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Middle Powers and Soft-Power Rivalry: Egyptian–Israeli Competition in Africa

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Scholars of international relations have long recognized the importance of soft power in great powers' hegemonic designs. In contrast, we know little of middle powers' employment of noncoercive strategies of attraction and, in particular, how soft power operates in the context of middle-power antagonism. We suggest that, first, soft power enhances coalition-building strategies for middle powers. Contrary to expectations that states join forces against a shared threat, the use of soft power via development aid produces an "Us" versus "Them" distinction in target states that unites them in the absence of a common enemy. Second, middle states' soft-power strategies are likely to support coalition maintenance so long as it does not challenge target states' national interests. Utilizing extensive archival and interview-based data, we examine how soft power featured in Egyptian–Israeli competition across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) from 1957 to 1974. We demonstrate how soft power operates beyond the context of great power agenda setting, therefore providing novel evidence for the importance of soft power in the interplay between interstate antagonism and noncoercion in world politics.

Los académicos del ámbito de las relaciones internacionales reconocen desde hace tiempo la importancia del poder blando en los designios hegemónicos de las grandes potencias. En cambio, sabemos poco sobre el empleo por parte de las potencias intermedias de estrategias de atracción no coercitivas y, en particular, de cómo funciona el poder blando en el contexto del antagonismo entre potencias intermedias. Sugerimos que, en primer lugar, el poder blando mejora las estrategias de formación de coaliciones de las potencias intermedias. En contra de las expectativas de que los Estados unan sus fuerzas contra una amenaza común, el uso del poder blando a través de la ayuda al desarrollo produce una distinción entre «Nosotros» y «Ellos» en los Estados objetivo que los une en ausencia de un enemigo común. En segundo lugar, es probable que las estrategias de poder blando de los Estados intermedios apoyen el mantenimiento de la coalición siempre que esto no suponga un desafío para los intereses nacionales de los Estados objetivo. A partir de numerosos datos de archivo y entrevistas, examinamos la influencia del poder blando en la competencia egipcio-israelí en el África subsahariana entre 1957 y 1974. Demostramos cómo el poder blando opera más allá del contexto de la fijación de la agenda de las grandes potencias, aportando así pruebas novedosas de la importancia del poder blando en la interacción entre el antagonismo interestatal y la no coerción en la política mundial.

Les chercheurs en relations internationales reconnaissent depuis longtemps l'importance du « soft power » dans les plans hégémoniques des grandes puissances. Par contraste, nous en savons peu sur l'emploi des stratégies d'attraction non coercitives par les puissances moyennes et,

plus précisément, sur le fonctionnement du soft power dans le cadre de l'antagonisme des puissances moyennes. Nous proposons d'abord que le soft power renforce les stratégies de formation de coalitions des puissances moyennes. Contrairement aux attentes selon lesquelles les États s'unissent contre une menace commune, l'utilisation du soft power par le biais de l'aide au développement produit chez les États cibles une situation de « Nous » contre « Eux », qui les unit en l'absence d'un ennemi commun. Ensuite, les stratégies de soft power des États de puissance moyenne soutiennent généralement le maintien de coalitions, tant que celles-ci ne remettent pas en cause les intérêts nationaux des États cibles. À l'aide d'un vaste ensemble de données d'archives et d'interviews, nous analysons les formes prises par le soft power dans le cadre de la concurrence entre Égyptiens et Israéliens en Afrique subsaharienne entre 1957 et 1974. Nous démontrons comment le soft power fonctionne en dehors du contexte de mise en place du programme des grandes puissances. Ainsi, nous générons des données inédites pour étayer l'importance du soft power dans l'interaction entre l'antagonisme interétatique et la non-coercition en politique mondiale.

Introduction

How does soft power operate beyond the context of great power agenda setting, and how does it feature in conflictual relations between middle powers? Defined by Nye in a minimalist fashion as “the ability to shape the preferences of others” via “the ability to attract” rather than coerce (Nye 2004, 5–6), the concept of soft power has been a topic of intense debate across scholars and policymakers alike.¹ That said, the relevant literature has yet to theorize on the importance of noncoercive strategies in middle powers' interstate antagonism, partly due to a traditional international relations (IR) focus on how soft power features in the designs of great powers. There are ample empirical examples of interstate competition via the use of soft power: over the last two decades, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have engaged in a costly rivalry over the Muslim populations of the Western Balkans; earlier, Fidel Castro sought to expand Cuba's soft power across the Global South via the country's public health diplomacy, placing it in competition with numerous other states, including Taiwan. More recently, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have engaged in soft-power competition over Islamic discourses in the region following the Arab Spring. We therefore ask: how is soft power utilized to affect interstate conflict between middle powers?

In this paper, we seek to expand existing understandings of the interplay between interstate antagonism and noncoercion by examining how soft power operates beyond the context of grand power competition. Theoretically, we endeavor to understand the specificities of soft-power rivalries among middle powers and put forth two arguments. First, soft power enhances coalition-building strategies for middle powers. Contrary to the expectations of coalition-building theorists who expect states to unite against a shared threat (Dupont 1996; Monteleone 2015; Henke 2017, 2019), the use of soft power may produce an “Us” versus “Them” dichotomy in target states, and arguably enhance coalition building even in the absence of a common enemy.

¹Nye's conceptualization gained traction arguably also because of his timely proposal of employing soft power as a potent American foreign policy instrument of the post-Cold War era. For Nye, soft power “uses a different type of currency (not force, not money) to engender cooperation – an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values” (Nye 2004, 7). Although it is often critiqued for conceptual ambiguity, immeasurability, and ethnocentricity, among others (Mattern 2005; Bohas 2006; Fan 2008; Hall 2010; Rothman 2011), the concept of soft power nevertheless maintains salience in as much as it pertains to the role of nonmilitary means in enhancing states' regional or international standing.

Second, middle states' soft-power strategies will support coalition maintenance only if doing so will not challenge target states' national interests. While existing work expects a great power's attractiveness to diminish in cases of economic and military decline (indicatively, [Datta 2009](#); [Smith 2014](#)), we argue that the durability of middle powers' strategies in coalition maintenance is primarily determined by target states' self-image.

Empirically, we focus on two middle powers of the Global South, Israel and Egypt, and engage in a comparison of their soft-power strategies toward African states, between 1957 and 1974.² Israeli and Egyptian soft-power strategies did not explicitly aim to shift target states' position on the Arab–Israeli conflict; instead, the two middle powers sought to support target states' socioeconomic development, as SSA became a territory of ideological and strategic competition by proxy for the dyadic rivals. The use of development aid, primarily by Israel, was accompanied by Egyptian emphasis on educational exchanges and public campaigns. We detail how both middle powers projected a Manichean narrative on African policymakers—in fact, for almost two decades, the two states engaged in soft-power rivalry over the “hearts and minds” of Africa. We demonstrate how coalition building via soft power continued unabated despite Egypt's military and economic collapse following the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, only to unravel once it came into conflict with African states' evolving international self-image in the early 1970s. Overall, we draw on the two states' strategies in order to enrich theoretical work on soft-power rivalry among middle powers, demonstrating the extent to which soft power serves the purposes of coalition building, as well as its limits.

