

Essay

AFRICA & PALESTINE: A HISTORIC RELATIONSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

The African-Palestinian relationship is historic and has been rooted in a shared vision of justice. It goes back decades, and includes both government and non-government alliances. In 1979, Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor stated that he does not “think anything can come from a racist, non-progressive political leadership,” as he described the government of then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.¹ Black Panther Party leader and activist Stokely Carmichael, also known as Kwame Ture, famously said that “Palestine was the tip of Africa.”² The ongoing genocide in Gaza against the Palestinian people has brought about a revival in recovering the African histories of Palestinian solidarity. While the world has rightly focused on the strength of the relationship between South Africa and Palestine, particularly after the former brought forth the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case against Israel in January 2024, there has been comparatively less attention on the broader relationship between Palestine and the rest of the African continent.³ The language of the Global South as an extension of what was once the ‘Third World’ has been resurrected more recently in reference to Palestine. What made South Africa’s case at the ICJ so historic was the shared sense of struggle across the Global South against settler colonialism, oppression, and apartheid.

As a historian of the so-called Third World, I often encounter an ethos of global anti-colonial struggle that defined Third World movements. Notably, “the Non-Alignment Movement, Afro-Asianism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, Third Worldism, Third World internationalism, and decolonization each had their own interlocutors and separate ideologies.”⁴ The concept of the Third World, both as a physical location and a socio-political endeavor, was closely intertwined with the fight against colonialism. The Third World, as both a place and a project, was in praxis inextricably linked to anticolonial struggle. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, “the defining marker of the historical Third World movement... was a global solidarity that believed anti-colonial struggles to be linked”.⁵

For postcolonial Algeria, Senegal, Egypt, Indonesia, and Ghana, among many others, the Third World Movement became a state project. Many of the prominent figures and names associated with the Third World movement — Gamal Abdel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Ahmed Ben Bella, Sukarno, Jawaharlal Nehru — were heads of nascent postcolonial states with their own political agendas, often in conflict with one another. What seemed to connect these often disparate agendas of the Third World during those three decades was, however, the question of Palestine.

Moreover, Palestine has been described as being “the beating heart of the Third World movement as a historical project of liberation from imperialism and settler colo-

nialism.” From Nkrumah to Nasser, the dispossession of Palestinians and *al-Nakba*, also known as the catastrophe, became a collective call of “global anti-colonial revolutionary struggle,” linking Africa, Palestine, Black liberation, and Pan-Africanism worldwide.⁶ While the association between Pan-Arabism and Palestinian solidarity is often taken as a given with focus on places like Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Libya, and Syria, the historic relationship between Pan-Africanism and Palestine remains overlooked. Recent scholarship has uncovered vital links between African Americans and Palestinian solidarity, particularly between the Black Panther Party in the United States and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Malcolm X and Angela Davis are well-renowned figures within Palestinian solidarity circles.⁷ However, figures such as Senegal's Senghor, Guinea-Bissau's Cabral, and Ghana's Nkrumah, as well as the African Union (AU), are less recognized as supporters of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle.

This Essay provides a preliminary chronological overview and important reminder of the historic relationship between Pan-Africanism and Palestine during the height of the Third World movement in the 1960s and 1970s. While it has long been assumed that Palestine was a rallying cry for Pan-Arabism during this period, it also occupied a central role in the Pan-African imagination of liberation, including in Sub-Saharan Africa. It should come as no surprise, then, that Africans are increasingly becoming the champions of the Palestinian cause.

PAN-AFRICANISM

Pan-Africanism as a movement is often traced to the late nineteenth century, with roots on both sides of the Atlantic. However, some historians now trace its origins back to the Haitian Revolution of 1789.⁸ Historically, there were differing visions of what a Pan-African future would look like for Africa and its diaspora, encompassing a wide range of beliefs. Some of its earlier renowned figures such as Edward Blyden or W.E.B. Dubois in the United States, emphasized the unity and commonality of all Africans across the globe, whether in Africa, the Americas, or the West Indies. Later generations of Caribbean thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, were committed to revolutionary anti-colonial struggle and saw Pan-Africanism and Blackness as a political identity that included all of continental Africa and beyond. On the other hand, founders of the Negritude movement, such as Senghor, saw Black identity as a core tenet of Pan-Africanism.⁹ The ideologies of Pan-Africanism influenced the creation of organizations such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the precursor to today's African Union. Despite differing visions of what exactly Pan-Africanism was and who it should include, it was, as a historical movement, deeply committed to anti-colonial solidarity and regarded itself, during the 1950s-1980s, as a vital part of the Third World movement. During this period, as states across the Third World gained independence

from colonial rule, the fate of Palestine and Palestinians increasingly became a focus of the anti-colonial solidarity struggle, especially after the wars of 1967 and 1973.

