer regime in Pretoria. By the end of the 1990s, 40 African nations had diplomatic links with Israel, a figure higher than the peak of the 1960s.

The African reaction to Israel’s current military offensive in Gaza has been decidedly mixed. In November 2023, the African Union (AU) criticized Israel’s military attacks on Gaza and called for stronger efforts for a diplomatic solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. “What happened there [Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023] is to be condemned; what was carried out from Gaza is to be condemned, but the answer was not proportionate,” said Comoros President Azali Assoumani, the current chair of the Union. At an African Union summit in Addis Ababa in

February, leaders condemned Israel's offensive and called for its immediate cessation. Moussa Faki, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, described Israel's offensive as the "most flagrant" violation of international humanitarian law and accused Israel of waging a war of extermination on Gaza's inhabitants. The AU then suspended Israel's observer status.

Beyond the AU's unequivocal stance, unanimity is hard to find elsewhere on the continent on the subject of Israel and Palestine. In addition to South Africa, Algeria, Sudan and Tunisia have expressed support for Palestine. On the other hand, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have expressed support for Israel. The sort of diplomatic riposte we saw from African nations in the late 1970s after the Yom Kippur War has not been forthcoming. Afro-Arab solidarity is not what it once was. It is a testament to Israel's insistent cultivation of relations on the continent.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has prioritized the strengthening of relations with African countries. The aim was, and remains, the forging of sympathies and allegiances that can neuter any attempt to isolate Israel in the international community. Netanyahu's tour of Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda in 2016 made him the first Israeli prime minister to visit Africa after the nearly three decade-long diplomatic rift between Israel and a majority of the countries on the continent. In 2021, Israel successfully (and controversially, in the view of some African nations) regained its observer membership status in the AU. In 2017, Netanyahu became the first leader outside of Africa to address the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Heads of State and Government Summit in Liberia.

Signaling his commitment to development diplomacy, Netanyahu told West Africa's leaders on that occasion: "In every field, our technology is there, it's ready to work with you, to provide solutions to some of the most pressing issues of Africa. We want to help your soil become more fertile, your water reusable, your cities safer, [and] your air cleaner."

Even when diplomatic relations between the African countries and Israel were cut in the 1970s, the latter stealthily maintained security and intelligence relations with some of the countries from which it was notionally estranged. Famously, the Mossad collaborated with Kenya's security forces in foiling a January 1976 plot by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to shoot down an Israeli airliner in Nairobi and the Israeli Defense Forces worked with Jomo Kenyatta's government to carry out Operation Thunderbolt – the spectacular July 1976 rescue of hostages held by the PFLP and German the Baader-Meinhof gang in Entebbe, Uganda, following their hijacking of an Air France plane.

Israel's good standing with Kenya endures as do its relations with Ethiopia whose traditional monarchy claims a part-Hebraic heritage and Solomonic pedigree. For Kenya and Ethiopia, the threat of terrorism in the Horn of Africa notably from al-Shabab in neighboring Somalia provides ample justification for partnership with Israel. Netanyahu's government has also pursued a rapprochement with the likes of Sudan, and extended its outreaches to Chad and Somalia, offering not just security expertise and weaponry but also development assistance.

The fractured African response to events in Gaza is also a sign of the extent to which Arab negrophobia rivals variants of racism elsewhere, especially as seen in the horrific ordeals of

black African migrants in the Maghreb. The sort of Afro-Arab solidarity that sustained the diplomatic embargo on Israel in the 1970s no longer exists.

The reaction of African nations to Gaza is also shaped by a pragmatic calculation of their interests, a preoccupation with domestic problems, and perhaps a sense of their own marginality globally. The leverage they had, even in part, in 1973 is no more. The dynamics are different. In 2009, Israel bombed Iranian convoys in Eastern Sudan allegedly ferrying weapons to Gaza. Unlike earlier Israeli military incursions into Africa such as the seizure of the Sinai Peninsula and the raid on Entebbe, the reaction to the airstrikes in Sudan consisted of muted outrage. In the past decade, Israeli defense, security and intelligence firms have deepened their penetration of African markets and governments – a maneuver which surely precludes these new clients from adopting any sort of radical anti-Zionist posture. Perhaps it is ultimately fruitless to seek a common position on Israel from a continent of 54 nations, each with their strategic calculi of their own interests.

