

'Solidarity of Action:' Is Africa Reclaiming Its Historic Role as the Center of Palestinian Solidarity?

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ABSTRACT *Solidarity against the colonial regime is one of the keys to overcoming the oppressor. This is why the 20th century, which is seen as the century of decolonization, experienced many demonstrations of solidarity from Africa to America. Palestine's long resistance against the Israeli colonial project should be considered as another decolonization movement. Unfortunately, many Arab regimes have not shown solidarity with Palestine in recent years. While the Arab states have hesitated to show full solidarity, it is the African continent that has stepped in, internationalizing the debate regarding genocide. This is, indeed, not limited to Africa. South American states also show their support for Palestine and have halted their relations with Israel. How do we make sense of this solidarity, from Namibia to South Africa and from Nicaragua to Cuba? This commentary analyzes the evolution of Global South solidarity with Palestine since the foundation of Israel, with a more focused focus on the African continent. It demonstrates that as decolonial nations, African states have once again shown their solidarity with Palestine, even though there have been some hesitant times due to realpolitik and the U.S. role in protecting Israel's status.*

Keywords: Africa, Palestine, Israel, Solidarity, Colonialism, Global South, South Africa, Genocide

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Introduction

“The inter-African solidarity must be a solidarity of fact, a solidarity of action, a solidarity concrete in men, in equipment, in money.” Frantz Fanon wrote these words in “The African Revolution” 57 years ago.¹ The unity of African nations remains a prerequisite for the continent and its people to ensure that any process of decolonization takes place outside the confines of former colonial masters and that neo-colonialism does not achieve what traditional colonialism couldn’t.

If one swaps the term “inter-Africa solidarity” with “inter-Arab” or “inter-Muslim solidarity” and applies these terms to the current Israeli war in Gaza, Fanon’s call for solidarity and unity will acquire a new and even more urgent meaning. The urgency stems from the fact that an active state of genocide has been carried out against the Palestinian people in Gaza especially since October 7, 2023. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have perished in the ongoing war, and, according to the *Lancet* medical journal, the number could reach 186,000.²

Though global solidarity with Gaza has grown by leaps and bounds, there are a few indications that Arab or Muslim solidarity has grown to the point of becoming a political factor, capable of pressuring Israel, the U.S., and other supporters of Tel Aviv. In fact, the opposite is true. While countries like the South American nation of Bolivia severed ties with Israel,³ Arab countries that have diplomatic

ties with the Israeli regime have not followed suit. Furthermore, due to the restrictions on Israeli and other ships that transport goods to Israel by Yemen’s Ansarallah group, some Arab countries have taken it upon themselves to ensure that Israel does not suffer any shortages in either food or fuel. The extension of the land corridor through several Arab countries, starting with the UAE and ending with Jordan, was created⁴ and sustained while Palestinians in Gaza continue to suffer an acute famine, as reported by the United Nations.⁵

Aside from the “active pseudo-solidarity,” another phrase used by Fanon in his book, Arab governments have, in fact, shown “solidarity of action” with Israel. Tellingly, some African countries, however, remained committed to the Palestinian people, and despite U.S. pressures and Israeli promises of aid, their solidarity with Palestine has become even stronger since the start of the recent invasion of Gaza.

Namibia Leads the Way

The distance between Gaza and Namibia is counted as thousands of kilometers, but historically, they are close. This is why Namibia was one of the first countries to take a strong stance against the Israeli genocide in Gaza.⁶ Namibia was colonized by the Germans in 1884,⁷ while the British colonized Palestine in the 1920s,⁸ handing the territory to the Zionist settler colonizers in 1948. Though the ethnic and religious makeup of both

Palestine and Namibia are vastly different, the historical experiences are similar.

It is easy, however, to assume that the history that unifies many countries in the Global South is that of Western exploitation and victimization. Though there is much truth to the assumption, it merely tells half of the story. It is also a history of collective struggle and resistance. Namibia has been inhabited since prehistoric times. Over the course of thousands of years, this long-rooted history has allowed Namibians to establish a sense of belonging to the land and to one another, something that the Germans did not understand or appreciate.

