



המכון ליחסי ישראל - אפריקה
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Israel-Africa Air Routes: Overview and Recommendations

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1. Executive Summary

The expansion of air routes between Israel and Africa faces significant obstacles, including economic viability, restricted overflight options, and high security costs. Low passenger demand remains a major barrier; most routes cannot generate the necessary traffic to cover operating expenses, with exceptions like Ethiopia and Morocco. Additionally, overflight restrictions from countries without diplomatic ties to Israel, mainly in North Africa, increase flight times and costs, especially for West and Central African destinations. Stringent security protocols at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport, due to security concerns, also add logistical and financial challenges, deterring potential travelers and airlines.

To address these challenges, increasing passenger demand is critical. One solution is to develop pilgrimage routes from Africa to Israel, targeting Africa's substantial Christian population interested in visiting holy sites. This can be achieved through collaborative efforts between tourism ministries and by supporting group travel options for pilgrims. Additionally, promoting African tourism destinations, such as Kenya and Tanzania, to Israeli travelers can boost outbound travel demand.

Collaborating with established airlines like Ethiopian Airlines and Royal Air Maroc presents another viable solution. By leveraging these airlines' extensive networks in Africa, Israel could improve connectivity without directly establishing new routes, sidestepping the constraints of operating its own flights in a complex and costly market.

A comprehensive strategy combining new routes with deepened diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties could mirror Turkey's success in Africa, where investments in multiple sectors have strengthened regional partnerships. For Israel, fostering air connections alongside broader bilateral initiatives is key to developing Israel's relations with Africa nations.

2. Introduction

The explosion in the volume of air traffic in the mid-20th century brought profound geopolitical changes. For any state, aviation and air traffic are tools to project power; they are also one of the main instruments of globalization. Deregulation of air traffic has increased competition among airlines worldwide. To survive in this particularly volatile market – subject to both economic crises and geopolitical tensions – airlines often need to form alliances to survive. Moreover, air travel is a tool of prestige for states or regions: opening a new airport or new routes demonstrates their importance and connection with the rest of the country, region and the world. Every national or regional capital aims to develop its airports and attract international airlines and routes.

For Israel, military and civil aviation have represented key strategic and symbolic dimensions since its independence. Strategically, given Israel's narrow territory, densely populated coastal areas and lack of a "hinterland," controlling the air has been essential. Symbolically, it was civil aviation, especially the early establishment of Israel's national airline, El Al, that



facilitated the arrival of hundreds of thousands of emigrants in Israel from the early 1950s and onward. Jews arrived from Yemen, Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, later from the former Soviet Union and also from Ethiopia from where the Israeli Air Force airlifted thousands in major historical rescue operations.

Air travel between states is both a tool to enhance diplomatic relations and a means to express tensions. The founders of the UN agency for civil aviation, the International Organization for Civil Aviation (IOCA) established in 1944, aimed to “develop civil aviation in all of its aspects”. Increased air traffic reflects strength in countries' relations while limiting or canceling lines is used as a tool when diplomatic relations between states deteriorate. National airlines like El Al are typically the last entities to leave a country in the event of a diplomatic breakdown and often the first one to return when relations normalize.

Development of air routes often parallels large migration movements. It is no surprise that one of the first routes between Israel and Sub-Saharan Africa connected Israel and South Africa, home to one of the continent’s largest Jewish communities at the time. Numerous South African Jews also served as fighter pilots in the pre-state Haganah, and some stayed in Israel after independence to help establish El Al.¹ Today, migrations are increasingly circular, with frequent back-and-forth travel between countries of origin and destination. This phenomenon partly explains why the most traveled route between Israel and Africa today connects Tel Aviv and Addis Ababa.