We structure the article as follows: first, we review the relevant work and place our analysis within a larger theoretical framework of soft-power research, paying particular attention to middle powers' strategies. Following a discussion on methodology, we draw on the crucial-case method to analyze the soft-power strategies of Egypt and Israel, two middle powers selected for theory-testing purposes through within-case analysis. This dyadic rivalry, representing the two opposite sides of the wider Arab–Israeli conflict, sought to build diplomatic support at the United Nations (UN) for Egyptian and Israeli positions, respectively. As newly independent African states emerged in the process of decolonization to become UN member states, both Egypt and Israel sought to use their soft power to enhance their coalition-building strategies across the continent. By focusing on development aid as a nonmilitarized, soft-power competition within the wider Israeli–Egyptian rivalry, this article also aims to address an acute lacuna in the rich literature on the Arab–Israeli conflict, which to our knowledge has never addressed soft-power projection as part of a dyadic analysis of the conflict's most prominent protagonists. Finally, we briefly examine how our analysis might shed light on similar instances of middle-power coalition-building attempts via soft power and discuss avenues for future research.

Soft Power as Development Aid in Middle-Power Rivalry

Despite the plethora of research on states' soft-power strategies following Nye's early work, a majority of this work continues to center on a small number of great powers, notably the United States ([Nye 1990](#), [2004](#); [Datta 2009](#); [Sun 2009](#); [Parmar and Cox 2010](#)), the European Union, Russia, and China ([Gill and Yanzhong 2006](#); [Mingjiang 2008](#); [Breslin 2011](#); [Shambaugh 2015](#)). This bias has led to two key dimensions of the concept receiving less attention. First, existing theorization expects soft power to act by example and, thus, to operate in a positive-sum fashion that encourages global cooperation under American hegemony. This neoliberal perspective, tied to the post-1990 moment, is

²For ease of reading, our discussion of African states refers to sub-Saharan African states (thus, excluding Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Libya).

unable to identify the role of soft power in shaping diverse cleavages and divergences within IR. Efforts by non-American powers to develop their own soft-power agendas to combat Washington's universalist rhetoric are dismissed by Nye as "propaganda [that] often lacks credibility and thus is counterproductive as public diplomacy," without considering that credibility is a value-laden concept. In fact, Nye only uses the term "propaganda" to describe the strategies of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and China; in contrast, "soft power" denotes efforts by European states, the Vatican, Japan, and, most often, the Pentagon and the American government (which he refers to as "our soft power"). "Soft power," Nye argues, "is a staple of democratic politics" (Nye 2004, 6). Nye's approach to soft power as a positive-sum tool of liberal democracies inhibits attempts to examine whether soft power may also become an instrument of interstate rivalry.

We argue that a closer engagement with broader work on power becomes necessary if one is to shed Nye's normative underpinnings from the conceptualization of soft power. It could, in fact, be argued that the use of attraction as a form of power has been amply discussed outside the context of Western liberal democracies for decades, if not more. From Gramsci (Hoare and Smith 2005) and Foucault (1980) to Bourdieu (Schwartz 2012) and Lukes (2021), work on power and persuasion details how soft-power strategies are neither solely confined to a democratic polity nor do they only operate in a positive-sum fashion. Within IR, more specifically, a range of scholars identified the importance of values, ideas, and visions for democratic and nondemocratic regimes alike (Morgenthau 1948; Jervis 1976; Sartori 2002; Lebow 2005), going back to E.H. Carr's (1946) reference to "power over opinion" and "the art of persuasion." The benefit of adopting a more expansive theoretical framework—one focused on soft power but stripped from Nye's neoliberal underpinnings and expectations of an American hegemony—arguably allows the concept's application to unexamined zero-sum situations: dyadic rivalries where both states apply soft-power strategies toward the same target states, meaning that only one "version" of soft power can triumph at one time since, by definition, it is based on the promotion of shared values and norms. Once soft power is conceptualized as an instrument of states' zero-sum strategies, away from normative underpinnings, then we are able to utilize the concept in analytic comparisons of states' rival efforts to capture the "hearts and minds" of targets.

A second issue that we raise with Nye's conceptualization of soft power rests on specific expectations of the type of state that can wield it, namely great powers, thereby limiting the concept's scope. For Nye, successful soft power depends on "the universalism of a country's culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international behavior" (Nye 2004, 33). However, these universalist aspirations—again, linked to the post-Cold War American experience—set two sets of limits in terms of the concept's utility. For one, the ability to establish institutions and set favorable rules rests on certain levels of a state's military power and political capacity that exclude most sovereign states today. Yet, this does not necessarily prevent less powerful states from using noncoercive strategies aimed at shaping other states' preferences (Altunışık 2008; Lee 2009). At the same time, even states that have the capacity to set global agendas may also seek to engage in noncoercive forms of power in order to attain limited, rather than universal, foreign policy goals, as in the case of Chinese efforts in Africa (King 2013), or India's strategies across South Asia (Wagner 2010).

We argue that a closer engagement with studies on soft power and middle powers is necessary in order to address this criticism. Defined either in terms of aggregate material criteria, or in contrast to great powers as states that avoid a "direct confrontation with great powers, but they see themselves as 'moral actors' and seek their own role in particular issue areas" (Soeya 2007), middle powers such as Turkey, South Korea, and Brazil have attracted significant research on their soft-power

agendas.³ Some scholars expect middle powers to use soft power in a positive-sum way, be it to bolster UN's capacity for collective action (Laatikainen 2006), or to sponsor sports mega-events (Grix 2013), yet this aligns with Nye's initial expectations. Sohn's work on South Korea highlights this issue and argues that middle powers may be inclined to combine soft power with "network power," namely a state's relations with other states (Sohn 2012). Work by Chatin on Brazil, as well as Chatin and Gallarotti's edited volume (Chatin and Gallarotti 2018) on the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries, details how middle powers dedicate substantial effort and resources to developing soft-power offensives, paying more attention to soft power in potential zero-sum or competitive contexts (Alpan & Öztürk 2022); yet, they do not explore specific middle-power dyads whose rivalry is affected by soft-power competition. Ultimately, how are middle powers expected to use soft power in the context of an interstate rivalry?

In order to address this, we consider that middle powers cannot impose their will on other states and because they are motivated by functionalist considerations and not solely by ethical behavior or altruism, the use of development aid is arguably particularly appealing (Stokke 1989). In pursuing these types of "niche diplomacy" (Cooper 1997), middle powers are seen to project their soft power to compensate for their relative lack of more tangible sources of leverage in the international system. In this article, however, we examine how rival middle powers may engage in soft-power projection as a coalition-building strategy *against each other*. Research on coalition maintenance and durability has appeared fairly recently (cf. Weisiger 2016), with scholars arguing that domestic preferences shape withdrawal decisions (Tago 2009). We suggest that middle-power coalitions endure only so long as the common goal does not challenge target states' self-image. As coalitions depend on the commonality of interests among parties (Dupont 1996), target states are likely to modify their foreign policy behavior in line with the pertinent agendas of the middle power that provides development aid, as long as it does not clash with other foreign or domestic policies or jeopardizes the target state's self-image. Coalitions are different from alliances, characterized as a group of actors that coordinate their behavior in a limited and temporary fashion to achieve a common goal (Fogarty 2007). While the literature on non-hegemonic states and coalition building has been expanding (cf. Higgot and Cooper 1990; Deitelhoff and Wallbott 2012), there is little discussion on the importance of soft power. We therefore examine development aid as a function of soft power that includes, among other, education, scientific cooperation, technical assistance, and agricultural training and is widely considered a key aspect of a state's public diplomacy, as in the case of China (Kurlantzick 2007; Nye 2008; Wang 2008; Suzuki 2009; King 2013). In the absence of a common enemy or shared goal, we expect soft power to feature as the main resource in middle powers' coalition-building strategies, in this case via development aid.

