

Report

Israeli Penetration into East Africa Objectives and Risks

*Fahad Yasii**

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his east African tour with its military, security, political and economic dimensions [Reuters]

Abstract

On 8 July 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concluded his East Africa tour, which included Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Rwanda, the first official visit by an Israeli prime minister to the region in decades.

In light of this visit, the researcher reviews part of the history of Israeli–African relations, which date back to the 1950s. Relations have fluctuated between intermittent disruptions on the one hand and an embrace of diplomatic normalisation on the other. As a result, Israel’s image in Africa has changed gradually into that of a typical state, until it finally succeeded in embedding itself in the African continent in general and in East Africa in particular.

Moreover, the researcher sheds light on the recent visit’s objectives, which range from strategic, political and security objectives to economic ones, with the East African region possessing vital shipping lanes overlooking the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Furthermore, during this visit doubts prevailed over the likelihood of Israel inciting the Nile Basin countries which currently support Egypt concerning Sudan's share of the Nile River.

The researcher also addresses the visit’s importance for both sides. This comes after Israel expressed concerns over the threats posed by jihadist movements to its interests in the region, which provide a fertile environment for coordination on the adoption of a new security strategy to curb extremist movements.

Finally, the researcher outlines the future of East African–Israeli relations, which are likely to witness remarkable growth in view of the significant extent of the two sides’ shared concerns at the political, economic and intelligence levels.

Introduction

On 8 July 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concluded his East Africa tour, which included visits to Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Rwanda, the first official visit by an Israeli prime minister to the region in decades. This visit was connected to Israel's security and strategic objective of penetrating the Nile Basin countries, in addition to acknowledging the region's economic importance.

History of Israeli–African relations

Israeli–African relations date back to the very beginning of the 1950s. These relations have changed over time, fluctuating between sporadic convergence and disruption, detente and rapprochement at different times due to regional and international political events. In another sense, Israeli relations with African countries, especially non-Arab ones, have witnessed a momentous shift over the past fifty years.

The golden age of Israel's penetration into Africa, which included the 1960s, ended definitively after the October 1973 war when Israeli aggression against Egypt, Syria and Jordan led to a change in Africans' perceptions of Israel's image, which went from being viewed as a young peaceful state to being seen as a strong, aggressive and expansionist one. Following a meeting of the Organisation of African Unity in November 1973 when the organisation decided to sever its diplomatic ties with Israel, African governments began to follow suit, ending their own diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. The motive behind the OAU's decision was its demand that Israel should withdraw from the occupied Arab territories and recognise the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. African countries, including those in East Africa, responded to this resolution by ending their own diplomatic relations with Israel, except for apartheid South Africa, which maintained relations due to different motives and reasons too numerous to mention.⁽¹⁾

Despite the severing of diplomatic ties, trade relations between Israel and African countries remained unaffected, while Israel sought to restore diplomatic relations. Notably, the years 1980 and 1981 were the last period of wholly severed diplomatic relations, as perceptions of Israel in Africa shifted gradually to its contemporary positive image as a model state, which prevails to this day. As a result, Israel finally succeeded in securing a foothold in the region by targeting various areas in need of support, such as agriculture and development.⁽²⁾

As in other African countries where Israel has formed warm relations with their respective leaders, Israel has formed close ties with East African leaders. Israel's cultivation of these ties shows an emerging trend whereby the state aims to develop a

broad base of loyal supporters among members of the African political elite, many of whom have been educated and trained in Israel.

Since announcing its independence in 1948, and even during the years of diplomatic estrangement between Israel and East African countries, Israel has provided military assistance to a few countries in East Africa, including Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, by various means, such as training their police and presidential guard forces.

In the intelligence field, Israel's activities in East Africa reached their peak in 1976 when Israeli commandos raided an Air France plane at Entebbe Airport in Uganda after a Palestinian group hijacked the plane, which was carrying 83 Israelis out of a total of 229 passengers, in order to demand that the Israelis on board be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners.

In the aftermath of the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad became active in the East Africa region under the pretext of combating terrorism. Israel's intelligence services have continued their operations in Africa to the present day, most notably in Kenya. In 2013, during an attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi by the Somali terror group, Al-Shabab, Israeli forces quickly intervened in support of Kenyan troops to regain control of the mall.

In addition, a large number of Israeli consultants and experts work in the ranks of these countries' armies to provide training and weapons, particularly air force munitions. This is clearly revealed by the Kenyan and Ugandan forces' Israeli-manufactured weapons, especially aircraft, gunboats, artillery, electronic devices and communications equipment. Israel has also worked in transferring technical skills to countries in the region by setting up training programs and establishing partnership companies, or at least by providing expertise and administrative skills to African companies.

In the economic and commercial fields, meanwhile, thousands of Israelis work in significant economic centres in East Africa, especially in the areas of trade, agricultural management and project services. In these areas, Israeli companies monopolise many of the economic activities in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia, as is demonstrated by the number of Israeli companies working in the region. In particular, the Israeli company, Solel Boneh, works in the construction sector, establishing air and seaports and constructing residential and government buildings. Other examples are Agrotop, which engages in the development of agriculture, CORE, which produces electronic equipment, as well as electrical and metal devices, and Motorola Israel, which is involved in extending electricity and water networks and importing water control devices, while another Israeli firm, Carmel Chemicals, which specialises in chemical production, has a number of projects in East Africa.