Africa, for its part, historically has had a limited network of internal air connections, contributing to a low level of tourism and economic exchanges within the continent. The lack of affordable and accessible travel options within Africa also hinders the ability of international actors to conduct business on the continent and deters many multinationals from establishing headquarters on African soil. A few regional hubs such as Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Casablanca and Johannesburg connect some of the continent's capitals. However, they cannot provide sufficient travel options for Africans and foreigners seeking to fly between regional destinations, in particular in the western and central part of the continent. Until Africa's air connectivity undergoes radical improvement, intercontinental travel will remain essential for the continent's economic, political and cultural exchanges.

3. Israel and Africa: Historical Background Overview of Israel-Africa Air Routes

Until 2020, there were several direct routes between Israel and African nations. However, most were canceled or suspended following the COVID-19 crisis and the regional conflict sparked by Hamas' terrorist attack on southern Israel on October 7, 2023.

¹ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al’s Director of International Affairs, September 2024

A. Egypt

Since 2021, and until the recent Gaza War², four weekly EgyptAir flights connected Cairo and Tel Aviv.³ During the previous four decades, Air Sinai, a subsidiary of Egypt's national carrier, discreetly operated a route between the two countries with unmarked planes. The 1981 peace agreement between Jerusalem and Cairo stipulated that there should be direct flights between the two countries. Occasional flights to Sharm El Sheikh have also been canceled.

B. Rwanda

In May 2019, several months after Jerusalem opened its embassy in Kigali, Israel and Rwanda inaugurated the first direct route between the two countries. The three weekly flights, operated by RwandAir, were aimed at boosting tourism and business, but also at making the Rwandan capital a hub for Israeli travelers throughout the continent.⁴ Additionally, several Israeli-operated charter flights ran between the two countries in 2021. In March 2020, the RwandAir route was suspended due to the COVID-19 crisis. Efforts to restore the route were unsuccessful due to low demand. In parallel, the fact that Qatar Airways is finalizing the acquisition of 49% of RwandAir⁵ could negatively affect the prospect of renewing flights to Israel.

C. Nigeria

A Bilateral Air Service Agreement (BASA) was signed between Israel and Nigeria in 2013 during President's Good Luck Jonathan's visit to Israel. ⁶ One of the goals of the agreement was to boost pilgrimage tourism from Nigeria to Israel. The agreement was ratified nine years later and Air Peace, a Nigerian company, inaugurated a route between the two countries in April 2023. ⁷ However, after the first flight, Sudan plunged into civil war and the country closed its airspace to foreign flights. With Libyan airspace also off-limits to Israel-bound flights, the extended flight times rendered the route unprofitable and it was eventually canceled. Interest remains in restoring the route once wars in Sudan and Israel end.

D. Kenya

In 2019 and 2020 significant efforts were put in place for Kenya Airways to develop flights between Israel and Kenya, a route that was operated by El Al up until the 2002

² "Air Cairo suspends flights to Israel amid war in Gaza" Aham online, 11.10.23

³ "EgyptAir to launch direct Tel Aviv-Cairo flights next month" Times of Israel, 13.09.21

⁴ Discussions with current and former Israeli officials, September 2024

⁵ "RwandAir says Qatar Airways close to acquiring stake, FT reports" Reuters, 16.06.24

⁶ "Israel, Nigeria to sign flight pact in bid to boost pilgrimages," Times of Israel, 21.10.13

⁷ Discussions with current and former Israeli officials, September 2024

Mombasa terrorist attacks. However, the COVID-19 crisis, limited demand and strong competition from Ethiopian Airlines prevented the project from materializing.