³ As with the concept of soft power, debates on middle powers have attracted significant scholarly debate, which is beyond the scope of this article. The measurement and classification of actors in the international system is not straightforward. While many studies include various aggregations of military, economic, diplomatic, and soft-power dimensions to define distinct types of state actors, the delineating lines between small, medium, emerging, regional, super, and global powers are often more visible in theory than in reality. The concept of middle powers remains contested (Holbraad 1971, 1984; Neack 1993; Cooper 1997; Schoeman 2013). The concept of middle power has evolved to a post-Cold War emphasis on behavioral-based definitions that treat the exercise of soft power as a normative or behavioral position that middle powers occupy as mediators, communicators, technical experts, coalition builders, norm entrepreneurs, or order stabilizers (Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal 1993; Chapnick 1999; Siniver 2010; Cooper 2011; Carr 2014; Carr and Baldino 2015; Siniver and Cabrera 2015; Robertson 2017). We follow Organski's (1958) positional notion of middle powers as states who play a significant role regionally, while their capacity to exert international influence is greater than that of small states (cf. Keohane 1969; Buzan and Waever 2003). For a conceptual overview, see Holbraad (1984) and Jordaan (2003).

Methodology and Case Selection

We employ case-study methodology for the purposes of theory testing through deduction relying on within-case analysis (Bennett and Checkel 2015). A long discussion exists on the potential pitfalls of the case-study method (Collier and Mahoney 1996), particularly if cases are selected on the dependent variable. Yet, a significant body of political science work highlights how “in the early stages of a research program, selection on the dependent variable can serve the heuristic purpose of identifying the potential causal paths and variables leading to the dependent variable of interest” (George and Bennett 2005, 23). Covariation and within-case analysis are employed to substantiate the study’s theoretical claims (Gerring 2017). Within-case analysis is well suited to the “systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed” (Collier 2011, 823), particularly in enabling qualitative tools to assess the causal claims and mechanisms outlined in the previous section (for comparison, Beach and Pedersen 2013).

We examine the period from 1957 to 1974 as it captures the birth of the soft-power rivalry (following Israel’s opening of its first embassy in Africa, in Ghana), its evolution during Israel’s “golden age” in Africa and Egypt’s counterstrategies to rival it, and the final demise of the Israeli–African coalition. We consider Israel and Egypt to be middle powers during this period based on positional/hierarchical definitions of the term: their military capabilities and respective regional positions as representing the opposing ends of the Arab–Israeli conflict in that period, together with their capacity to affect regional dynamics but not to influence the international equilibrium, accurately capture their middle position in the international position. Additionally, the normative and behavioral approaches do not capture adequately the motivations and activities of Israel and Egypt in this period. As the analysis will show, while they engaged in coalition building, these efforts were driven by status seeking and relative gains, rather than by ideational imperatives. Additionally, while each state often buttressed its activities in Africa in normative terms, these would have not been sustainable had they not paralleled Israeli and Egyptian respective strategic, diplomatic, and economic priorities.

We treat Israeli and Egyptian cases of development aid to African states as a form of soft power because they are characterized primarily not by monetary assistance—what Nye refers to as “payment,” which together with “coercion” typify hard power—but through “attraction,” the third basic means of power that Nye characterizes as soft power (Nye 2009). As will be discussed in the following sections, Israel’s and Egypt’s engagements with SSA in the 1950s and 1960s were primarily through the nonmilitary, noneconomic application of power, including the transfer of technical knowledge, the training of manpower, sustained cultural and scientific exchanges, and educational programs. We will examine, firstly, how the two middle powers used development aid toward sub-Saharan African states with the aim of coalition-building via soft power from 1957 onwards. Secondly, we will demonstrate the limits of these strategies in the post-1967 era—not, as would be expected, due to the decline in monetary assistance provided by Egypt but because of sub-Saharan African states’ evolving self-image, which came into contrast with Israeli expectations.

Finally, a note on data collection: fieldwork in the Middle East presents unique challenges (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 218), particularly in topics related to foreign policy and the Arab–Israeli conflict. While Israeli archives generally subscribe to the Western institutionalization of the thirty-year rule of declassification, this practice is rarely replicated in the Arab world. Research on Egyptian policymaking, and the broader Arab world, is plagued by a lack of detailed, publicly available statistical data (Tsourapas 2019). As Brand (1995, 8) wrote on seeking statistical data on the Jordanian political economy, “one works under the assumption that such documents will probably never be released or may never have existed in the first place.” To overcome these issues, we rely upon a meticulous analysis of existing archival material across Egyptian and Israeli sources. Importantly, while we

focus on the actions of these middle powers, we give equal weight, where possible, to the target states' perceptions of Israel's and Egypt's soft-power exertions. We do so by drawing on political statements of African leaders, local news reports, and minutes of meetings of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). For the purposes of triangulation, we employ semi-structured expert and elite interviews conducted in Cairo ($n = 31$) between July 2013 and June 2014 (for comparison, [Tansey 2007](#)). This includes former Prime Minister Abdel Aziz Hegazy, current and former ministers, and high-ranking Egyptian government officials. Additionally, we draw on local news reports and policy analysis in the target states that were collated by Israeli and Egyptian agencies.

Egypt–Israel Rivalry and Soft-Power Strategies across Sub-Saharan Africa

Israeli and Egyptian Motivations in Engaging with Sub-Saharan Africa

The origins of Israel's development aid to Africa are found in the country's search for regional alliances following its independence in 1948. Known as the "doctrine of the periphery," this grand strategy was designed to seek alliances beyond Israel's immediate neighborhood of hostile Arab Sunni states, thus breaking the regional isolation and countering the Arab League's embargo on Israel ([Alpher 2015](#)). As late as 1957, Israel had only seven embassies overseas, six of them in Europe and North America, and it would take another 2 years before the austerity regime in the country (itself a legacy of the first Arab–Israeli war and the absorption of hundreds of thousands of immigrants shortly after) would be lifted. Against this context, Israel's search for allies beyond its immediate neighborhood included the "northern triangle" of Iran, Turkey, and the Kurds, and the "southern triangle" of SSA. Israel opened its first embassy in Africa, in Ghana in March 1957, a whole year before Egypt followed suit, which allowed Israel to set up extensive assistance projects in Ghana and West Africa, thus signaling to the continent its willingness and ability to act quickly to aid the development of new nations.⁴ In 1958, the Israeli government established the Agency for International Development Cooperation (*Mashav* for the acronym in Hebrew), which oversaw the dispatch of hundreds of engineers, technicians, doctors, and agricultural experts to dozens of developing countries across the world. By the mid-1960s, Israel's objectives had expanded from West Africa to the East African countries of Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya, with their important seaports that ensured Israel's freedom of navigation in the Red Sea ([Levey 2004](#)). As Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion told the Knesset, Israel's aid to many African countries was "not a matter of philanthropy ... We are no less in need of the fraternity of friendship of the new nations than they are of our assistance" ([Middle East Record 1960](#), 274). At its height in the late 1960s, Israel had one of the largest technical assistance programs in the western world, per capita ([Decter 1977](#), 8).

From the outset, the Israeli development aid program toward Africa rested on three key pillars. First, as an ideological tool, it was seen as fulfilling the country's self-image as being "light onto the nations" by contributing to human development, economic sustainability, and poverty alleviation throughout the developing world ([Levey 2008](#), 207). Conversely, many African nations saw Israel's "liberation" from British rule and its noncommunist model of socialism as a blueprint for their own progress in the areas of agricultural, rural, social, and economic development ([Lorch 1963](#); [Peters 1992](#), 15; [Decalo 1998](#), 18; [Carol 2012](#), 37–43). As the Congolese leader, Léonard Mulamba, told Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol during his visit to Kinshasa in 1961, "The African people like Israel because we are all victims of racial discrimination and we have to fight for our liberty" (cited in [Sawant 1978](#), fn59).

⁴Moshe Bitan, "Review #20," April 26, 1962. Israel State Archive (henceforth ISA), FM-2119/4 (ISA-mfa-IsraeliMissionCIV-000stxn).