The somewhat lukewarm African response to the unfolding catastrophe in Gaza also reflects the religious cleavages within the continent. Over the past four decades, Africa has witnessed the growth of the most exclusive strains of Islam and Christianity – Wahhabism and a brand of Pentecostal Christianity heavily influenced by American evangelical Christianity. Wahhabism has been the wellspring for some of the most virulent, violent extremist organizations in the Middle East and Africa while the American inspired Christianity on the continent subscribes to an eschatology which idealizes Israel as a Millennial Utopia, the very site of the second coming of Christ. For this reason, there is a distinct pro-Israel sensibility among African Christians of this persuasion. Indeed, in many respects, the Pentecostal Christian movement on the continent is an Africanized form of Christian Zionism.

Among the many ironies that have clouded the long running Israeli – Palestinian conflict is its popular depiction as a clash of religions rather than a clash of nationalisms, albeit one undergirded by sectarian passions. Palestinian nationalism evolved as a collective identity based on resistance to British, and later Zionist, occupation. The common perception of the conflict is that it pits a neo-Christian entity in Israel against an Islamic entity in Palestine. In this framing, the existence of Palestinian and Arab Christians is but an inconvenient wrinkle, and Christian Zionists extend no sympathy to their Palestinian brothers and sisters.

A related irony is that, as a result of wars waged by American neoconservatives with evangelical support in the Middle East and which toppled Iraq's Saddam Hussein and sought to depose Syria's Bashar al – Assad, the safety of Christian minorities in the region - long guaranteed by secular authoritarians- has been fatally compromised.

Incidentally, the cynical manipulation of religious sensibilities is a subtext of the Israeli – Palestinian crisis. In the 1970s, Israel actively funded the social and evangelical activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in the newly occupied Gaza and the West Bank as part of a “tactical alliance” against the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization which was then the foremost Palestinian resistance organization led by Yasser Arafat. The Israeli security establishment believed that the most effective way of subverting the Palestinian national movement was to

exploit Islam by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood as a means of undercutting Fatah and weakening Arafat.

Founded on December 13, 1987, the Islamic Resistance Movement (whose Arabic acronym " Hamas " also means "zeal") emerged from a Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Three years after the emergence of Hamas, Israel was forced to outlaw the extremists that it had previously used as its proxy counterweight to the PLO. Israel's divide-and-rule strategy successfully sowed strife between Hamas and Fatah militias in Palestinian-controlled areas but in Hamas, Israel inadvertently created a threat much greater than Arafat ever was.

The End of the Rules-Based Order

It is not merely the innocents of Palestine that are dying in Gaza. We also face the demise of the certitudes that have been the normative tapestry of the world order for almost a century. Israel, long indemnified against censure by its invocation of the Holocaust, and its casual weaponization of charges of antisemitism against any criticism of its policies, can no longer hide its extremism towards Palestinians.

Since 1948, Israeli elites have cast their nation as a Hebrew David in the midst of ravenous Arab and Persian Goliaths. Its survival, serial military victories, and the legendary derring-do of its spies, only burnished its self-mythologization as a people of ingenuity and resolve forged in the crucible of divine providence. Insofar as many people instinctively side with the underdog, the Jewish state won sympathy, admiration and grudging respect in different quarters for prevailing against the odds. Israel has also alchemized Europe's enduring guilt over its antisemitic past and the Holocaust into a stock of geopolitical capital unrivalled by any other nation on the planet.

However, Israel is no longer the underdog, and, in truth, it has never truly been. Armed by the United States and Europe, its military superiority in the Middle East has been long established. The ongoing assault on Gaza – the latest and the harshest in a long series of punitive expeditions against the Palestinians - purportedly in a bid to destroy Hamas – has exposed the colonial nature of the occupation. When Hamas attacked Israel, there was sympathy from across Africa, where many countries are dealing with terrorist threats. But as Israel's response grew steadily and overwhelmingly disproportionate, and careened into the territory of war crimes, that sympathy has been eroded. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, in strategic terms, Hamas is, in fact winning, while Israel is now reeling from a severe reputational damage.