E. Seychelles

Air Seychelles operates a successful direct route between Tel-Aviv and Seychelles with additional charter flights occasionally provided by Israeli airlines during holiday seasons. Most passengers are Israeli tourists visiting the archipelago and it is *one of the few routes between Tel Aviv and Africa that has remained operational during most of the war in Gaza*.⁸

F. Tanzania

In 2023, Arkia operated occasional charters to Zanzibar and Arusha, two of Africa's top tourist destinations in Tanzania.⁹

G. Morocco

Following the normalization of ties between Rabat and Jerusalem in 2020, both countries' national carriers began operating direct flights between Morocco and Israel. El Al operated the Tel-Aviv to Casablanca route while Royal Air Maroc flew between Marrakech and Ben Gurion Airport, with a total of 15 weekly flights connecting the two countries. In July 2023, Israeli company Arkia even signed an agreement with the Moroccan tourism agency to eventually start a third direct flight between Essaouira and Tel Aviv.¹⁰ These air links were suspended with the onset of the Gaza War. Additionally, Israeli airlines operated occasional charters serving pilgrims to Moroccan Jewish holy sites.¹¹ In 2021, the total number of Israeli travelers to the Kingdom reached the impressive figure of 80,000.¹²

H. Ethiopia

Ethiopian Airlines currently serves as the main gateway for Israeli travelers to Africa, operating two to three daily flights carrying thousands of Israelis to dozens of destinations across the continent. The extensive reach of Africa's biggest airline makes it extremely challenging for other airlines to compete with Ethiopian Airlines in terms of price and variety of destinations. El Al has a code share agreement with Ethiopian Airlines, allowing the Israeli national carrier to sell tickets on the Ethiopian carrier's flights.¹³

⁸ "The airlines that have not yet returned to Israel - and those that have," Jpost, 06.10.24

⁹ "טנזניה, אתיופיה וניגריה: אפריקה במוקד חדשות התעופה," Ynet, 30.03.23

¹⁰ "מרוקו אקספרס: ארקיע משיקה קו טיסות ישיר לאסווארה," The Marker, 30.07.23

¹¹ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs, September 2024

¹² "Annual Report 2023," page 51, Abraham Accord Peace Institute, 2023.

¹³ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs, September 2024

I. South Africa

The Johannesburg-Tel Aviv route was one of the first established by El Al and for years it *operated three flights a week between South African and Israel*, serving South Africa's Jewish community, tourists from both countries, business travelers and Christian pilgrims. Following the October 7h attack, the Israeli airline gradually reduced service before ultimately *canceling the route in March 2024 due to low demand*. The South African government's political hostility toward Israel and El Al's closure of its Johannesburg office make the prospect of a resumption of flights to South Africa more complicated.¹⁴

¹⁴ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs, September 2024

Diplomatic relations and air routes between Israel and Africa



Illustration of Diplomatic Relations and Air Routes between Israel and Africa, courtesy of [Cassini](#). The map does not represent the actual flight routes

4. Considerations for Opening or Resuming an Air Route

Multiple elements essential for airlines when considering the opening of a new air route.

A. Market Demand

Market demand is the number one factor in determining whether to open a new route. Airlines typically conduct extensive research on passenger traffic, ticket price range, and airfare data to forecast the number of passengers likely to travel on the new air route. However, ensuring a strong demand is not enough; a new air route must also generate enough revenue to cover operating costs. Airlines must therefore project costs and expected ticket prices, along with load factors (the percentage of seats filled for each flight).¹⁵ In addition to revenue from passenger traffic, airlines can create another revenue stream by *transporting cargo, particularly on long-haul international lines or between trade hubs*.¹⁶

B. Competitive Positioning

Airlines also assess their competitive landscape before entering a new market. Understanding the establishment and strength of other carriers operating on the same route, and whether there is enough demand to sustain an additional airline, is crucial.¹⁷ In some cases, airlines may open new routes for strategic reasons even if profitability is uncertain, in the hope that the route will expand network connectivity or establish a presence in new regions. Airlines may also anticipate growth in demand through the “stimulation effect,” where the availability of a new route encourages more people to travel, creating additional demand.¹⁸