Second, through the development of diplomatic links with emerging states, the Israeli government hoped to alleviate its isolation across the region as well as in the UN. The Israeli foreign ministry noted that “The young, beleaguered State of Israel must establish herself in the community of small, poor nations ... Victim of economic boycott and political warfare, there is an overpowering necessity to break the wall of isolation and hatred.”⁵ Similarly, Ben-Gurion stated that Israel’s objectives in Africa were to “break the boycott placed on us by the hostile Arab states and build bridges to the nations being liberated in the black continent ... we are prepared to assist them with social and material development” (Avriel 1980, 28).

Third, and related to the previous point, was a desire to break out of the Arab economic boycott of Israel, which was also carried by many western companies who bowed to Arab pressure ... In this regard, the creation of new African states presented new opportunities for the Israeli economy. Having made great strides in the fields of technological and agricultural innovation, Israel was seen by many fellow nascent states as a model of economic growth and human development. Moreover, Israel’s brand of democratic socialism appealed to many Africans as a middle way between the “extremes” of capitalism and communism, As Kenya’s *Daily Nation*, the country’s largest newspaper, reported in 1963:

Most (but not all) educated Africans tend to identify the European view of life with colonial appetites and summarily reject it. The economic imperialism of the Americans is widely viewed with some acid suspicion ... The Russian way and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese way are both viewed with caution. But not the Israelis. They do not have the power to entertain colonialist fancies. They are by no means in the pocket of the West and are distinctly socialist in their approach ... Africa wants more of the Israel method. (cited in Sawant 1978, 313)

Egypt’s thrust into Africa similarly rested on three pillars. First, this was an ideologically driven strategy that formed part of Egypt’s moral mission, a belief in leading the African continent that predates the 1952 Free Officers movement. In 1947, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted “Egypt’s civilizing mission among other African peoples.” Cairo Radio declared that “we the son of the Nile valley have a political duty towards the African peoples,” while the Egyptian Charter highlighted how “our people live at the north-eastern gate of the struggling Africa and cannot be isolated from its political, social and economic development.” Detailing state preparations for the Bandung Conference, *al-Ahram*’s front page enumerated a range of policies that will be taken by Egypt “in her capacity as the leader of the African continent” (*al-Ahram*, March 21, 1955). By 1956, the Egyptian delegation to the UN would note that “the destiny of Egypt is closely connected with the African continent because she became the leader and her leadership was recognized on this continent” (*al-Gumhuriya*, April 18, 1956). Nasser himself wrote that “we certainly cannot, under any conditions, relinquish our responsibility to help spread the light of knowledge and civilization into the very depth of the virgin jungles of the continent” (Nasser 1955).

Second, the development of closer diplomatic links with African states aimed to augment Egypt’s foreign policy on the international stage, particularly with regard to its anti-Western and nonaligned dimensions. “When we support African issues and independence movements elsewhere,” Nasser explained in a Damascus speech in 1961, “we actually consolidate our own independence” (UAR 1961, p. 31). Egypt “must endeavor to unify the peoples of the [African] continent and discover a tie to join them so that they may form a united [bloc] in economy, defense, and politics vis-à-vis the big [blocs] now existing in the world” (Heikal 1956). “I would say, without exaggeration,” Nasser wrote, “that we cannot, even if we wish to, in any way stand

⁵ Marguerite Cartwright, “Israel in Africa,” 1961/62. ISA, FM-3388/24 (ISA-mfa-Political-000kv1x).

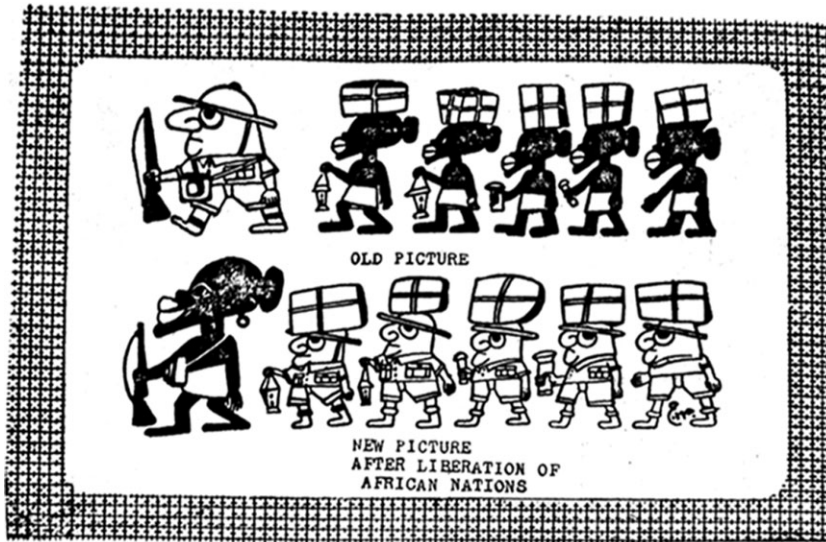


Figure 1. African liberation: “Cairo Carries the Torch of Liberty for the Black Continent” (Arab Observer, July 10, 1960), 133 × 87 mm.

aside from the sanguinary and dreadful struggle now raging in the heart of Africa between five million whites and two hundred million Africans” (Nasser 1955). The Voice of Free Africa radio programs, put into operation in 1957 to disseminate Egyptian propaganda in the style of Voice of the Arabs, would urge African listeners to “drive the white dogs of the oppressor countries of the West” from their lands’ (*The New York Times*, January 21, 1958; see also figure 1). By extension, Egypt’s potential success in influencing African states’ diplomacy would enhance its case for leadership in the Arab world. Three years later, Israel launched its own radio service, The Voice of Israel in Africa, which broadcasted daily for half an hour in English, French, and Swahili. It covered Israeli and African affairs, although its most popular program was a biblical quiz section, as well as the opportunity for African visitors to Israel to be interviewed on the radio. According to the Israeli daily *Davar* (August 8, 1961; see figure 2), this form of public diplomacy played a “decisive” part in the “political and psychological warfare which Israel engages with the Arab states.”

Third, beyond moral and diplomatic imperatives, Egypt had distinct economic reasons for developing stronger bonds with SSA. Egypt saw Africa as a potential outlet for its persistent twin problems of overpopulation and the lack of food and raw materials (Ismael 1971, 122–26). It was recommended that the state “encourage the emigration of Egyptians to many African countries such as the Sudan and East Africa, facilitate their journeys and grant them subsidies” (Heikal 1956). Africa was also seen as a solution to Egypt’s shortage of food, and authorities stressed the need “to ensure a continuous flow of raw materials from Africa to feed [Egyptian] industries” (*Arab Observer*, September 3, 1962). Egyptian dependence on the waters of the Nile translated into an imperative to ensure friendly relations with African countries of the river’s basin (Boutros-Ghali 1963). Finally, in the face of rapid industrialization in the aftermath of the 1952 Revolution and elites’ eagerness to diversify its foreign trade away from both the Western and Soviet blocs, Asian and African non-communist countries became key alternatives (*Three Monthly Economic Review/Egypt, Libya, Sudan*, No 20, 1955).



Figure 2. “Voice of Israel from Jerusalem!” (Davar, August 8, 1961), 25 × 23 mm.