1950s & 1960s

After its creation in 1948, the State of Israel made significant attempts to establish diplomatic ties with African countries during the 1950s and 1960s, aligning itself with the anti-colonial movement of the decolonization period. These attempts did not go unnoticed, and even Lebanese migrants in West Africa took note of Israel's ever-expanding efforts. One migrant wrote in his memoir about his fifty years living in Senegal, saying that "we should be as aggressive as our Israeli competitors and respond to the wrongs they inflict on our African compatriots by reporting their unscrupulous methods to the African governments that continue to trust them."¹⁰

Israel's exclusion from the iconic first Asian-African Conference in Bandung in April 1955 prompted a reassessment of its foreign strategy, leading it to seek alliances in Africa to counter potential Arab mobilization and position itself as a part of the post-colonial Afro-Asian world. Notably, at Bandung, the conference participants formally expressed their support for "the rights of the Arab people of Palestine and called for the implementation of the United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question."¹¹

As a result of these policies, an Israeli embassy was established in Ghana following its independence in 1957. Israel invested in a variety of bilateral initiatives in Ghana, including infrastructure development, military assistance, and cultural exchanges.¹² The Israeli Ambassador played a key role in facilitating close ties between the two nations, becoming particularly close to Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah. Israel aimed to bolster its international legitimacy through Ghana's "showcase of Israel's aid in Africa's development" and its potential role in influencing the Pan-African agenda.¹³ However, by 1961, Israel's ties with Ghana soured as a result of Nkrumah's alignment with Cairo's Pan-African vision under Gamal Abdel Nasser. This led Ghana to adopt a more critical stance towards Israel, exacerbated by its relationships with former imperial powers of France, the United States, and the United Kingdom.¹⁴ Israel's diplomatic gains in Africa during the 1950s and early 1960s were limited, albeit significant. During the January 1961 Casablanca conference of the famed 'Casablanca bloc,' Ghana, Guinea, and Mali dubbed Israel, "the pillar of imperialism in Africa."¹⁵ By 1963, Israel had established 22 embassies in Africa.¹⁶ However, Israel was excluded from the April 1959 commemoration of the first Africa Freedom Day event and was the sole UN member not invited.¹⁷

1967: THE TURNING POINT

Israel tried to frame itself as a postcolonial state and used Zionism as a liberal movement aligned with newly independent nations in the Third World, while rejecting comparisons to colonialism. But after the Six-Day War in 1967, this narrative became indefensible, marking the decline of Israel's influence in Africa.¹⁸ The Six-Day War of 1967 was an Israeli offensive attack against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Within six days, Israel had captured and occupied the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Of these territories occupied by Israel in 1967, only the Sinai Peninsula has been returned to Egypt. The remaining territories of the Syrian Golan Heights, the Palestinian West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip remain under Israeli military occupation.¹⁹ This resounding defeat, or *al-Naksa*, cannot be overstated. Arab governments were humiliated, as Israel could no longer claim that it was a small-scale anti-colonial power surrounded by aggressive Arab states.

After 1967, African nations reevaluated their relations with Israel. With the exception of Malawi, Lesotho, and Swaziland, diplomatic ties with most African states ceased.²⁰ In 1967, Senghor's government became the first Black African state to grant official recognition to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and encouraged them to open an office in Senegal. Senghor, Senegal's first president, had a mixed legacy. While some viewed him as overly sympathetic to the French and European colonial powers, his support for Palestine within a Pan-Africanist framework, was unwavering. Even Western diplomatic sources were quoted as saying that "Senghor has always been a champion of the PLO."²¹

While there was initially some traction among individual African nations in establishing relations with Israel during the 1950s and early 1960s, 1967 marked a turning point. The 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria (PANAf), *Le Festival Panafricain d'Alger*, became a showcase for Pan-African solidarity with Palestine, as several Palestinian representatives were in attendance.²² The PANAf, organized by the Algerian government under the Organization of African Unity, was held from July 21 to August 1, 1969. It focused on anchoring African identity within the anti-colonial struggle and featured leaders of liberation movements, and performances by renowned artists from across the global African diaspora.²³ It produced infamous pictures of PLO members alongside Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael from the Black Panther Party, and hundreds of other anti-colonial revolutionaries of the day.²⁴ The festival commenced with leaders of liberation movements from various African nations leading their delegations, symbolically replacing the colonial or apartheid rulers. It also featured performances by renowned artists from across Africa and the diaspora, including Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone, and Archie Shepp.²⁵

Perhaps the most iconic moment of Palestinian solidarity at the PANAf was that Al-Fateh, the-then revolutionary arm of the PLO, issued a communique titled “The Message of the Palestine National Liberation Movement Al-Fateh to Africa”. It discussed shared histories of European colonialism and white supremacy while arguing that Africa could be viewed in two ways: geographically and politically. Politically, Africa represented more of “a cause than a continent”, serving as a hub for revolutionary resistance against colonialism, similar to the situation in Palestine. Al-Fateh presented themselves as part of the African cause despite not being from the continent itself, while stating that “Palestine on this map is a cause of liberation and stands with Africa on the same line and front.”²⁶ It was clear that Palestine was a thread that weaved together anti-colonial revolutionaries across Africa and the Third World in the era of what Algeria dubbed itself as the “Mecca of Revolution.”²⁷