C. Operational Feasibility

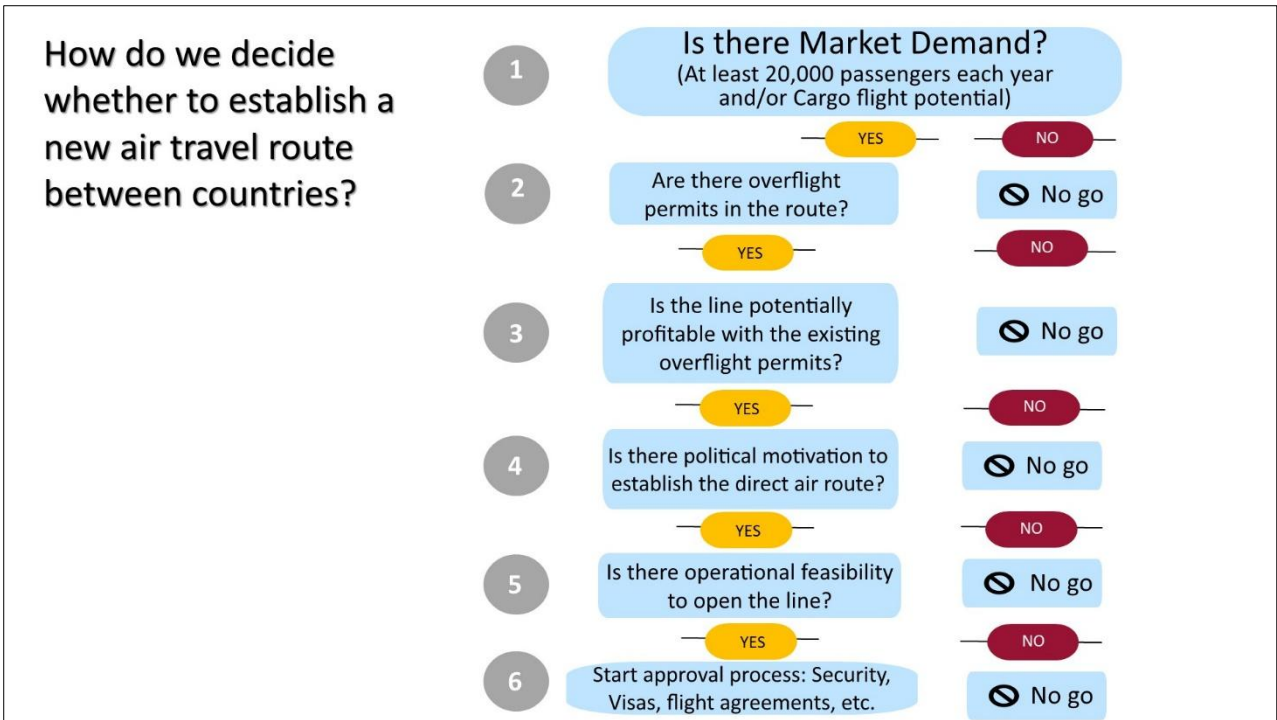
Airlines must ensure that they have the necessary resources, including aircraft, crew, and airport slots, to operate the route smoothly. Airlines must plan around existing constraints, such as airport infrastructure and capacity, or airspace restrictions. This aspect in particular plays a crucial role for flights between Israel and Africa.

¹⁵ “4 considerations airlines must make when planning new routes,” Sabre, 03.01.17

¹⁶ “Exploring the horizons: A study of unserved air routes to, from and within Africa,” Airbus, June 2024

¹⁷ “This Is Exactly How Airlines Choose New Routes,” travel+leisure, 12.07.23

¹⁸ “Exploratory analysis of air travel demand stimulation in first-time served markets,” Journal of Air Transport Management, January 2022



5. Obstacles

Several major obstacles have thus far prevented the development of air connections between Israel and Africa. These issues fall into three main categories.

A. Economic

Currently, the biggest obstacle to establishing direct routes between Israel and Africa is their lack of economic viability. The demand for direct flights between the continent and Ben Gurion Airport is simply too low to justify the opening of new routes, let alone to sustain some of the existing ones.