When the Germans colonized Namibia, giving it the name of 'German Southwest Africa,' they did what all other Western colonialists have done from Palestine to South Africa, in fact, to virtually all Global South countries. They attempted to divide the people, exploited their resources, and butchered those who resisted. Though a country with a small population, Namibians resisted their colonizers,⁹ resulting in a German decision to simply exterminate the natives, literally killing the majority of the population.¹⁰

Since the start of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, Namibia has answered the call for solidarity from the Palestinians, along with many African and South American countries, including Colombia, Nicaragua, Cuba, South Africa, Brazil, and China, among

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others.¹¹ Though intersectionality is a much-celebrated notion in Western academia, no academic theory is needed for oppressed, colonized nations in the Global South to exhibit solidarity with one another. So, when Namibia took a strong stance against Israel's largest military supporter in Europe, Germany, it did so based on Namibia's total awareness of its history.¹² The German genocide of the Nama and Herero people (1904-1907), is known as the "first genocide of the 20th century."¹³ The ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza shall be known as the first genocide of the 21st century. The unity between Palestine and Namibia is now cemented through mutual suffering.

The typical analysis of why Germany continues to support Israel is explained on the basis of German guilt over the Holocaust.¹⁴ This explanation, however, is partly illogical and partly erroneous. Illogical because if Germany has indeed internalized any guilt from its previous mass killings,

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it would make no sense for Berlin to add yet more guilt by allowing Palestinians to be butchered en masse. In other words, if guilt indeed exists, it is not genuine.

And erroneous because it completely overlooks the German genocide in Namibia. In fact, it took the German government until 2021 to acknowledge the horrific butchery that took place, ultimately agreeing to pay merely one billion euros in ‘community aid,’ which will be allocated over the course of three decades.¹⁵

The German government’s support of the Israeli war on Gaza is not motivated by guilt, but by a power paradigm that governs the relations among colonial countries. Many countries in the Global South understand this logic very well, thus the growing solidarity with Palestine. Reaction against the Israeli brutality in Gaza, but also admiration of the Palestinian “sumud,” the people’s steadfast perseverance, resilience, and resistance, are inspiring the Global South to reclaim its centrality in anti-colonial liberation struggles.

The revolution in the Global South outlook –culminating in South Africa’s case at the International Court of Justice, however, indicates that the change is not the outcome of a collective emotional reaction. Instead, it is part and parcel of the shifting relationship between the Global South and the Global North.

New Discourse

In fact, various regions of the African Continent have been undergoing a process of geopolitical restructuring for years. The anti-French rebellions in West Africa,¹⁶ demanding true independence from the continent’s former colonial masters, in addition to the intense geopolitical competition – involving Russia, China, and others – are all signs of changing times. And with this rapid rearrangement, a new political discourse and popular rhetoric are emerging, often expressed in the revolutionary language emanating from Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and others.¹⁷

But the shift is not happening on the rhetorical front only. The rise of BRICS as a powerful new platform for economic integration between Asia and the rest of the Global South has opened up the possibility that alternatives to Western financial and political institutions are very much possible. In 2023, it was revealed that BRICS countries now hold 32 percent of the world’s GDP compared to 30 percent held by the G-7 countries.¹⁸ There is much political value to this as four of the five original founders of

BRICS are strong and unapologetic supporters of the Palestinians.

Israel, like other regional powers, has understood the significance of the rise of the Global South and the potential of Africa as an economic source of raw material and an ever-expanding market. Equally important is the significance of African countries as potential political partners in Tel Aviv's quest for normalization with its former foes in the region and beyond.

Israel's Scramble for Africa

Thus, Israel has initiated a process of incorporating Africa into its political domain for many years. The push for normalization with the continent was renewed once more by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The gateway to Africa, per U.S. and Israeli understanding in Kenya; thus, on July 5, 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu kick-started Israel's own 'scramble for Africa' with a visit to Nairobi, which was described as historic by the Israeli media.¹⁹

Indeed, that was the first visit by an Israeli prime minister in the last 50 years. After spending some time in Nairobi, where he attended the Israel-Kenya Economic Forum alongside hundreds of Israeli and Kenyan business leaders, Netanyahu moved on to Uganda, where he met leaders from other African countries, including South Sudan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. Within the same month, Israel announced the renewal of diplomatic ties between Israel and Guinea.²⁰

A new Israeli strategy flowed from there. More high-level visits to Africa and triumphant announcements about new joint economic ventures and investments followed. In June 2017, Netanyahu took part in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), held in the Liberian capital, Monrovia. There, he went as far as rewriting history.²¹ "Africa and Israel share a natural affinity," Netanyahu claimed in his speech. "We have, in many ways, similar histories. Your nations toiled under foreign rule. You experienced horrific wars and slaughters. This is very much our history." With these words, Netanyahu attempted not only to hide Israel's colonial intentions but also rob Palestinians of their own history.²²

Moreover, the Israeli leader had hoped to crown his political and economic achievements with the Israel-Africa Summit, an event that was meant to officially welcome Israel, not to a specific African regional alliance, but to the whole of Africa. However, in September 2017, the event organizers decided to postpone it indefinitely after it was confirmed to be taking place in Lome, the capital of Togo, on October 23-27 of that same year.²³ What was seen by Israeli leaders as a temporary setback was the result of intense, behind-the-scenes lobbying of several African and Arab countries, including South Africa and Algeria. When, on July 22, 2021, the African Union Commission granted Israel observer status membership, that move seemed the culmination of years of relentless Is-

South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor speaks to press members following the ICJ ruling for Gaza in Lahey, Netherlands on January 26, 2024.