East African markets have also represented some of the most promising markets for Israeli arms manufacturers and traders since the racial, ethnic and religious conflicts of the 1960s, which have yet to end. Israeli arms have appeared in a number of African conflicts, including the Hanish Islands conflict between Eritrea and Yemen, and the bloody civil war between North and South Sudan. It's also arguable that Israeli weapons were a primary reason for the steadfastness of South Sudanese President Salva Kiir Mayardit's forces against the armed opposition led by his deputy, Riek Machar.(3)

For as long as relations have existed between Israel and East African countries, the former has taken advantage of the existence of regional security threats, especially in the period after the September 11 attacks of 2001. This led the Israeli leadership to once again reaffirm the centrality of East African countries to Israeli foreign policy, further strengthening its political, economic and security ties with the countries of the region.(4)

Netanyahu's East Africa visit: Objectives

The latest Israeli effort in East Africa has a number of objectives, ranging from political and military to security-related and economic aims. These objectives can be summarised as follows:

First: Strategic and political objectives

For Israel, East African countries play a crucially important role, as the region possesses vital sea lanes overlooking the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, which are essential to Israel's commercial and strategic interests. Indeed, 20 per cent of Israeli trade passes the Horn of Africa and travels through the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, upon which Israel depends for its trade with Africa, Asia, and Australia. As an entry point for its other activities, such as those related to economic and security issues, Israel has established diplomatic relations with the largest possible number of African countries. It has aimed to weaken African support for Arab issues and win the support of African public opinion. These efforts may cause Arabs to lose an important asset in political support by virtue of shifting the votes of the continent's countries in international organisations.

Second: Economic objectives

During Netanyahu's recent visit, Ethiopia and Israel signed cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding on capacity-building in the fields of agriculture, tourism and investment. Kenya and Israel also concluded agreements in the fields of health and immigration, in addition to a February 2016 agreement signed between the two nations in the field of agriculture and irrigation. In conjunction with the latest visit, the Israeli cabinet approved a proposal to open offices of Israel's Agency for Development Cooperation (MASHAV) in all four countries during Netanyahu's tour, and announced the allocation of \$13 million to promote economic relations and cooperation in the region.

This coincides with a period of rapid growth in Israeli investments in the Ethiopian market, especially in the areas of floriculture and agricultural processing. According to the staff of the Ethiopian Investment Commission, the number of Israeli projects in Ethiopia has now reached 187, with a combined value of 1.3 billion Ethiopian birr (equivalent to 58.4 million US dollars).

Similarly, the Rwandan Ministry of Agriculture contracted the Israeli firm Ebony Enterprises Limited to carry out a major irrigation project in Rwanda, with the two sides signing a memorandum of understanding at the ministry's headquarters in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, on 22 January 2007.

Israel is also involved in a massive joint project with Germany and Kenya to clean up the waters of Kenya's Lake Victoria, which covers an area of nearly 69,000 square kilometres and is the main upstream source of the Nile River. On 17 August 2012, representatives of the three countries met in Nairobi to sign an agreement for the major project, which aims to restore the lake's rich variety of fish and eradicate the invasive aquatic plants which have spread out of control in much of the lake. Once again, Israel appears to be incorporating a humanitarian dimension in its relations with African nations through this massive project, which is projected to provide employment opportunities to about five million people in countries bordering the lake, such as Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Bearing all this in mind, Netanyahu's recent visit to Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia reveals Israel's broad economic ambitions to further strengthen trade and investment relations with African countries, which may explain the large delegation that accompanied Netanyahu on his visit. The delegation of 80 people, including senior Israeli business leaders representing more than 50 Israeli firms, accompanied Netanyahu, in order to boost economic relations.

In addition, Israel also wishes to diversify its economic partnerships, ending what's viewed as their current over-reliance on the European and US markets. In the past few years, Israel has formed active relations with East African countries in the fields of trade and investment. Joint cooperation in trade is shown by the presence of Israeli offices and commercial companies in Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya, which serve to reinforce trade between Israel and those countries, given the increase in Israeli exports to countries in the region over the past five years.

In 2008, for instance, Israeli exports to Ethiopia amounted to \$18 million, while its imports from Ethiopia reached \$46 million. Israel exports chemicals, industrial machinery and software to Ethiopia, and imports agricultural products and tobacco from the country, with the levels of both exports and imports rising steadily; between the 1990s

and 2008, the value of Israel's annual exports to Ethiopia more than tripled, going from \$1.9 to \$5.8 million a year.⁽⁵⁾ Meanwhile, in 2007, the value of Israeli exports to Kenya amounted to \$97 million, while it imported \$22 million worth of goods from the country.