At present, most travelers between Israel and Africa are Israeli businesspeople and *African pilgrims*. A key factor for a router's success is demand in what aviation professional term the "VFR" (*Visiting Friends and Relatives*) passenger segment. However, few African destinations in Africa – with the exception of Morocco, South Africa and possibly Ethiopia, with their historically significant Jewish communities – fall within the VFR category.¹⁹ According to Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs²⁰, a *direct line requires a minimum of roughly 20,000 passengers per year to be economically viable*. Apart from Casablanca, Marrakesh and Johannesburg (until recently), no African destination meets these numbers. The Addis Ababa route serves primarily as a hub for other destinations on the continent.

¹⁹ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs, September 2024

²⁰ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs, September 2024

The primary potential for growth in the passenger market is *pilgrims*. Millions of Africans are devout Christians, and they are eager to visit the Holy land at least once in their lifetime. Additionally, *rapid economic growth in numerous countries on the continent makes the trip affordable for an increasing number of Africans*. However, budgets nevertheless remain limited, and these travelers often opt for cheaper routes with layovers, such as the ones offered by Ethiopian Airlines and Turkish Airlines, rather than more expensive direct routes.²¹

B. Overflight

The inability of Israel bound flights to cross air spaces of countries with which Jerusalem does not have diplomatic relations presents a significant challenge to the establishment of direct flights between Israel and Africa. For years Libya, Tunisia, Chad, Sudan and Algeria refused to open their airspace to planes flying to and from Israel, rendering direct flights between West and Central Africa to Israel economically unviable. Airlines had to fly the Red Sea route, bypassing the northeastern part of Africa, a detour resulting in substantially longer flight times and higher fuel consumption. However, the normalization of relations between Jerusalem and Chad²² in 2018 and then Sudan in 2020 created opportunities for direct air routes between Israel and West Africa. Taking advantage of this new reality, Nigerian company *Air Peace* launched a direct air connection between Tel-Aviv, Lagos and Abuja in April 2023.²³ Unfortunately, following the outbreak of the civil war in Sudan later that year, the country closed its airspace to foreign civilian airlines,²⁴ and Israel once again found itself isolated from numerous African countries.

Without access to Libyan or Sudanese airspace, *direct flights to Central and Western Africa will remain economically unviable*.

Some airlines have however found innovative solutions to circumvent overflight restrictions for Israel bound planes. For example, in 2015 part of the airspace over the Red Sea coast of Yemen was closed to commercial flights following the Saudi military intervention against the Houthis. This development effectively shut down the Tel Aviv-Addis Ababa route as planes taking off from Israel could not use the Red Sea route anymore and were still banned from flying over Sudan (normalization between Khartoum and Jerusalem only took place in 2020). However, Ethiopian Airlines ingeniously incorporated a stopover of a few minutes in Cairo for flights taking off from Tel Aviv, without passengers disembarking. This allowed the airline to change its flight plan to Cairo-Addis Ababa. With the flights taking off from Egypt, the Ethiopian planes

²¹ Conversation with Stanley Morais, El Al's Director of International Affairs, September 2024

²² "Netanyahu: Oman and Chad to Allow Israeli Airlines to Fly Over Airspace," Calcalist, 10.12.18

²³ "Nigeria's Air Peace to start nonstop Israel flights in April," Reuters, 27.03.23

²⁴ "Sudan extends airspace closure until Aug. 15 due to conflict," Reuters, 31.07.23

were then able to access Sudanese airspace and take Israeli passengers to their destination.²⁵ While effective, such a solution increases both flight time and costs significantly, making it unsustainable on a large scale and over a long period of time.

