Contribution and Cooperation- Jewish and African Diasporas and the national liberation project before independence

Introduction

The 1950s and 1960s was a time of vast increases in diplomatic activity between the state of Israel and a variety of African countries. The period has been the subject of considerable academic review. Most analyses of the era tend to privilege the state as the unit of analysis and look to geopolitical and real politic considerations as the major driver of these interactions. This means of viewing the period is useful and entirely justified. However it is also limited. This analysis is fairly a-historical suggesting that relations began from a "standing-start". Also it essentially sees engagement as a result of the formal independence and de-colonisation process. This view is not very helpful in our current context, where the state is not the only driver of diplomatic relations and major geopolitical drivers from that period, such as the logics of the cold war, have essentially ceased to exist.

What is needed are added lenses that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the state/real politic paradigm. One good tool that we can use for this is purpose is the notion of "diaspora". This essay will track the nearly half a century of co-operation between African and Jewish intellectuals and activists based almost entirely in the diaspora, most notably Europe and America. It will argue that early diaspora interactions paved the way for state based co-operation after independence and set the conceptual agenda for future engagement as well.

The 1950s and 1960s in context

Before exploring the roots of African and Jewish diaspora co-operation it is worth touching on the nature of state engagements during the period. Diplomatic activity between Israel and African states begins following Israeli independence in 1948 and the start of the formal continental de-colonisation process in the 1950s. Israel was a popular diplomatic partner in Africa. Being a small, poor country, Israel was unlikely to be an agent of neo-colonialism. Having recently ousted the British, it was also a good example of a successful liberation struggle.

By 1965, most major Africa leaders had visited the country. Israel's friends included such African heavy weights as Emperor Haile Selassie

of Ethiopia, President Leopald Senghor of Senegal, Jomo Kenyata of Kenya and President of Liberia, William Tubman (who provided an important African block vote for the establishment of Israel the United Nations). By 1973, Israel had established relations with 32 African states - more than any other country in the world besides the former colonial powers. Many African states also opened embassies in Israel most of which were based in Jerusalem.

Israel also cultivated more informal connections. When ANC leader Walter Sisulu decided to visit the world festival of youth and students in Russia in 1953 he flew on Israel's state owned national carrier *El Al*. It was the only the airline in the world that would take the black South African passenger, since the Apartheid government had denied him a passport.

A key aspect of the co-operation developed based on similar state building challenges experienced by both parties. President Julius Nyerere observed in 1957 that, "*Israel is a small country… but it can offer a lot to a country like mine. We can learn a great deal because the problems of Tanganika are similar to Israel's.*" These partnerships resulted in a vast array of joint projects across the continent including in construction, agriculture, aquaculture, health care, hydrology, youth movement development, student and scholar exchanges, regional planning, engineering, community services and many others. Some of the more interesting projects included a specialist eye clinic established in Sierra Leone and the creation of Ghana's Black Star line shipping company.

Diaspora thinkers and national projects

As noted in the introduction, analysts of the period have tended to point to the geopolitical considerations as the primary, almost spontaneous, driver of these interactions. Adding the lens of diaspora however shows a much deeper genesis.

In order to understand the contribution of diaspora to these state relations one needs to go back to the beginning of the 19th century. For the Jews, who had been exiled from the Holy land by the Romans, diaspora had been a constant condition for the vast majority of the population for nearly two millennia. For the peoples of Africa the slave trade had created vast networks of diaspora particularly in the Americas. For the majority left on the continent however, colonisation

was the main experience and both groups encountered prejudice and persecution in many parts of the world.

One popular response to these conditions was the idea that national self-assentation in the form of independent states was a natural remedy. There was support amongst both groups for this idea. The first Zionist Congress to create a Jewish state was in August 1897 and calls for the establishment of the Africa Association, a key moment in the development of pan-Africanism, followed less than a month later, both in diaspora populations.

Diaspora Ideological Engagements

Movement intellectuals saw the parallels and potential for collaboration early on. The founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, writes that "*Once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish to also assist in the redemption of the Africans*".

Many prominent pan-Africanists also saw their work as being analogous to Zionism. For example W.E.B du Bois said that *"The Africa movement means the same to us as what the Zionist movement must mean to Jews."* He understood Zionism to mean, "*Young and forward thinking Jews, bringing a new civilisation into an old land and building up that land out of the ignorance, disease and poverty into which it had fallen and by democratic methods to build a new and peculiarly fateful modern state."*

Likewise Marcus Garvey, whose followers were often called "Black Zionists," suggested that, "*many white men have tried to uplift them, but the only way is for the Negroes to have a nation of their own is like the Jews, that will command the respect of the nations of the world with its achievements.*"

Such sentiments can be found widely in the works and activities of pan-Africanists including those of Edward Blyden, Robert R Delaney and Paul Robeson. This engagement between the two groups was important for later thinkers in of the civil rights movement. According to Martin Luther King Jr for instance "*When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews You're talking anti-Semitism*". These diaspora thinkers helped shape their movements and its leadership attitudes as they moved towards independence and set the intellectual stage for state based co-operation.

One can see this intellectual heritage at play in a statement from Kwame Nkrumah, President of Ghana, who argued in 1961, that "*We understand one another, Jews and Negroes. We were both oppressed for a long time and now we both have our own independent states.*"

Activist engagements

Beyond simple ideological affinities, diaspora mutual activist support and the "comparing of notes" of the respective movements helped cement ties post-independence.

The Pan-Africanist West Indian journalist George Padmore, for example helped introduce Israeli cabinet minister Golda Meir to the 60 delegates of the All Africa Peoples of Conference in Ghana 1958. This interaction was a crucial event in the establishment of Israel – Africa ties. Padmore also believed that Africa's development could be fostered using organised infusions of funding from the African-American Diaspora, along the same lines as the Zionist campaign known as the United Israel Appeal.

Another important sphere of shared diaspora thinking was on the topic of safety and security. Take for example the views of one of the organisers at the fifth pan-Africanist Congress in Manchester in 1945, Rus Makonnen from Guyana.

"*Undoubtedly what was going on in Palestine with the Jews was an important experience for us as members of this other diaspora… so the Jewish experience was formidable. We felt the particularity of the Africans, our Africaness, just like Jewishness. And later we wondered when we saw a handful of Jews in the Haganah movement gaining independence militarily for Palestine, whether we could do the same.*"

The movement that Makonnen is referring to here is the Zionist pre-state armed forces that would eventually become the Israeli Defence Force. These pre-state institutions were important in the establishment of Israel and of interest to pan-Africanist activists.

To give just one example they were the inspiration for the structure of the ANC's *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) armed forces. In planning MK, Nelson Mandela leaned on the experience of anti-apartheid activist Arthur Goldreich who had fought in these Zionist military units. Mandela also credits "The Revolt", by Zionist military organiser

and later Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as being among the books he used in planning the ANC's guerrilla campaign.

As a result of this early military diaspora interest, Israel contributed to building the defence infrastructure in many other African countries, especially training their early military, navy, air forces and police.

Conclusion

What these vignettes show is the impact both intellectual and organisational over half a century of diaspora engagement and collaboration between Jews and Africans. The leveraging of contacts, ideas and experiences of each movement is a crucial part of the ties of the 1950s and 1960s. They show that these relations go further and deeper than simple geo-political and real politic explanations allow.