Third: Security and military objectives

Another priority of Netanyahu's recent tour was to address the rising Israeli concern about the threats posed by jihadist movements to its interests in the region, a subject which has become a major focus in Israeli relations with East African countries. Israel's objectives in this regard are to confront the jihadist movements and prevent any threats to its interests, such as the operations against Israeli and US targets over the last two decades e.g. the aforementioned attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, which is owned by a Jewish businessman.

Addressing the threats posed by Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabab, of carrying out operations in Kenya against Israeli interests remains crucial to Israel. In recent years, East African countries, especially Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, have become bases for Israeli intelligence services, provided with the latest monitoring devices, in order to try to understand what is going on in the Horn of Africa. This shift aims to reduce the spread of Islamic extremist groups in East Africa, which are considered to be a direct threat to Israel's security.

Consequently, the security pressures faced by regional countries, such as exposure to the threat of Al-Shabab, provides a fertile environment for coordination between Israel and East African countries and the strengthening of security efforts aimed at curbing extremist movements.

In this context, during his recent visit, Netanyahu indicated that Israel and the region's countries would work together to counter terrorism. Netanyahu's talks with African leaders also focused on security issues and the promotion of security cooperation between Israel and the region's nations. This indicates that the terrorism factor is a significant Israeli motive with regard to consolidating relations with countries in the region.

Fourth: The impact on the Nile Basin countries

The four countries visited by Netanyahu – Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda – include Nile Basin countries that are in favour of Egypt and Sudan sharing the Nile River's water resources. Thus, Netanyahu's visit to these countries corresponds with Israel's relentless efforts to turn upstream countries against downstream countries, especially the republics of Egypt and Sudan. Israel can achieve this by feeding and fuelling disputes with the Nile Basin countries in an attempt to increase its influence among the states governing the Nile's source, with a focus on establishing agricultural projects designed to draw water from Lake Victoria, which is co-owned by several East

African countries. Moreover, Israel seeks to portray Egypt and Sudan as the only countries benefiting from the Nile's waters.

Five: Encouraging the completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

The immense significance of Netanyahu's visit to Ethiopia surpassed the importance of his visits to the other states included on his tour, despite the fact that Israel's relationship with Kenya is older than its relationship with Ethiopia. Indeed, Kenya is considered a main base through which Israel monitors what is going on in the African region.

It's possible that Netanyahu's visit to Ethiopia indicates Israel's covert support for Addis Ababa at a time when the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has begun to store water – without Egypt's approval and following the failure of recent negotiations; this emphasises the seriousness of the challenge facing Egypt, demonstrating that its argument with Ethiopia over the dam is not technical but rather related to significant regional political goals.

At the same time, Israel is attempting to guarantee its own future water security and acquire a guaranteed share of the Nile River water through its support for the dam project.⁽⁶⁾ Netanyahu's promises during the recent tour to help Ethiopia benefit from its water resources in developing agriculture and supply the country with Israeli technology raise several questions about the visit's implications and objectives, not to mention its timing a few days before the signing of contracts concerning technical studies on the Renaissance Dam.⁽⁷⁾

Egyptian media reports have minimised any mention of possible negative effects of Israel's role in Egyptian interests in the Nile Basin. Egypt maintains eight embassies in all of the Basin countries, while the Israeli diplomatic presence in the same countries is limited in comparison with embassies in only three of the nations, namely Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Behind the scenes in Egypt, however, there will be many negative reflections on the Israeli prime minister's visit with regard to Egypt's own water security, especially in light of Netanyahu's promises to the Ethiopian Representatives Council to support Ethiopia in taking advantage of its water resources. Gradually easing the potential negative impact requires Egyptian intervention against the convergence of interests between diverse Israeli, Egyptian and African parties.

The future of Israeli–East African relations in light of the Arab absence

Israel's relationship with East African countries is set to experience remarkable growth in the next few years due to the high level of mutual interests between the two sides in the political, economic and intelligence fields. It is worth noting that the strong relations between East African countries and Israel are the result of an Israeli strategy that began

early in the country's history. In other words, this policy was implemented shortly after the emergence of the Israeli entity in 1948 in an attempt to circumvent the Arab hostility towards the state. Indeed, the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, formulated this strategy, which emphasised strengthening ties with non-Arab countries surrounding Arab nations. Ben-Gurion also called for the launching of efforts from those countries to stir up sectarian, ethnic and religious strife in Arab societies in order to distract them from the Arab–Israeli conflict and deplete their capabilities in other conflicts. This strategy was clearly demonstrated through Israel's role in Sudan and its support for popular movements incubated in Kenya, Uganda and other countries in the region.

Israel's recent strategy in East Africa constitutes part of the Arab–Israeli conflict and part of the Israeli security doctrine based on legitimate acquisition, dominion and control of the region. It is also based on encircling the Arab countries as well as depriving them of influence within any region considered promising in the fields of trade and investment.

Conclusion

Netanyahu's visit to several East African countries reveals Israel's deep penetration of the African continent, particularly the Horn of Africa, which poses an enduring threat to Arab national security in light of Arab governments' negligence towards East Africa. This gives Tel Aviv a valuable opportunity to engage in broad cooperation in most East African capitals and establish security, military and economic bases in a region considered promising in the fields of trade and investment.

Fahad Yasiin is a researcher at Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.

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