

COMMENTARY

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Military Ties Bind Israel and Kenya

Alvite N

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

The recent terrorist attack on Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, evoked several concerns from almost every corner of the globe. Major Powers such as the United States, United Kingdom and France, once again have pledged to uproot the activities of these anti-state elements, and this sentiment has been shared by several countries as well.

One of the most interesting unfolding events was the reported Israeli military-security assistance provided to Nairobi while tackling the hostage crisis. This, in a way, takes us back to the days when Israel started to turn towards the African continent as a part of its "peripheral diplomacy", along with its reach-out to monarchical Iran and Turkey.

Israel's Early Days in Africa

Since the late 1950s, Israel has worked to forge better ties with certain African nations. The Jewish state's moves were calculated accurately by pursuing a policy that could work in tandem with Africa's aspirations for economic development and modernization. During this period, Israel's foreign policy concerns were mainly aimed towards "humanitarian action in the Third World countries", and Africa in particular.

The strategy aimed at earning friendship and much-needed political support in the wider international community. As a result, during the 1960s when most of the African states gained their independence, Israel took no time in establishing diplomatic relations with them. This was also a move to come out of the Arab embargo as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the region.

With the warming of ties between Israel and the African nations, the Jewish state's foreign policy was centralized around parameters such as technical assistance, exchange and training programs alongside joint-enterprises and trade-related activities. And, Israel became one of the first countries to agree to share its technical skills with the newly formed states in Africa as well in Asia.

Beside economic and commercial incentives while developing cordial relations with Africa, the strategic interest of Israel in this region cannot be ignored. Most importantly, its close geographical proximity with the Horn of Africa was a major interest so as to ensure a trouble-free maritime trade and also smooth airway routes to connect with the said continent.

This is where Kenya's importance came in Israel's security calculations. It was because of these geopolitical and geostrategic concerns that had made Israel assist the African states militarily. Moreover, the emergence of various military-political leaders in the newly independent African states facilitated a smooth military cooperation with Israel.

It should be noted that defence ties between Israel and Africa were at its peak during the 1960s. However, this was one area which was not given due attention. Israel's military assistance to Africa was constituted of many forms, namely, military training of African personnel in the army, navy and air force; establishment of paramilitary and youth organizations; direct military aid and arms sales.

According to scholars like Abel Jacob, "New states in Africa, as elsewhere, realize the necessity for a national army and security forces. This is due to internal tensions and threats of separatism, coupled with the real potential for civil strife". These concerns had come in consonance with that of Israel's. Hence the mutual interest to cooperate in military sector.

Israel-Kenya Relations: The Military Dimension

Israel and Kenya established their diplomatic relations in 1963 but had to be severed in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Prior to the diplomatic fallout, along with countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and so on, Kenya was a major recipient of Israeli military assistance.

Interestingly, Kenya's earliest pilots were trained in Israel and this was publicly announced by its first president, Jomo Kenyatta, when the country got its independence. This signified the level of military cooperation between the two countries. By mid-1960s, the Israeli military presence in a few African countries was substantial. Around this time, Israel was reported to have sold arms to both Kenya and Uganda.

Relations grew significantly throughout until the aforementioned war severed their ties. However, absence of formal relations did not deter Kenya from buying arms from Israel. During

the late-1970s, Kenya was reported to have purchased military items from Israel such as missile boats, Gabriel missiles and various military equipments. Continuation of this clandestine military relation in devoid of formal relations indeed enhanced their relations once they reinstated their diplomatic ties in 1988.

It was believed that the secret meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Daniel Arap Moi, the president of Kenya, in 1987, brought about this renormalization of relations. Since then, military-security relations have been on the rise.

Speaking of military ties, both Israel and Kenya have come cooperating in the combat of terrorism. In the past, Entebbe Airport crisis in Uganda, in 1976, was one such instance. Even though the Kenyan government denied its involvement in the operation, it was firmly believed that Kenya played a very important role in assisting the Israeli commandos.

Israeli secret service (Mossad) agents were reported to have used Kenyan forces' boats to reach Entebbe by crossing Lake Victoria. Despite certain displeasure from the Kenyan authorities over this event, security engagements were enhanced further, and Israel's tactics to operate on such hostage crisis was well-admired.

The rising activities of various terrorist networks in Kenya's neighbourhood remain an important convergent factor for strong security ties with Israel. Especially, the Islamist terrorism originating from countries like Somalia is a major concern in Nairobi's internal security measures.