It is also clear that Israel's relentless prosecution of atrocity and its defiance of international law could not have been possible without the complicity of its Western supporters. Whatever assumptions of Western moral legitimacy, let alone superiority, that somehow survived the catastrophic war-profiteering frauds of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, they are now coming to a gruesome end in Gaza. The haste with which France and Germany swept to Israel's defense at the ICJ merely replicated the litany of Euro-American vetoes of any attempt to censure Israel at the United Nations and Israel's capture of mainstream political elites on both sides of the Atlantic.

Israel has killed more civilians in Gaza than Libya's Muammar Gaddafi ever did in Benghazi. In that case, it was the threat of a looming massacre that supposedly triggered a NATO intervention in 2011, ostensibly to protect the civilian population but which rapidly morphed into a regime change operation that killed Gaddafi, dismembered Libya and destabilized the Sahel. Regardless, Israel's Western backers have continued to ply it with weapons and to defend its right to "self-defense." The contradictions are self-evident. The rest of the world, watching and learning from the carnage in Gaza, will no longer acquiesce to the trademarks of Western sanctimony – hypocritical double standards and selective invocations of international law.

Demography and Decimation

In the 1980s, Tel Aviv encouraged many Ethiopian Jews known as Falasha or Beta Israel to migrate to Israel as the Jewish state continued to consolidate itself. Israel used the migration of African immigrants, particularly Ethiopians Jews, to legitimize itself as a multicultural and democratic country, to deflect charges that it is an ethno-religious and racist enclave and, more importantly, to distract attention from the tribulations of indigenous Palestinians. Given the attention of the Israeli establishment to questions of race, it comes as no surprise that the status of Africans in Israel has grown increasingly precarious. Fearful of racial 'dilution', Israeli right-wing politicians have condemned the increasing numbers of Africans in their country and implemented anti-migration measures. In 2012, Miri Regev, currently Minister of Transport, National Infrastructure and Road Safety and a member of Netanyahu's Likud party, infamously described Sudanese migrants as "a cancer."

This fear of demographic subsumption is relevant. To hardliners, the stark choice that confronts Israel in the 21st century is between being a fortress state built on an overt apartheid regime against Arabs or a state so weak that federation with a burgeoning Palestine becomes plausible. But the latter scenario holds the possibility of Israeli identity becoming demographically overwhelmed by Palestinians, something that the Israeli government, under the ultra-right-wing leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, is seeking to avoid by deploying what many contend as genocidal violence. The means are ethnic cleansing, the continued promotion of illegal settlements in the West Bank, the large-scale massacres and starvation of Palestinians; the endgame is to permanently tip the demographic scales in Israel's favor.

Israel's onslaught in Gaza may ultimately be for nought because other global demographic trends are not in its favor. The constituencies in the West from which Israel has long demanded and received unquestioning allegiance are facing long-term demographic and political decline. The pro-Israel white Christian population of the US and Europe is shrinking. Massive migration to Europe, ironically largely driven by American wars in the Middle East, is destined to alter Europe's geopolitics and foreign policy. In another fifty years, the primary posture of Europe towards Israel will change from one of guilt and appeasement for the Holocaust to a withering contempt for Zionist oppression. Israel is now drifting inexorably towards pariah status.

In the eyes of a wealthy Euro-American Christendom, Israel was once an embattled Jewish enclave and a faithful outpost of the West in the Middle East. But, in the eyes of a more multicultural and secular Euro-Atlantic society, Israel is a white colonizing power and the last apartheid stronghold on earth. Consequently, like the defunct Afrikaner apartheid regime in

South Africa of the 1980s, Zionist apartheid is living on borrowed time. Israel's vulnerabilities will be amplified in a world in which American hegemony is supplanted by a multipolar order with ascendant powers – regional hegemons impervious to capture.

The tragedy unfolding in Gaza has also exposed the inadequacy of the post-1945 international system, the decaying foundations of Euro-Atlantic dominance and colonialities that have passed their sell-by dates.

Perhaps, in time, the rules-based order will be supplanted by a new consensus around the defense of international law and civilizational norms. This new consensus may reaffirm the equality of all human beings and achieve unanimity on what constitutes genocide. This is a possibility germinating amid the agony and the ruins of Gaza. For now, however, we face the prospects of an interregnum in which the nostrums of the global order have lost their efficacy, geopolitical dynamics are being renegotiated and the pillars of the coming world order remain uncertain.