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Israeli Observer Status at the African Union: What Do They Gain?

Unit for Political Studies

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Almost two weeks after Israel accepted an offer of observer status to the African Union, seven Arab countries, namely Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania, Comoros and Djibouti, submitted their objection to the action taken by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki. They argued that the move “is unacceptable at the discretion of the President of the Commission. It is a procedural and political violation” and a violation of the criteria for granting observer status to the African Union. The rest of the Arab league member states of the African Union, namely Morocco, Sudan and Somalia, remained silent. Algeria and South Africa had already objected to this move early on.⁽¹⁾

The letter was also signed by Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Palestine and Yemen, in addition to the delegation of the Arab League, expressing their rejection of the step taken by the Chairperson of the African Commission on 22 July 2021, “on a political and sensitive issue on which the African Union, at its highest decision-making levels, issued clear decisions for a long time that express its firm position in support of the Palestinian cause, opposed to all of Israel’s practices against the brotherly Palestinian people, which contradict the supreme interest of the Union, its values, ideals and decisions.” The seven signatories demanded the reintroduction of the debate over Israel’s application to join the African Union at the next Executive Council session, within the framework of an Arab effort led by Algeria and supported by South Africa, Nigeria and other African countries to rescind the decision to admit Israel as an observer member of the union.⁽²⁾

Rationale for Granting Israel Observer Status in the African Union

The acceptance of Israel’s membership as an observer state in the AU has sparked a great deal of controversy inside and outside the organization, given the objection of so many member states to the measure taken unilaterally by the Chairperson of the Commission, Moussa Faki. Israel’s requests to join the organization was rejected three times before in 2013, 2015, and 2016. South Africa has made it clear that in addition to the obvious political considerations that have prompted in the past to reject the State of Israel’s application to join the African Union as an observer, there are legal considerations that place Israeli behaviour in conflict with the values enshrined in the African Union Charter. How can an organization that consistently supports the right of the Palestinian people in their struggle for the establishment of an independent state,⁽³⁾ and calls on Israel to respect its obligations under international law, grant it observer status? Especially since the Israeli request was not discussed with the member states in the 34th session of the African Union Conference held on 6 - 7 February 2021.⁽⁴⁾

1 “Seven Arab countries voice objection to Israel’s observer status in African Union,” *MENA AFFAIRS*, 5/7/2021, accessed on 6/7/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3CqHqIT>.

2 See the full [Arabic] text: “7 Arab Countries Object to Granting Israel Observer Status in the African Union,” *The New Arab*, 3/8/2021, accessed on 5/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jtiPdN>.

3 The Palestinian Authority has been an observer member of the African Union since 2013.

4 « Statut d'observateur à l'entité sioniste: Pretoria dépose une objection auprès de l'UA, » *Algérie Presse Service*, 29/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jlQB4p>



The legal advisory body of the African Union had called for amending the articles of the Constitutive Act of the Union, stated in the meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives and Legal Experts on Legal Issues, in item (5) of the agenda, entitled: “Examining the draft criteria for granting observer status and the accreditation system to the Union The African Union”, Document No. EX.CL/161 (VI). The body called for “a review of the current standards that were in place under the Organization of African Unity to reflect the reality of the African Union, and to establish a formal system for submitting credentials, especially with regard to (...) in non-African countries in light of the growing role of the African Union in international affairs.”⁽⁵⁾ It is an initiative adopted by Algeria, through which it stresses the need to amend the Charter of the African Union, to ensure that no country from outside the continent, based on the occupation of the territory of others, is allowed to obtain any status within the Union.⁽⁶⁾ It seems that Algeria’s initiative also seeks to prevent the African Union Commission from being isolated in sensitive decisions such as those taken by Moussa Faki, who has been accused of corruption, sexual harassment, and intimidation in the commission, according to a report issued recently by the International Crisis Group.⁽⁷⁾

Israel’s Efforts to Join the African Union

Although the decision to accept Israel as an observer member of the African Union is a unilateral decision made by the African Union Commission, it reflects Israeli interest in the African continent and recent Israeli breakthroughs in the co-opting of many of its countries, and normalization with others, including Arab countries. Israel reached normalization agreements with Morocco and Sudan (2020) and established diplomatic relations with Chad (2019), where Moussa Faki served as Prime Minister from 2003-2005, and Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2008-2017, before his election as Chairman of the African Union Commission in 2017.