Further, Kenya has been a victim of such terrorism since the late-1990s, when frequent bombings including suicide attacks rocked the nation. Israelis were also killed in these attacks and as a result, both countries have jointly pledged to counter this menace. Their joint efforts to confront terrorism once again came in the limelight when Israel assisted in evacuating the victims of the 2002-Mombasa blast that killed 15 people. It happened in an Israeli-owned hotel. The Israeli investigation team took an active role during the probe of the blast. Along with other foreign nationals, the terrorist groups also target Israeli citizens.

For Israel, the wellbeing of the Jewish citizens residing in different parts of the globe has always been an important foreign policy. In Kenya today, there is a Jewish community of about 600 members, and their security is of primordial concern. In the past too, military assistance provided by Israel to any recipient country was partly driven by this Jewish factor. Such Israeli arms sales pattern were also seen in the case of Argentina, Ethiopia, monarchical-Iran, South Africa, etc.

As a result of the burgeoning militancy in the region, Kenya has expressed a strong desire to purchase state-of-the-art weapons systems from Israel. In 2010, several personnel from Israeli defence firms such as Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), Israel Military Industries,

representatives from SIBAT (the defence aid branch of Israel's Ministry of Defence), and the then foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman toured nine African states, including Kenya.

Though no arms deals were clinched, Nairobi was reported to have shown an interest in purchasing various Israeli-made counterinsurgency systems and unmanned aerial vehicles for its border surveillance. Further, in a move to boost their military ties, in early-2010, the late Kenyan internal security minister George Saitoti met his Israeli counterpart, Yitzhak Aharonovich, in Jerusalem, and discussed the rising jihadist activities in Somalia.

During this year, Kenyan armed forces visited Israel with an aim to enhance military cooperation between the two countries and to exploit possibilities of cooperation with the various Israeli defence industries. Later in the year, Kenyan police and anti-terror unit again visited an Israeli company which is renowned for its surveillance systems.

For Israel too, a strengthening of ties with Kenya will be in its interests, given the importance of Horn of Africa, a centre of Iranian interest due to shipping activities. In 2012, a couple of members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force were arrested in Kenya with explosives. It was believed that they had planned to carry out terror attack against foreign targets, including Israeli diplomats. Such incidents have led to an intimate security and intelligence cooperation between the Israeli and Kenyan authorities.

Israel and the Nairobi Mall Attack

As Israel and Kenya celebrate 50 years of bilateral relations, the terrorist attack gives a very strong reason to step up military-security cooperation. Soon after the Al-Shabaab terrorists stormed the Westgate Mall in Nairobi and took hostages, there were reports about Israel's security assistance to tackle the situation.

It was reported that a team of Israeli military advisers were flown in to Nairobi to advise the "negotiating strategy", and unconfirmed reports that the Israeli forces were also involved in the operation to end the siege.

Kenyan officials said this was purely a "national operation despite offers of foreign support". However, as a symbolic mark of solidarity with victims of the carnage, Israeli President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed their condolences and vowed to combat terrorism collectively.

Here, Israel's quick reaction to the situation has highlighted its longstanding ties with this East African nation. It was reported that Israeli intelligence sources warned Kenya of an attack against Israeli targets during the September Jewish holidays, but unfortunately failed to prevent the attack.

Similarities in the threats facing both the countries will continue to push them together for military-security cooperation. The bilateral relationship between the two will also be driven by these close defence ties and shared national security challenges.

Israel not only looks into Kenya for partnerships, it is also trying to restore its presence in Africa to what it was during the late-1950s and 1960s, before the diplomatic breach following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. At least in the military arena, countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Eritrea, Angola, Ivory Coast, and Ethiopia are likely to benefit from Israeli arms supply. The region alone can give Israel arms business worth US\$1 billion. Israeli arms sales soared to US\$7.5 billion last year, a significant jump on the US\$5.8 billion in 2011. In this, African countries accounted for US\$197 million.

Conclusion

Israel's special attention towards the nations of South and Southeast Asia; Latin America and Africa, especially for its arms sales, could be attributed to the burgeoning isolation it is facing within its own region, alongside the budgetary issues in Europe and North America. At this juncture, when popular uprisings have engulfed states such as Egypt, one of the few countries having peace treaty with Israel, the Jewish state is reaching out far and wide for business. Till today, the linkages between Israeli arms sales and its foreign policy pursuits still hold some relevance as it was during the 1960s and 1970s.

However, considering rivalry between nations in Africa, Israel should be very tactful while transferring weapons systems. This will also become a harder task for Israel as its arch rival Iran is also making a speedy inroad to Africa with a motive to enhance its diplomatic, defence and commercial deals. Only time will tell how far Israel can yield success in its approach to gain a foothold again in this continent.

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Alvite N is a Doctoral candidate at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Email: alvite_n@yahoo.com

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