1970s

The PANAf paved the path into the 1970s, a decade that was arguably recognized as the height of Pan-African-Palestinian solidarity. The 1973 October War, also known as the Yom Kippur War, involving Egypt, Syria, and Israel over the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights, led the remaining African countries to sever diplomatic ties with Israel in response to its occupation of Egyptian territory.²⁸ During this period, it became evident to many Pan-Africanists that Black liberation and Palestinian liberation were interconnected.

In 1974, the Pan-African Congress in Tanzania recognized “the Palestinian cause as an integral part of the worldwide struggle” against imperialism.²⁹ The Organization for African Unity (OAU) followed suit in 1975 by declaring Israel as an apartheid state, and acknowledging that “...the racist regime in occupied Palestine and the racist regime in Zimbabwe and South Africa have a common imperialist origin... having the same racist structure and being organically linked in their policy aimed at repression of the dignity and integrity of the human being.”³⁰ Israel's case was further weakened by its strong economic and political links with apartheid South Africa.³¹

Several African revolutionary organizations began to view the PLO and the Palestinians as comrades in their struggle, including South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC), the South West People's Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia, and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). These organizations formed significant alliances with the PLO and actively advocated for the Palestinian cause, in turn the PLO reciprocated the support. They were trading armaments and resistance strategies with one another, highlighting the interconnectedness of anti-colonial struggles across Africa and the Middle East.³² However, the fervor of anti-colonial solidarity collaborations in the 1970s did not carry over into the 1980s.

By the 1980s, the Third World movement had waned considerably. Neo-liberal economics, foreign interference, and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) had crushed African economies, as individual countries became mired in their own domestic economic and political issues. While 1967 was a turning point for African solidarity with Palestine, reaching the height of political agendas in the 1970s, it also catalyzed the gradual decline of state-sponsored solidarity across the Third World.

2000s

Although state-level support across Africa had declined, grassroots and civil society groups stepped in to fill the gap. In March 2022, activists and solidarity organizations along with participants from 21 countries launched the Pan-African Palestine Solidarity Network (PAPSN) in Dakar, Senegal, aiming to create a continent-wide solidarity network to lobby African governments and mobilize civil society against Israel. The event, hosted by *Plateforme de Solidarité Sénégal-Palestine* and the Senegalese branch of Amnesty International, marked the first conference under the theme “From Africa to Palestine: United Against Apartheid,” gathering delegates from various civil society groups from across Africa to strategize and build a coordinated Palestine solidarity movement, emphasizing the importance of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.³³

On the 29th of December, 2023, South Africa sent an application to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging that Israel was violating its obligations under the Convention Against Genocide. The application underscores the country’s foreign policy objective to the “attainment of a durable peace between Israel and the State of Palestine, with two States existing side by side within internationally recognized borders, based on those existing on 4 June 1967, prior to the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.”³⁴ The *South Africa v. Israel* case can be viewed, as yet again, an extension of South Africa’s history of supporting Palestine, positioning itself as a defender of Palestinian rights. Given the Court’s failure to implement a ceasefire, South Africa’s case remains significant, as it is the only country that has filed a lawsuit against Israel at the ICJ.

CONCLUSIONS

Palestine was at the core of the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia. It was a transregional global movement that resonated across the Third World, and was of central concern to Pan-Africanism, as well as Pan-Arabism and Third World solidarity.³⁵ This highlights the importance of considering historical context.

It might be argued that Israel’s extensive investment in water management, cyber technology, military, food security, and agriculture projects in Africa, coupled with its

increasing diplomatic relations and efforts at normalization with African countries, suggests a growing support for Israel and a corresponding decline in support for the Palestinians.³⁶ Yet the streets of African capitals are frequently filled with protestors denouncing Israeli aggressions against Palestinians. From Libya to Nairobi, Africans have demonstrated that their historic solidarity with Palestine should not be forgotten.³⁷

Today, like in much of the Arab world, the African people, if not its leadership, overwhelmingly support the Palestinians. In turn, Palestinians also arguably regard Africans as their strongest champions. As Nelson Mandela stated, “We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.”³⁸

About the Author



Dahlia EL Zein is a Senior Fellow at Fiker Institute. She holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern and African History from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research explores the intersections of race, gender, migration, and empire between the Eastern Mediterranean and West Africa in colonial and postcolonial contexts. She is currently an assistant professor in residence in the Liberal Arts Program at Northwestern University in Qatar.

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