After visiting Chad in September 2020, to discuss the possibility of opening a Chadian embassy in occupied Jerusalem and strengthening bilateral economic cooperation, former Israel PM Netanyahu said that “Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is returning to Israel.”⁽⁸⁾ This visit was preceded by tours that began in June 2014, led by former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, in five

5 the Executive Council: “Draft Report of the Meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives and Legal Experts of Member States on Various Legal Issues”, Seventh Regular Session, Sirte, 28/6-2/7/2005, accessed on 3/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/37nmDYc>.

تقرير المجلس التنفيذي حول: “مشروع تقرير اجتماع لجنة الممثلين الدائمين والخبراء القانونيين للدول الأعضاء عن مختلف المسائل القانونية”، الدورة العادية السابعة، سرت، 28 يونيو - 2 يوليو 2005، شوهد في 3/8/2021، في: <https://bit.ly/37nmDYc>

6 Othman Lahyani, “Israel is an Observer in the African Union: The Plot of Its Hero the Chairperson of the Commission,” *The New Arab*, 3/8/2021, accessed on 3/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3yjkdkB>.

عثمان لحيانى، «إسرائيل مراقباً في الاتحاد الأفريقي: حيلة بطلها رئيس المفوضية»، *العربي الجديد*، 2021/8/3، شوهد في 2021/8/3، في: <https://bit.ly/3yjkdkB>

7 “Les dossiers prioritaires de Moussa Faki Mahamat à la tête de la Commission de l’UA,” *Radio France International*, 7/2/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2TSAyT4>.

8 “Netanyahu: Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is returning to Israel” *The Jerusalem Post*, 23/2/2016, accessed on 6/8/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3fL0Kqm>.

African countries: Rwanda, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Ethiopia and Kenya, to promote Israel's efforts to gain observer the status in the African Union.⁽⁹⁾

In 2016, Israel tried to strengthen its presence again through a four-country tour by Netanyahu, which started in Uganda, then Kenya and Rwanda, to Ethiopia; At the time, Israel allocated a budget of 13 million USD to strengthen economic relations with African countries.⁽¹⁰⁾ In October 2017, Israel pushed to organize an Israeli-African summit in Lomé, Togo, which brought together African heads of state with the exception of the Arab Maghreb. But the summit was cancelled in a blow to Netanyahu's efforts to gain votes for his African Union membership project.⁽¹¹⁾ This did not prevent him from strengthening Israel's political, military and intelligence influence, however, especially in Ethiopia and Rwanda.

The main motives behind Israel's increased diplomatic activity in Africa are clear.⁽¹²⁾ It is, first, part of its strategy to influence the neighbouring Arab region through alliances in the surrounding regions. Second, it is part of a strategy that seeks to win support for Israel at the global level. It hopes that its accession to the African Union will mean that African countries do not vote against it in international forums, or that they remain neutral. Third, like other emerging international powers, Israel seeks to exploit the economic potential of the continent, seizing opportunities in the technology market, arms trade, specialized security technologies, mining, energy, infrastructure, and others; Fourth, Israel seeks to negate its image as a racist and occupying power by being accepted by third world countries in general, all the more urgent as its label as an apartheid state spreads. Finally, the east African coast and the Nile Basin remain a strategic and vital area that pushes its policies towards Africa forward.⁽¹³⁾