Israel's Soft-Power Projection in Africa

By 1961, fourteen recently decolonized sub-Saharan countries developed close relationships with Israel—so close that the prime minister of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere referred to Golda Meir, Israel’s foreign minister from 1956 to 1966, as “the mother of Africa.” In her memoirs, Meir noted that she was “prouder of Israel’s International Cooperation Program and of the technical aid we gave to the people of Africa than I am of any other single project we have ever undertaken” (Meir 1975, 265). Indeed, the extent of Israel’s success in developing extensive relations with all the independent states of Africa in the 1960s (the only two exceptions being the entirely Muslim countries of Mauritania and Somalia, who also joined the Arab League) was evident in the preference given by the Israeli foreign ministry to Africa over all other diplomatic relations in the Third World. One measure of the extent of Israel’s diplomatic relations included the frequent reciprocal visits of Israeli and African officials at the highest level. For example, between June 1962 and December 1963 alone, thirteen African presidents and prime ministers arrived in Israel on state visits. By 1964, Israel had more diplomatic missions in Africa (26) than France (24), Belgium (20), Italy (19) and West Germany (23), and only one fewer than Britain. Most critically, Egypt had only fourteen diplomatic missions in the continent.⁶ By 1967, almost a third of Israel’s diplomatic missions (29 of 96) were in Africa, while more than two-thirds of Israel’s expert missions overseas from 1958 to 1973 took place in Africa and nearly half of all participants in Israeli training programs (many of them in-country) were African (Amir 1974, 74; Levey 2004, 83).

As noted above, the main mechanism behind the Israeli outreach to Africa was the Agency for International Development Cooperation (*Mashav*). Since its establishment in 1958, its soft-power activities in the Third World helped to facilitate Israel’s political and diplomatic goals in dozens of recently decolonized states. Its aim, according to one of its founders, was to “provide technical assistance to Asian and African countries ... professionally speaking, our experience can easily compete with [that of] other countries ... basing [our presence] in the [African] continent by [sending] experts gives Israel commercial and economic advantages and adds to our stature in a sensitive, important part of the world ...” (cited in Oded 2009, 92–93). Some of these initiatives included the establishment in 1958 of the Afro-Asian Institute for Labor and Cooperative Studies, which by 1971 had trained thousands of individuals from eighty-six countries in economics, trade unionism,

⁶Prime Minister Office, “General Overview—Africa,” March 1964. ISA, A-7937/14 (ISA-Privatecollections-YadEshkol-00031bf).

and other developmental problems of emerging nations; the Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Trade Center, which aided the development and education of African women; and the establishment of dozens of eye clinics by Israeli doctors in Africa, who treated about a million patients and performed more than 30,000 operations until diplomatic relations were severed in 1973. Half of all students from developing countries in Israel from 1958 to 1969 came from Africa (6,772), while Africa received more than two-thirds of the agricultural experts and technical specialists that Israel sent to developing countries in the same period (2,485). During the “golden age” of *Mashav* activities in the 1960s, it also cooperated extensively with various international organizations and other donor countries in funding training and education programs, including UNICEF, WHO, UNCTAD (UN Conference on Trade and Development), Food and Agricultural Organization, USAID, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States, to name a few (Lorch 1963; Inbal and Zahavi 2009; Alpher 2015; Salman 2019). Throughout this period, Israeli leaders repeatedly stressed that the aid was not—and should not—be conditioned on political favors from the African states, as per Nye’s “no-strings-attached” aspect of soft power. Indeed, from an African perspective, “it was important to the new nations [that] no external threat had been offered, no strings attached to the aid given, with no compromise to their sovereignty, or threat to their dearly-loved independence.”⁷ In the long term, however, it was this lack of linkage in Israel’s aid policy that had led many Israeli editorials, as well as academic and policy studies, to suggest that the considerable investment in the aid program did not justify the return, certainly given the “African betrayal” of 1972–1973 that effectively ended the Israeli adventure in Africa (Gitelson 1974; Levey 2004; Inbal and Zahavi 2009).

There was no denying the political and diplomatic benefits that Israel reaped from its various development aid programs—especially in the wider context of the Cold War and the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Israeli projection of soft power in Africa through *Mashav* activities effectively saved Israel from political isolation while preventing many African states from turning to Communism or Nasserism. As one Israeli official noted, “Let’s be honest. MASHAV was not completely altruistic. Countries and the relations between them are never altruistic. As a country we were politically isolated, and we needed friends. The Arab noose was around our throats and we loosened it with our friendship with the Africans” (cited in Oded 2009, 96). Indeed, notwithstanding the no-strings-attached, humanitarian rhetoric of Israeli officials, internally the foreign ministry recognized that acquiring the friendship of African states was a vehicle to achieve less altruistic aims, chief among them was to “neutralize them in the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict, bring them to publicly declare their friendly position and maybe use them in the long-term in mediating the conflict.” The other two aims, according to Meir, were to strengthen Israel’s position in the eyes of the great powers, and to boost the Israeli economy by finding new markets for its products and through the development of joint activities.⁸ Perhaps the most accurate assessment of the “hard” benefits of projecting this soft power in Africa was this summary of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Although Israel does not link cooperation with MASHAV to political achievements and does not expect anything in return, in actual fact MASHAV’s activities serve as an important tool for the Israeli embassies in their bilateral relations. MASHAV’s activities contribute to promoting Israel’s image as a country with something to give and that there is a desire to receive aid from it” (cited in Oded 2009, 106). Regardless of the motives behind Israel’s development aid program in Africa, there is no doubting its impressive political and diplomatic benefits. By 1972, there were more African embassies in Israel (twenty) than in Britain, with many of them based in Jerusalem rather than Tel Aviv, which signaled their wish to stay out of the Arab–Israeli conflict and

⁷ Marguerite Cartwright, “Israel in Africa,” 1961/62. ISA, FM-3388/24 (ISA-mfa-Political-000kv1x).

⁸ Memorandum, “Israel–Africa Relations,” n.d. ISA, FM-31061 (ISA-mfa-Political-000kqlk).

maintain friendly relations with all parties despite the pressure of their northern Arab neighbors.⁹

Egyptian Soft-Power Counterstrategies across Africa

Already in 1955, the front page of *al-Ahram* wrote that “Egypt will try to alienate the Afro-Asian states from Israel” (*al-Ahram*, March 21, 1955). “Nasser’s interest in Africa has certainly been greatly stimulated by Israel’s extensive and successful program of technical assistance to African nations,” Cremeans wrote in 1963, “which he views as the manifestation of a joint plan by Israel and its Western sponsors to encircle the Arab area . . . thus setting up a counteroffensive to his attempts to exclude Israel from the Afro-Asian community” (Cremeans 1963, 271). Israeli actions across Africa were immediately noticed in Egypt. Close colleague of Nasser and *al-Ahram*’s long-standing editor-in-chief, Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, would argue that “Israel wants to share in the loot of Africa, by its role in carrying out the schemes of neo-imperialism” and that “Israel dreams of mobilizing votes at the UN which would help her bury the UN resolution on the Palestinian question [given that] the African countries have now one-third of the votes at the UN.” He continued to describe Israeli policy in Africa:

One should be fair even to the devil, and admit that Israel is clever in pushing forward in Africa . . . The day the country celebrates its independence, a delegation arrives from Israel carrying with it a deep and detailed study of the problems of the country. While all other delegations are muttering their congratulations, the Israeli delegation is speaking about the problem which the newly-independent country faces. Most delegations go home after the congratulations, but the new African ruler keeps the Israeli delegation because he can discuss post-independence problems with it. In most cases, the Israeli delegation returns carrying with it agreements, economic, technical or cultural. Israel usually chooses one or two fields and concentrates activities on these [and] chooses her men in Africa carefully. The Israeli embassies in Africa comprise the most efficient men at the Foreign Ministry. (*Arab Observer*, August 10, 1964)

Not surprisingly, Egypt would develop its own program of economic, educational, and technical assistance in the late 1950s and 1960s. These would be managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade. The African Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would determine the nature and importance of bilateral relations, after which the Africa Department of the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade, founded in 1956, would negotiate the trade agreements. These would then be implemented by the El Nasr Export–Import Company, which was nationalized in 1961.

