





African Philosophical Perspectives on South Africa's Contribution to Global Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: Insights from the Israel-Palestine Dispute

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ABSTRACT

The Russian-Ukraine conflict drew Africa's attention, which saw an opportunity to promote its philosophy of Ubuntu. This is where South and African leaders emphasize the principles of nation-building and peace initiatives. Additionally, African leaders further urged the leaders of both states to follow Ubuntu's principles to prevent further humanitarian crises. In the same breath, South Africa also depicted such attributes in the stance against Israel's brutality towards Palestinians in Gaza, highlighting the genocide and mass killings. South Africa argued that this cannot be condoned in any way, hence advocating for communalism and peace. South Africa believes that communalism through intense consensus can bring peace and stability to the Gaza war. This action reflects the Ubuntu principle of social justice and reconciliation advocated by the late Rev. Desmond Tutu. From this perspective, the paper employs a qualitative research method, including a desktop study and search engines, to examine South Africa's contribution to global conflict resolution and peacebuilding, using the Israel-Palestine dispute as a case study. The findings show that South Africa has contributed a lot of philosophical perspectives, such as Ubuntu, communalism, and villagisation in Africa. Thus, the paper concludes that South Africa, like other African leaders, advocates for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Middle East conflict, and achieves these through the application of African philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa has always been a frontier state in International, Continental and Regional political and economic development.¹ Thus, this has been the strength of South Africa's foreign policy development of how they interact with the outside world. The foreign policy formulation of a state is often influenced by several actors, from the state actors and non-state actors, as well as the historical credentials of that country. These factors play a deciding role in the formulation of the policy; the geographic location of a particular state is often disregarded in the foreign policy formulation, but it also has a role to play in this.

¹ John L Comaroff, "Reflections on the Colonial State, in South Africa and Elsewhere: Factions, Fragments, Facts and Fictions," *Social Identities* 4, no. 3 (1998): 321–61.

The foreign policy formulation is expected to be able to benefit the state and its society and then expand to other state-related states. For instance, the foreign policies South Africa and China have in relation with each other must be beneficial towards South Africa as a state. This relation must ensure the Chinese government invest in the private sector to grow South Africa's economy.

Thus, this will help create more new jobs so that South Africa can first benefit domestically first before addressing the external implications that the China-South Africa relationship will produce through its foreign policy.² It is on that note that foreign policy is explained as a written agreement of a state in how it intends to have relations with other states. Therefore, in foreign policy, the geographic location also plays a huge role in the formulation of this policy.³ However, within the context of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the intervention by South Africa was driven by the historical credentials and the humanitarian ideology of South Africans to prevent any apartheid anywhere in the world. During the era of apartheid, black South Africans and those who were assisting in the fight against apartheid enjoyed support from various states across the world. Their solidarity to ensure that the regime is abolished in South Africa is part and parcel of the foreign policy formulation driven by historical credentials and relations.

In recent decades, South Africa has emerged as a significant player in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, drawing on its unique historical experiences and philosophical perspectives rooted in African traditions.⁴ This was seen when South Africa led a diplomatic mission to Russia to plead with both the Russian and Ukrainian presidents to find an amicable solution to the conflict. The collectiveness of African leaders to unite under a common cause depicted that African leaders do have and can provide a meaningful contribution to the end of conflicts around the world. In the Middle East, the step by South Africa to take the Israeli state to the International Court of Justice further depicts the courage and the role of South Africa in international politics and its development.⁵ This depicts that South Africans are not and will not be bystanders of humanitarian crises, as well as those who decide not to address issues related to human rights abuse. However, bigger than that is the ability and the leadership to be provided by the South African government in ensuring that humanitarian is part of the foreign policy objectives of the country, especially taking into consideration the history thereof. Hence, this study sought to explore how African philosophical outlooks influence South Africa's approach to addressing conflicts, particularly in the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute. Thus, the paper shall explore key principles such as ubuntu, reconciliation, and collective responsibility to gain insights into South Africa's contributions to fostering peace and reconciliation in one of the world's most entrenched conflicts.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was employed due to its approach of offering a complete description, examination, and narrative of a research subject. Thus, the qualitative method was deemed relevant to offer scholarly descriptions in narrative format in this study, which sought to explore how African philosophical outlooks influence South Africa's approach to addressing conflicts, particularly in the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute. Thus, unlike the quantitative research method, which offers numerical explanations. Hence, the study employed qualitative explanations because the method was able to provide narrative-based explanations of how African philosophical outlooks influence South Africa's approach to addressing conflicts within the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute.

Research Design

The paper has since employed an explorative case study research design, which is regarded as a design for a detailed study of a specific subject that has no clear outcomes. The researchers identified this design due to its ability to explore interventions with unclear outcomes. Therefore, it was chosen due to its ability to explore the interventions made by South Africa in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, as the outcomes are

² Chris Alden and Yu-Shan Wu, "South African Foreign Policy and China: Converging Visions, Competing Interests, Contested Identities," in *South African Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2018), 61–89.

³ Nicholas J Spykman, "Geography and Foreign Policy, I," *American Political Science Review* 32, no. 1 (1938): 28–50.

⁴ Malte Brosig, "Aligned or Non-aligned: South Africa's Response to the War in Ukraine," *Global Policy* 15, no. 4 (2024): 757–61.