C. Security

While Israel's stringent security measures have led to its national airline having an excellent reputation over the years, they remain a financial and practical burden on the development of air travel on a large scale. Strategically positioned between three continents, Israel has the potential to become one of the world's top air travel hubs; however, the high costs and discomfort of security requirements have frequently discouraged travelers from transiting through Ben Gurion Airport. As such, it remains challenging at present to envision direct routes designed to ferry international travelers to Africa through Israel on a large scale.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

A. Developing Israel-Africa Relations

The expansion of direct air links between Israel and Africa is currently constrained by the scope of economic, diplomatic and cultural exchanges between Israel and most African nations. The limited level of relations has an impact on passenger demand, which in turn impacts airlines' decisions to open new routes connecting Israel to African destinations. Aerial connections are a powerful tool to develop links between countries, but they cannot operate alone. One of the best examples is Turkey: Over the past two decades, Turkish Airlines massively expanded its network of destinations in Africa enabling millions of international and Turkish travelers to fly to the continent. However, the growth in aerial connections was also accompanied by deepening ties between Ankara and Africa. Since 2000, the Turkish government has greatly expanded its network of embassies on the continent, increased bilateral visits and invested heavily in economic, security and educational ties, boosting bilateral commercial exchanges from \$5 billion to \$25 billion in less than two decades.²⁶

As such, a broad acceleration of relations between Israel and African countries at multiple levels is essential to facilitate a significant development of flight connections.

²⁵ *One of the authors of this paper personally travelled this route through Cairo in 2015*

²⁶ "Turkey, a New African Power," *ORIENTXXI*, 18.01.22; Turkey's Deepening Inroads in Africa by Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, August 2024, available at the Israel-Africa Relations Website [HERE](#)

B. Boost Demand: Develop Israeli Tourism in Africa and Christian Pilgrimage Routes to the Holy Land

The potential for tourism from Africa to Israel is enormous. According to the latest estimates, the continent is home to more than 700 million Christians.²⁷ Many of them are devout believers who consider Israel to be the Holy Land. Moreover, significant economic growth in numerous parts of the continent has allowed the emergence of a strong middle class that has the means to afford international travel. Investment in the development of pilgrimage routes from Africa, including through the facilitation of group travels for pilgrims and cooperation between tourism ministries, could incentivize the opening of additional aerial routes and strengthen travel between Israel and Africa.

Additional tourist destinations in Africa could also be developed for Israeli travelers. Israelis are known for their enthusiasm for travel and the rise in GDP per capita over recent decades has enabled growth in Israeli tourism across dozens of new destinations. In the years 2010-2019, Israel outbound tourism more than doubled, growing from 4 million travelers to 8 million.²⁸ Promoting established tourist destinations in Africa such as Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania and South Africa could positively impact air connections with the continent. This topic warrants separate further research.

C. Cooperation with other airlines

Israel is geographically positioned between three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa. The Jewish state could therefore theoretically take advantage of this location to become a travel hub for passengers in the eastern hemisphere. However, for this scenario to take shape, Israel needs to make radical changes that do not seem feasible at the moment. They include changes in security measures, ability to fly above Muslim majority countries and massive investment in its national airline.

While it may be possible to significantly develop Israeli airlines, the issues of security measures and access to regional airspace is much more complex. Therefore, cooperation with other airlines seems the only way to overcome this obstacle. Israel could start by partnering with airlines that already have an extensive network of destinations on the continent, as it has done with Ethiopian Airlines, allowing it to expand connectivity without needing to open new routes in the short term.

Morocco's national airline, which flies to numerous destinations on the continent, could potentially become another such partner. Complementary research could be performed to assess the pricing, choices of destinations and frequency of flights to and from Israel

²⁷ "Status of Global Christianity, 2024," Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 2024

²⁸ "Flight Travel to and From Israel Soared in the 2010s, but Now It Will Come with Guilt," Haaretz, 28.12.19

needed for Royal Air Maroc to compete with Ethiopian Airlines and Turkish Airlines as the preferred option for Israelis traveling to Africa.

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