Initial agreements with Ethiopia and Somalia were followed a series of agreements in March 1961 on trade and payments, technical cooperation, and industrial credit with Mali, which had just established trade and cultural relations with Israel. By 1970, Egypt had concluded bilateral trade agreements with nineteen African states, with some stipulating that any Egyptian aid should not be used in any way that would benefit Israel. El Sayed Mohamed Ghanem, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of El Nasr Export–Import Company, argued in October 1965 that “the consolidation of co-operation and [Egyptian] trade with African countries in the past few years has helped to check Israel’s influence in Africa” (*Egyptian Gazette*, October 21, 1965).

Egypt also provided economic assistance to select countries, to be used for getting machinery and technical assistance from Egypt, with a 2.5 percent interest rate. Underlining the foreign policy importance of these initiatives, Nasser responded

⁹Prime Minister Office, “General Overview—Africa,” March 1964. ISA, A-7937/14 (ISA-Privatecollections-YadEshkol-00031bf) (Gietson 1974).

that “they were essential ... as a means of checking Israel’s influence in Africa.” As per these bilateral agreements, Egypt dispatched thousands of teachers, medical doctors, agricultural experts, and other specialists to African countries while it also undertook the construction of hospitals, schools, small factories, and roads. Teachers, in particular, were selected following a competitive process and underwent extensive training in order to “acquaint them with the countries that they will serve in and to enlighten them with their message,” as per governmental records (United Arab Republic 1964, p.12). Once abroad, Egyptian teachers would follow the Egyptian state’s national curriculum, with distinct anti-Western and anti-Zionist themes (Sadiq and Tsourapas 2021). While publicly available data do not exist on these practices, partial archival data reveal the extent of this strategy across non-Arab countries, approximately 90 percent of which were located in Africa.

However, the Egyptian lacked the resources to match the extent of Israel’s economic offensive across SSA, given that itself—like its African counterparts—was in need of hard currency. The dispatch of experts was a limited strategy, if it was not matched with adequate funding, which Israel was able to provide. This led Nasser to diversify his soft-power strategy along two lines: first, Egypt took advantage of its historic tradition of higher education to establish an ambitious—and fairly low-cost—program of scholarships for African students; second, it launched a wide-ranging anti-Israel publicity campaign across the entire African continent that aimed to paint Israel as a neocolonial power while also discrediting its strategy of soft power via development aid. In terms of the former, Egyptian foreign students amounted to approximately 5,500 in the 1953–1954 academic year, a number that rose to 27,975 in 1963–1964 (United Arab Republic 1964, 12). A total of 14,500 “cultural scholarships” were awarded to African and Asian students in 1963 alone. African students were given priority treatment with tours on Egyptian history and industrialization, coupled with Egyptian film nights and literature theater plays (Khafaja 1963, 146–48). At the time, the Egyptian state was in a continuous state of war against Israel while Egyptian society and politics were profoundly shaped by anti-Zionist discourses, into which African students were socialized.

More ambitiously, the Egyptian state embarked in a public campaign of turning African “hearts and minds” against Israel via a two-pronged soft-power strategy that discredited both Israel and its development assistance program. By 1960, Egyptian radio programs broadcasted in six different languages across the African continent, the Voice of Free Africa, and would reach 120 million Africans. In order to overcome the linguistic difficulties associated with this endeavor, the Egyptian Broadcasting Service recruited African students and members of diplomatic missions in Cairo who “gladly” served as program announcers in fulfillment of their “patriotic service” to their countrymen (*Arab Observer*, October 7, 1960). A series of radio talks in 1960 was organized around the theme of “Israeli Danger to Africa,” while the Department of Information appointed a Special Officer who would direct its anti-Israeli propaganda across Africa (Remba 1961, 18).

Israel was portrayed as the creation of colonialism and an agent of imperialist Western powers, frequently equated with apartheid South Africa. Beyond radio programs, booklets were distributed across Africa by the Department of Information. Nasser would decry Israel’s actions in Africa as undermining Afro-Asian solidarity, for Israel had already destroyed one Asian people, namely the Palestinians (UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC 1960). Egyptian National Assembly resolutions on imperialist conspiracies across Africa would be duly disseminated across African parliaments (*Egyptian Gazette*, December 23, 1965). Faced with “Israel’s extensive and successful program of technical assistance to African nations,” Egypt sought to discredit Israel’s soft-power strategy itself. Nasser pointed that the Israeli economy itself relies on economic aid from West Germany and the United States—in effect, imperialism continued to be present in Africa through Israel. The Middle East News Agency (MENA) Agency would report that “Israel is using in its own country only

one-fourth or one-fifth of the 500 million dollars it received annually in direct aid, grants and loans [while] the rest goes to Asian and African markets with the object of [establishing] a new imperialist empire in Africa and Asia” ([Middle Agency East News 1959](#)).

Discussion: Explaining the Israel–Egyptian Soft-Power Rivalry

Among Israel’s many diplomatic and political benefits that resulted from its coalition-building efforts in SSA, perhaps the most impressive was its ability to maintain the coalition for 15 years despite Nasser’s attempts to break it apart by harnessing the support of these countries in his fight against Israel. Indeed, as we hypothesized above about the durability of middle powers’ strategies in coalition maintenance, this coalition eventually disintegrated not because of economic or military decline on the part of Israel, or because of successful counterstrategies by Nasser, but because of a change in the national identities and domestic priorities of the target states.

This soft-power rivalry manifested itself as early as 1958, when the newly independent African countries blocked an Arab move at the First Conference of Independent African States to include Israel on its list of “racist” and “imperialist” powers ([Miller 1975](#), 394–95). Three years later, in December 1961, the Israeli foreign ministry alerted all its diplomatic missions in Africa of the looming danger posed by Egypt’s efforts to assume a leadership role in the nascent African Union of Broadcasting, which included more than twenty African nations. Mindful of Egypt’s capabilities and intentions, the head of the African division in the Israeli foreign ministry warned of “Cairo’s persistent endeavors to turn the broadcasting union into an effective tool to increase Egypt’s activities in the continent. This is under the ‘objective’ reasoning that Cairo is best placed to train and inspire in the area of broadcasting.” In response, he advised all Israeli diplomats to “turn the attention” of their respective African governments, public relations, and media contacts to the “danger which lies in allowing Egypt to control this vital area.” To counter the Egyptian threat and provide an alternative source of training, he also informed the missions in Africa that “Mashav, together with Voice of Israel [Israel’s public broadcaster] and the information department, will soon issue a pamphlet about forthcoming training opportunities in radio in Israel.”¹⁰

Under the leadership of Nasser and the flag of pan-Arabism, Israel was repeatedly labeled in Arab media and at regional forums as a bridge to imperialism, and its friendly relations with many African countries were described as a defeat for the Arab countries, especially in North Africa. In September 1960, the Arab League voted to increase the number of Egyptian economic missions in Africa as a means to promote Muslim unity against the growing number of Israeli activities in the continent. A few months later, on January 23, 1961, Nasser promised the Egyptian National Assembly that the UAR (United Arab Republic) would protect the continent’s eastern gates from the Israeli “imperialist infiltrations” ([Carol 2012](#), 200–201). In April 1961, an Egyptian economic delegation led by the finance minister and comprised of thirty officials went on an eleven-country tour of Africa. Described by the UAR press as “the largest and most important delegation ever sent to Africa,” it was accompanied by a TV crew with four cameras and 300 film rolls to cover the trip and show the host countries the “progress made by the UAR in the economic and social fields.” Similarly, following the conclusion of a cultural agreement between Liberia and Egypt in April 1961, the African division at the Israeli foreign ministry assessed that “this is seemingly a normal cultural agreement, with student exchanges, artists, athletes, etc., but in fact it allows for the opening of ‘cultural centres’ for the

