Reviving Relations Between Israel and Africa

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent visit to Africa signaled Israel’s renewed emphasis on its relationship with the continent. Beyond the mutual economic benefits, this renaissance in Israel-Africa relations is an opportunity, among other things, to bolster support for Israel on the international stage, particularly at the United Nations.

In the early years after independence in 1948, Israel enjoyed a unique relationship with many African nations. Recently freed from British rule and newly independent after thousands of years of exile and occupation of our homeland, Israel served as a role model for many African states caught in their own struggles with colonialism.

A special bond soon formed between the Jewish state and the young African nations. Israeli experts shared their knowledge with their African counterparts on everything from modern banking to drip irrigation. For Israel, the possibility of breaking out of the diplomatic isolation imposed by our immediate neighbors in the Middle East served as an additional strategic advantage.

Whatever progress was made in cultivating these relationships was thwarted following the 1967 Six Day War, and then almost completely wiped out after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Fueled by Arab propaganda, many former African allies became convinced of the lie that Israel was now playing the role of colonizer by “occupying” Arab lands.

More than 40 years after its relationship with Africa soured, Israel is now turning back the tide. As Prime Minister Netanyahu recently stated, “Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is coming back to Israel.” The Israeli government has announced a multimillion-dollar plan to strengthen its economic ties with Africa. On his recent visit, the heads of 70 Israeli companies joined the prime minister to help strengthen African relationships.

In areas such as international development, investment and know-how, Israel is the perfect partner for Africa. Both have been forced to find creative solutions to the kinds of problems large, wealthy, powerful states have never encountered.

In water policy, for example, Israel is not only the world leader in recycling and reusing water for agriculture, we have now successfully mastered the desalination process so that all our water needs are fully met despite our arid climate. In energy innovation, our cutting-edge technologies in solar, wind and other clean- and renewable-energy sources is a major focus of many budding economic ties.

There are larger, multilateral and global benefits of improved relations with Africa. For many decades, Israel has suffered under a bias at the U.N. because we have been greatly outnumbered in almost every forum. One byproduct has been the Palestinian attempts to circumvent direct negotiations through international bodies. Better relations between Israel and Africa could mitigate this escape hatch and encourage the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table.

Recently we have had glimpses of what is possible. In 2014, when the Palestinians tried to advance an anti-Israel resolution in the Security Council, Nigeria and Rwanda abstained, stopping the initiative. This while certain European members of the council voted for the Palestinian resolution.

Similarly, during my recent successful run for the chair of the U.N. Legal Committee, the Non-Aligned Movement headed by Iran sought to deny Israel the full rights and privileges awarded to all other U.N. member states. This attempt to boycott Israel was thwarted when African countries such as Kenya and Rwanda demanded that my candidacy be considered in the same manner as every other country seeking a leadership position. In the end, 109 countries voted for my chairmanship, making it the first time an Israeli was elected to head a permanent U.N. Committee.

We have every indication to believe that the Palestinians will continue to turn to the U.N. with the hope of imposing a solution on Israel and avoiding any of the hard decisions needed for real peace. In combating these attempts, Israel’s most important partner remains the American people. But Israel must expand its diplomatic horizons and widen our circle of friends.

We are deepening our relationship with Africa because it is the right thing to do and because there are economic benefits for both sides. But Israel will also be sure to leverage these important relationships to ensure that it is finally treated fairly at the U.N., as a full member state with the rights and privileges afforded to all other nations.