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raeli efforts aimed at co-opting Africa's largest political institution.

Failed History of Normalization

Starting in the early 1950s to the mid-1970s, Israel's African network was constantly expanding. The 1973 War, however, brought that affinity to an abrupt end. Ghana, in West Africa, officially recognized Israel in 1956, just eight years after Israel was established atop the ruins of historic Palestine. What seemed like an odd decision at the time –considering Africa's history of Western colonialism and anti-colonial struggles– ushered in a new era of African-Israeli relations. By the early 1970s, Israel had established a strong position for itself on the continent. On the eve of the 1973 Israeli-Arab War, Israel had full diplomatic ties with 33 African countries.²⁴

“The October War,” however, presented many African countries with a stark choice: siding with Israel –a country born out of Western colonial intrigues– or the Arabs, who are connected to Africa through historical, political, economic, cultural, and religious bonds. Most African countries opted for the latter choice. One after the other, African countries began severing their ties with Israel. Soon enough, no African state other than Malawi, Lesotho, and Swaziland had official diplomatic relations with Israel.

Then, the continent's solidarity with Palestine went even further. The Organization of African Unity –the precursor to the African Union– in its 12th ordinary session held in Kampala in 1975, became the first international body to recognize, on a large scale, the inherent racism in Israel's Zion-

ist ideology by adopting Resolution 77 (XII).²⁵ This very Resolution was cited in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379,²⁶ adopted in November of that same year, which determined that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” Resolution 3379 remained in effect until it was revoked by the Assembly under intense American pressure in 1991. Since Israel remained committed to that same Zionist, racist ideology of yesteryears, the only rational conclusion is that it was Africa, not Israel, that changed. Indeed, that was the case, and the reasons below apply not only to African countries but other traditional supporters of Palestine throughout the Global South.

First, the collapse of the Soviet Union. That seismic event resulted in the subsequent isolation of pro-Soviet African countries, which, for years, stood as the vanguard against American, Western, and, by extension, Israeli expansionism and interests on the Continent. Second, the collapse of the unified Arab front in Palestine. That front has historically served as the moral and political frame of reference for the pro-Palestine, anti-Israel sentiments in Africa. This started with the Egyptian government signing the Camp David Agreement in 1978-1979 and, later, the Oslo Accords between the Palestinian leadership and Israel in 1993. Covert and overt normalization between Arab countries and Israel continued unabated over the last three decades, resulting in the extension of diplomatic ties between Israel and several Arab countries, including Af-

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rican-Arab countries, such as Sudan and Morocco. Other Muslim-majority African countries also joined the normalization efforts. They include Chad, Mali, and others.

Third, the ‘scramble for Africa’ was renewed with a vengeance. The neo-colonial return to Africa brought back many of the same usual suspects – Western countries, which are, once more, realizing the untapped potential of Africa in terms of markets, cheap labor, and resources. A driving force for Western re-involvement in Africa is the rise of China as a global superpower with a keen interest in investing in Africa’s dilapidated infrastructure.

Tellingly, Washington does not only serve as Israel’s benefactor in Palestine and the Middle East but worldwide as well, and Israel is willing to go to any length to exploit the massive leverage it holds over the U.S. government. This stifling paradigm, which has been

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at work in the Middle East region for decades, is also at work throughout Africa. For example, in 2020, the U.S. agreed to remove Sudan from the state-sponsored terror list in exchange for Khartoum's normalization with Israel.²⁷ In truth, Sudan, now embroiled in a devastating civil war, is not the only country that understands –and is willing to engage in– this kind of ‘pragmatic’ –read under-handed– political barter. Others also have learned to play the game well.

Unfortunately, albeit expectedly, as Africa's normalization with Israel grew, Palestine became increasingly a marginal issue on the agendas of many African governments, who are far more invested in realpolitik –or simply remaining on Washington's good side– than honoring the anti-colonial legacies of their nations. Israel's diplomatic “return” to Africa, however, was not an easy task, as demonstrated in what took place on the day of February 18, 2023 –just a few months before the start of the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Unwelcomed in Africa

The sight of Israeli Ambassador Sharon Bar-Li and other Israeli delegates being escorted out of the opening ceremony of the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa on February 18, 2023, was historic.²⁸ The very moment that was meant to crown many years of Israeli diplomacy on the African continent turned within a few seconds to represent Israel's failure in Africa.