¹⁰ Lorch to African Missions, “Broadcasting Union in Africa,” December 24, 1961. ISA, FM-3322/51 (ISA-mfa-Political-000k9oi).

purpose of spreading “culture’.” We are making sure that the relevant people here will receive full information on the kinds of culture that the UAR spreads through similar cultural centres. Of course, we expect increasing UAR activity in the future, and there is no doubt that a large part of this centre’s activities will be directed against the Israeli influence here.”¹¹

Nevertheless, Nasser’s efforts to break the Israeli–African coalition were largely unsuccessful, as the 1960s were seen as the golden age of Israeli–African relations. During the OAU founding meeting in Addis Ababa in May 1963, African countries prevented Nasser from introducing an anti-Israel resolution. Nasser even threatened not to attend the conference unless Ethiopia removed Israelis from the capital and prevented Israeli diplomats and journalists from attending the conference itself, but Emperor Haile Selassie refused. Such efforts by Nasser not only brought Ethiopian–Israeli relations even closer, but also represented a general mood among African states that the Arab–Israeli conflict was a Middle Eastern issue, not an African problem. Accordingly, even when the increasingly powerful Arab bloc managed to pass resolutions condemning Israeli trade and aid as a cloak of neocolonialism at forums such as the Conference of Independent African States, the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference, and the OAU, individual African states acted behind the scenes to reassure Israel that such resolutions would not affect their friendly relations. As Julius Nyerere, Prime Minister of Tanganyika (later Tanzania) declared in December 1961, “We are not going to let our friends determine who our enemies shall be” (cited in Carol 2012, 201).

From the outset, Israel sought to build and maintain its coalition by harnessing its friendly relations in Africa to resist Nasser’s efforts to Africanize the Arab–Israeli conflict, both in its bilateral dealings with African states and in multilateral forums such as the UN and the OAU. For example, the Israeli ambassador in Leopoldville advised the foreign ministry in 1961 that “while at present there is no danger of Egyptian economic penetration, there is no doubt that soon they will send a representative, maybe even an ambassador. In anticipation of an [Egyptian] economic effort ... it is better to be proactive and encourage the economic department to create facts on the ground” by establishing a strong Israeli presence in the country.¹² Similar sentiments were raised by the Israeli ambassador in Chad, who alerted that “we have serious credit here. Let’s not waste it, we have opportunities to penetrate large and diverse areas beyond our previous hopes.”¹³ At the multilateral level, African states foiled Arab attempts to remove Israeli diplomats from key positions at various UN bodies and displayed collective anger at Nasser’s consistent efforts to turn the Arab–Israeli conflict into an African–Israeli conflict. For example, in response to Israeli concerns about such attempts by Nasser, several African leaders responded decisively that “Africa is not interested in the Arab–Israeli conflict, and it is regrettable that Nasser has pushed to make it an all-African problem,” noting Nasser’s “true colour” in his role in instigating coups and revolutions across Africa and beyond.¹⁴ These include, among others, providing support to “reactionary” movements in Cameroon, Senegal, Niger, Kenya, and Somalia, leading several African countries (including Sierra Leon, Liberia, and Congo) to expel Egyptian officials from their territories.¹⁵ As the Congolese president, Mobutu Sese Seko, explained to an Egyptian official in 1970, even if he wanted to stand by

¹¹ African Division to Director of Foreign Ministry, “Review—Africa no 30,” April 19, 1961. ISA, FM-3323/2 (ISAmfa-Political-000k9ok).

¹² Moshe Leshem to Head of Department of Political-Economic Planning, October 5, 1961. ISA, FM-921/12 (ISAmfa-IsraeliMissionCOD-000s30p).

¹³ Ephraim Dubak to Mashav—African Division, “Our Assistance to Chad,” March 24, 1964. ISA, FM-1512/12 (ISAmfa-IsraeliMissionTchad-000sj9h).

¹⁴ Telegram, Hagai Dikan to African Division, March 19, 1963, ISA, FM-2119/4 (ISAmfa-IsraeliMissionCIV-000stxn).

¹⁵ Prime Minister Office, “General Overview—Africa,” March 1964. ISA, A-7937/14 (ISAPrivatecollections-YadEshkol-00031bf).

President Nasser, “the Congolese people would not support him. They know who the Egyptians are and who the Israelis are,” pointing to Egypt’s financing and arming of Congolese rebels during the civil war.¹⁶

The Israeli–African coalition remained strong throughout the 1960s, and it did not wane significantly even after the June 1967 war. By early 1972, Israel still maintained diplomatic relations with thirty-three African countries, who benefited from approximately two-thirds of Israel’s aid program—at a time when UN aid to SSA amounted to only one-fifth of its total aid budget (Inbal and Zahavi 2009; Carol 2012, 210). The endurance of the Israeli–African coalition is further explained by internal African–Arab politics and the refusal of many African states to subjugate their interests to those of their northern neighbors. As late as May 1973, at the OAU’s tenth-anniversary meeting, there was no hiding the tension between the Arab states, now led by Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, and many sub-Saharan states who refused to unite around an anti-Israel agenda. The Secretary-General of the OAU, Nzo Ekangaki of Cameroon, spoke of the organization’s disappointment “in the world’s lukewarm attitude and lack of concern over the spartan aggressiveness ... of Israel ... as long as Israel continues to occupy parts of the territory of one of the founding members of the OAU, Egypt, she shall continue to have the condemnation of the OAU.” Nigeria’s General Yakubo Gowon declared similarly that “It is intolerable provocative that a part of Egypt, a member State of our organization, should continue to remain under armed occupation since June 1967, and I express the hope that African countries would express their solidarity with Egypt at international forums.” Even Emperor Selassie of Ethiopia, one of Israel’s closest friends in Africa, declared that a prerequisite for peace and stability in the Middle East must be “an Israeli withdrawal from all territories she occupied in the June 1967 war.” Nevertheless, Ethiopia, alongside many other African states refused to sacrifice their relations with Israel for the sake of this issue. Ghana, Botswana, Sierre Leon, Rwanda, Zair, Malawi, Ivory Coast, Swaziland, Liberia, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) were some of the other states that openly resisted Libyan and Algerian calls on African states to sever all diplomatic relations with Israel. They were also successful in removing any references to Israel in the political declaration as “the aggressor country” and an “agent of imperialism” who “usurped lands.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, Israel’s continuous occupation of Arab lands since 1967, combined with internal African dynamics as well as global developments, had gradually brought to an end the Israeli presence in Africa. From March 1972 to the outbreak of the 1973 October war, eight countries severed their relations with Israel. According to its internal assessment in July 1973, the Israeli Foreign Ministry concluded, “Holding on to the territories, Israel’s image as an occupier, its refusal to withdraw from all territories—are not acceptable in Africa, and the Arab demands receive emotional and instinctive support even amongst our friends ... There is a danger that these trends will continue to escalate ...”¹⁸ A further twenty African countries followed suit and severed their relations with Israel during the October war and in the weeks that followed. By November 1973, with Israeli forces occupying African territory in Egypt and only 60 miles from Cairo, only four countries maintained their diplomatic relations with Israel: Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Mauritius (Ojo 1988; Oded 2010).

The reasons behind this dramatic shift in Israeli–African relations over those 18 months can be grouped into three: first, there were political, economic, and ideological processes that drove SSA countries away from Israel. These include, among

¹⁶ Office of the Prime Minister to Israeli Embassy in Kinshasa, “Visit of Congo Ambassador at the Prime Minister,” July 2, 1971. ISA G-6694/6 (ISA-PMO-PrimeMinisterBureau-000wj32).