The Decline of the Arab role in Africa

Israel's presence is increasing in the African continent, which was one of the most prominent supporters of Arab causes during the first decades of colonial liberation. Meanwhile the rift is widening today between the Arab region and Africa, with the most influential Arab powers in the continent, especially Egypt, losing their African reach in favour of new African powers, led by Ethiopia, which has close relations with Israel. Despite the relatively belated objection of the seven Arab countries referred to earlier, other Arab countries have remained silent about the announcement that Israel has obtained observer membership in the African Union, despite the fact that the resolution poses

9 Media reports stated that, on September 26, 2014, Israel sent a delegation to the African Union Summit in Malabo (Equatorial Guinea) to represent it as an observer. But the delegation faced the rejection of the rotating president of the African Union summit at the time, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, and delegations of member states that immediately demanded the departure of the delegation from the conference centre. See: Esma Ben Said, "Israël pourra-t-il convaincre l'Union Africaine de lui ouvrir les bras?" *Anadolu Agency*, 11/7/2016, accessed on 3/7/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3xnWBi2>.

10 "Netanyahu Starts a 'Historic' African Tour from Uganda," *Al Jazeera Net*, 4/7/2016, accessed on 3/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2VyfxNP>.

11 Kifah Zboon, "Cancellation of the African-Israeli Summit in Togo", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 12/9/2017, accessed on 3/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2WYlp3S>.

12 So far, Israel has diplomatic relations with 40 of the 55 countries that make up the African Union.

13 Khalid Chegraoui, Rida Lyammouri & Maha Skah, "Emerging Powers in Africa Key Drivers, Differing Interests, and Future Perspectives," Policy Center for the New South, 10/11/2020, p. 21.

an explicit threat to the security and interests of many Arab African countries, and others that have interests and presence in Africa. In addition, it comes only two months after major Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, and during the escalation of settlement measures and practices carried out by Israel against the Palestinian people under a right-wing religious extremist government.

In the face of the cold Arab reactions, African countries need to justify their silence as well. They have long been committed to supporting the Palestinian cause, constituting a stumbling block on the way to Israel's acceptance as an observer member, especially during South Africa's presidency of the African Union (2012-2017). It stuck to its position and informed the Union Commission of its objection to the decision to grant Israel observer status, and demanded that this sensitive issue be included in the agenda of the Executive Council. With the continuation of internal crises in Libya and the impact of this on its presence in African issues, and with Morocco and Sudan normalizing their relations with Israel, only Algeria responded to efforts to withdraw the resolution, as it began to mobilize the positions of a group of African countries opposed to the resolution, including, so far, South Africa, Tunisia, Eritrea, Senegal, Tanzania, Niger, Comoros, Gabon, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Mali and Seychelles. Other countries are likely to join the effort.

Conclusion

Israel realizes the importance of being officially recognized in the African Union, although it has official and secret relations with 46 Arab and African countries, within the framework of military, security and economic arrangements, including arms sales, military training and technology. This enabled it not only to make political gains, but also to realize a range of economic interests.⁽¹⁴⁾ Israel would not have been able to penetrate Africa had it not been for the decline in the Arab role and interest in the main issues of concern to the continent, and the normalization of the Arabs themselves with Israel. And if the efforts of Algeria, South Africa and other African countries fail, Israel's accession to the African Union as an observer will represent a moral victory above all, in addition to some privileges, including access to official channels to influence issues that concern its interests. Its main goal will be to undermine African sympathy with the Palestinian cause, which will be reflected not only on Palestine, but on the entire Arab region. This explains the celebratory tone with which Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid announced the news of his country's admission as an observer in the African Union, as the culmination of twenty years of successful efforts.⁽¹⁵⁾

14 The Israeli Ministry of Economy announced that \$700 million awaits Israeli companies interested in expanding their exports to Africa, which participated in a conference on business opportunities in Africa (2018). This will be reinforced by Israel's accession to the African Union. See: Israeli Ministry of Economy, "Israeli Exports Heading to Africa", 5/12/2018, accessed on 3/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3rVqeXd>.

15 "Israël est de retour," *République Togolaise*, 22/7/2021, accessed on 3/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3CjicMz>.