Unable to fathom the breakdown of its diplomatic and political efforts, Tel Aviv responded to Bar-Li's removal with a war of words against African countries, accusing them of spearheading a campaign aimed at blocking Israel's observer status. Referring to a “small number of extremist states like South Africa and Algeria,” a spokesperson for the Israeli foreign ministry alluded to a plot, supposedly hatched by Iran and carried out by African governments that are “driven by hate” for Israel.

The undiplomatic nature of the ministry's language is a major shift compared to the upbeat, diplomatic rhetoric used by Netanyahu when he visited Africa to speak at the ECOWAS Summit in Liberia in 2017: “Israel is coming back to Africa.. and Africa is coming back to Israel.”²⁹ Nevertheless, for Netanyahu, the benefits outweigh the disappointments, especially as Tel Aviv fully understands that Africa, more than ever since the Berlin Conference in 1884, has once again become a major contested geopolitical space. That's where the breakdown of Israel's calculations

happened, thus the humiliating episode in Addis Ababa.

Three weeks after the AU decision, the South African parliament voted in favor of a motion that downgrades the country's embassy in Tel Aviv to a mere liaison office. That, too, was a matter of principle, namely as a "first step" that aims to pressure Israel "to comply with human rights, recognize the rights of the Palestinian people (and) their right to exist."

The Israeli war and genocide in Gaza galvanized the historic solidarity between the Palestinian people and the Global South in an even more convincing way. The Israeli genocide in Gaza has become the litmus test for all notions, whether those of the centrality of international and humanitarian laws, often championed by the West, or solidarity based on religion, identity, or shared collective historical experiences.

As countries like South Africa and Namibia, among many others are stepping up their solidarity with Palestine, countries in the Arab and Muslim world, and others in the Global South that have traditionally revolved in the 'pro-Palestinian' domain have failed miserably.

Aside from the 'solidarity of action' exhibited by some Arab countries to sustain Israel economically –and possibly in other ways as well– countries like Namibia continue to back their words at international institutions, with action. On August 27, 2024 a vessel suspected by Namibian author-

ities of transporting military cargo for Israeli use in the ongoing war on Gaza was prevented from docking in the Southern African nation.³⁰

Namibian Justice Minister Yvonne Dausab told state media that the ship was halted due to carrying "explosive material destined for Israel."³¹ The logic behind Namibia's behavior is entirely situated within a solidarity paradigm. In an interview with the Palestine Chronicle during a solidarity conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, Namibia's Justice Minister, Yvonne Dausab, said that her country's presence was important because Namibia's freedom is itself "a product of international solidarity."³²

"Today we are aware of (...) what is happening with Palestine. We cannot stand idle in the face of the kinds of killing, and ethnic cleansing that we see in Palestine," she added. A similar sentiment emanated from former South Africa's Foreign Minister, who has championed the Palestinian case at the international forum. "It has never been so urgent for progressive forces around the world to come together in a collective effort to exert maximum pressure to end the genocidal campaign underway in Gaza and to end the apartheid system of Israel in the occupied territories," Pandor said.³³

Conclusion

Grassroots solidarity and mere political positions are two separate and distinct experiences. The former ac-

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quires its meaning from the support of ordinary people. If this support reaches a critical mass, it could have a direct impact on politicians and ultimately, governments. Mere political positions, however, especially if they do not enjoy popular backing, are fleeting. While they can nominally be guided by moral positions, largely, they are mere strategic calculations, bound to the opportunism of politicians, political parties, and the geopolitical interests of states.

Israel, at one point, thought it had won back Africa or, in the words of Netanyahu himself, "come back to Africa."³⁴ That posturing, however, was an outcome of specific political circumstances linked to the interests of few African regimes, whose calculations were hardly situated in the rights of the Palestinian people or the centrality of international and humanitarian laws.

The ongoing Israeli war on Gaza, however, has once more shifted dynamics in favor of Palestinians, but only because of the massive solidarity that the Palestinian struggle has

acquired in Africa and the rest of the world in recent months. This solidarity promises to have long-term political outcomes, as opposed to the short-term outcomes achieved by Israel to feed the personal interests of a prime minister and his government.

Indeed, this is Africa's 'solidarity of fact' and 'solidarity of action' at work, playing out, not only in terms of the unity of Africa itself, but in serving as the core of a global solidarity movement around Palestine. The consequences of this action should be enough to shift the epicenter of global solidarity to Africa, precisely where it belongs. ■

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