¹⁷ Head of Africa Division to all missions in Africa, “OAU Meeting 1973–Final Report,” July 4, 1973. ISA, FM-3246/9, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010znk.

¹⁸ Shimoni to Foreign Minister, “Israel and Africa,” July 4, 1973. ISA, FM-3246/7, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010zni.

others, growing frustration with the lack of rapid economic growth, which was further exacerbated by a devastating drought in much of SSA; the rise of new national leaders who subscribed to radical left ideologies; and the increasing pressure by Algeria and Libya to make the Middle East situation a central item on the OAU agenda. The second reason for the demise of the Israeli–African coalition concerned the changing nature of outside activities in the continent. The early 1970s witnessed a growing reluctance by western countries to provide economic aid to many SSA countries, which left a vacuum into which China quickly stepped in—by October 1973, 40 percent of China’s foreign aid was destined for Africa. Similarly, the African suspicion toward communist activities in the continent in the 1960s gradually gave way to acceptance of such activities by Moscow and its satellite states, especially, East Germany. The final reason concerned specifically the Middle East conflict: as noted above, a growing number of African states struggled to reconcile their economic interests and sense of solidarity with their neighbors, especially as France and Britain, with colonial links in the continent, were vocal of their criticism of Israel. The rise in international attention to the Palestinian cause, as well as the growing influence of political Islam in many African countries, and the dependence on Arab oil, similarly contributed to a realization throughout SSA that they could no longer continue to justify their relations with Israel.¹⁹

The last point is particularly pertinent in explaining the Israeli exit from Africa against the introduction of the “oil weapon” by the Gulf states, as well as the uneasy relationship between “Black Africa” and the Middle East. The political and public reaction in Israel to Africa’s “gross betrayal of international friendship and goodwill,” in the words of foreign minister Abba Eban, immediately translated into sharp cuts in the *Mashav* budget, from 0.12 percent of Israel’s GDP in 1972 to 0.01 percent in 1974. Israeli exports to Africa dropped from \$30.9 million in 1970 to \$13.9 million in 1973. New investments and construction projects were halted almost overnight, while the number of African trainees in Israel dropped from 402 in 1972 to 80 in 1975 (Inbal and Zahavi 2009).²⁰ However, the Israeli exit from Africa did not leave a void in development aid for long. Frank Mwine, the World Bank’s division chief of Africa, assessed in 1975 that “The year 1974 may go into history as one of the most significant years in the history of economic development in Africa for it marked the arrival of a new donor on the scene – the Arab.”²¹

Ironically though, it almost immediately emerged that while the vast majority of African states “betrayed” Israel for the sake of unity with their Arab neighbors, they soon felt betrayed themselves by the failure of the rich Arab states to match their rhetoric on African aid with deeds. While the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) promised more than \$10 billion in aid to the developing world, many African states criticized the organization for supporting mostly Asian-Muslim and Arab League countries: more than 90 percent of the aid was destined to Egypt, Syria, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Arab League members with large Muslim populations. The *New York Times* reported that one African diplomat charged that “the Arab petrodollar politics is aiming at having colonies in black Africa” while another said, “No matter what the Arabs say, they are tying their willingness to help black Africans to black Africa’s willingness to line up solidarity with the Arabs against Israel in the Middle East” (*New York Times* 1975). Similar criticism leveled at the Arab “betrayal” of Africa could be found in African magazines such as *Eurafrique*, under the headline “Iepétrole, les Arabes et l’Afrique.” The Arab oil states did not deny this linkage. One Arab diplomat criticized the SSA countries for being irresponsible

¹⁹ Mosad’s Research Division, “Africa—Background and Reasons for Elimination of Israel’s Presence,” October 30, 1973. ISA, FM-6/3284, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010zp0, *passim*.

²⁰ ISA, FM-6/3284, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010zp0, *passim*.

²¹ Frank A. Mwine, “Arab Economic Aid to Africa,” July 1975. FM- 6/3284, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010zp0.

and that “while they want our backing in all areas, they want to say that the Middle East is an area on which they can remain neutral” (*New York Times* 1975).

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to contribute to the literature on soft power by moving away from great powers’ foreign policy analysis and extending it to middle-power rivalry. We demonstrated how rival middle powers may engage in soft-power strategies to gain relative advantage outside the military domain, by making two arguments: first, that soft power enhances coalition-building strategies for middle powers and, second, that the coalition will continue to be maintained by its members so long as it does not conflict with the national identities and self-image of the target states. Thus, whereas the literature on great powers’ projection of soft power expects their attractiveness to diminish following economic and military decline, the durability of middle powers’ soft-power strategies is primarily determined by the target states, owing to the limited capacity of middle powers as agenda setters at the global stage. Similarly, we have shown that contrary to existing explanations of coalition building whereby states unite against a shared threat or around a defined policy issue, the use of soft power via development aid can produce an effective “us” versus “them” distinction in target states that can unite them in the absence of a common enemy; to recall Julius Nyerere’s comment, “We are not going to let our friends determine who our enemies shall be” (cited in Carol 2012, 201).

These findings are significant because they highlight that Israel did not “lose” SSA in the early 1970s due to miscalculation of its development aid, or because of the diminishing appeal of its soft power. Despite the dramatic severing of diplomatic relations with Israel in the early 1970s, several African countries continued to sustain their contacts with Israel at a lower level through interest offices in thirteen foreign embassies (e.g., the Swedish embassies in Ethiopia and Tanzania, the Italian embassy in Uganda, and Danish embassy in Zaire), while educational and commercial exchanges continued to take place, albeit at a much-reduced level and away from the public eye.²² Conversely, Egypt did not “win” either, inasmuch as Nasser’s relentless efforts to Africanize the Arab–Israeli conflict from 1957 until his death in 1970 had failed to break the Israeli–African coalition, both diplomatically and economically. As noted above, even as late as May 1973, Arab members of the OAU were frustrated by the refusal of their African counterparts to stand in unity against Israel (Miller 1975). Indeed, the fact that for almost two decades the acquiescence to the Arab boycott of Israel was so prominent in North America, Europe, and Asia but not in Egypt’s backyard is a testament to the resilience and attractiveness of Israel’s soft-power strategies in building and maintaining its coalition with dozens of SSA countries over such an extended period.

Notwithstanding the limitations of a single case-study analysis and the crucial case method, we believe that there are several generalizable observations from this previously unstudied case of Israeli–Egyptian soft-power rivalry. First, the extant literature on soft power would benefit from adding to the considerable knowledge of great power diplomacy by theorizing on the motivations, durability, and effectiveness of middle powers’ pursuit of noncoercive strategies to build coalitions. As we have demonstrated in this article, middle powers behave differently in their projection of soft power due to their positionality in the global system, and as such, they ought to be studied as a distinct category of soft-power actors. Second, as alluded to in the introduction, despite the multitude of historical and contemporary cases of middle-power rivalries, these are rarely examined outside the prism of the

²² Gershon Gan to Shimon Amir, “Status of Israeli Representation in Africa,” November 5, 1973. ISA, FM-3246/7, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010zmi, ISA; “Israel’s Representation in Africa,” December 12, 1975. ISA, FM-3284/3, ISA-mfa-EconomicAffairs-0010zox.

military or economic competition, despite the evident use of soft-power strategies to gain a relative advantage in these conflictual relations. Finally, by empirically analyzing the foreign policies of middle powers through theoretical constructs such as soft power, this article may serve as an example for how future research may move beyond the definitional cacophony that had engulfed the study of middle powers in recent decades. Whether approaching the subject from a positional, behavioral, or ideational approach, there is much to gain from a deeper and more theoretically informed analysis of how middle powers engage in bilateral rivalries in noncoercive ways.

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