⁵ Emily Rauhala and Kareem Fahim, "South Africa Presses Genocide Case against Israel at International Court," *The Washington Post* (The Washington Post), 2024, accessed August 17, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/11/south-africa-icj-hearing-israel-genocide/>.

unclear. The outcomes are unclear because South Africa had to take the Israeli state to the ICJ, which were measures that were provided by the court; however, it is yet to be clear if the interventions were successful or not. Similarly, months after the intervention by the South African government, it is also unclear if the Israeli government intends to have a long-lasting cease-fire truce with Hamas or rather, they still intend on military warfare. This is one of the reasons why they needed to be the much-needed intervention, as the war also affected ordinary civilians. Due to this, the chosen design is suitable for the study at hand and will be important to explore the interventions made from an African philosophical lens.

Data Collection

The study has used document analysis as a technique of data collection due to our reliance on readily available documents such as books, journal articles, official reports, and other relevant documents on Israel-Palestine, South Africa, Conflict resolution, African philosophy, and peacebuilding. The study used the North West University (NWU) Library Online Catalogue and Google Scholar to search for books, journal articles, official reports, and other relevant documents able to provide scientific evidence of how African philosophical outlooks influence South Africa's approach to addressing conflicts, particularly in the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute. In employing the above-mentioned search engines, keywords such as Israel-Palestine, South Africa, Conflict resolution, African philosophy and peacebuilding assisted the researchers in obtaining relevant material on the conflict in the Middle East and the effects of the African philosophical intervention by the South African government.

DISCUSSION

International Relations

The locations of some states make it very difficult for these states to establish international relations with some states. They will be painted with the same atmosphere of where they are located, like most states from Asia are often regarded as the perpetrators of war and terrorism and they often cannot make and sustain international relations.⁶ In addition, those in the middle of terrorism are often neglected when it comes to talks to maintain world peace and are regarded as the last resort to defend the ideology of world peace. Consequently, because of their geographic location, they suffer economically, socially and otherwise, and this may force them to have fewer conditions on their foreign policy, to have an open market that attracts international organisations to have interest in investing in such states.⁷

The Israel-Palestine conflict is complex and lasting. The conflict traces its roots back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with competing claims over the land by both Jewish and Arab communities. The international community has not been silent on the matter. There are various key Actors in International Relations. In Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and regional players such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran play pivotal roles in the conflict. Hence, there ought to be an international perspective on the conflict; many states have raised concerns because of the conflict. Some of the challenges in International Relations include Security concerns, occupation and settlements, and diplomatic stalemate remain major obstacles to peace. The conflict not only threatens officials or citizens of other states but also led the question of who the custodian of the areas under contention is.

Additionally, there has also been an issue of diplomatic relations between the states that side of either state as they have different positional understandings of the conflict in the Middle East. Hence, addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict requires a concerted effort by all stakeholders to uphold principles of justice, human rights, and mutual respect. Some international bodies maintain that there remains hope for peace through navigating the complexities of international relations with pragmatism, empathy, and a commitment to peace. The recent events of the evacuation of Israel's request for the civil servants to vacate Gaza's southern city of Rafah could potentially be another hindrance, as this suggests that the Israeli government may have the intention to launch another attack.

⁶ Christopher Mitchell, "International Migration, International Relations and Foreign Policy," *International Migration Review* 23, no. 3 (1989): 681–708.

⁷ Valerie M Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2005, 1–30.

War and Peace

The geographic location of a state is very important in determining the foreign policy of a state. The regions that infringed on the war always have to invest a lot of their resources in getting the resources for war and unfortunately, some regions are just entrenched with such barbaric behaviour of war and terrorism and as a result of that many people tend to migrate from that state into the neighbouring states in order to seek asylum and better living conditions, as such their states will in often time draw up a foreign policy that will assist both the states to manage with the influx coming in or going out to reduce the constraints that the people may put on the resources of that particular state.⁸

For instance, several Middle Eastern and North African states are faced with war and terrorism by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS. Additionally, this terrorism against them inhibits development and, to some extent, also infringes on the human rights of the citizens of this state. Hence, whenever developing a foreign policy, they must assure the international community that they will be able to deal with this type of behaviour, and if they start threatening the investments of these states, they have a way in which they can monitor and contain the situation. Hence, the behaviour of Israel and Palestine may also pose a threat to the international community's investments in the area to ensure growth as well as development. In addition, this will also pose a threat to the lives of ordinary citizens in these areas, as they cannot make a living due to fear of being killed in the process. This also comes at a time when the Israeli government has now ordered people to vacate the city of Rafah; not only does it disrupt lives, but it also poses a risk to human life development in the area.

Israel-Palestine conflict

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is a long-standing dispute centred around the land of historic Palestine.⁹ Within the late 19th and Early 20th Centuries, the Nationalist movements among Jews aimed to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Mathew alluded that the British government issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917, supporting this aim.¹⁰ This was or still is recognized as one of the biggest and most important contributors to the contemporary situation. Similarly, the British Mandate Period from 1920 to 1948 was a period where Jewish immigration increased, leading to tensions with the Arab population. Conflicts between Jewish and Arab communities escalated when the Arabs felt the need to defend their land, but where the Jews ought to go since they also felt the need to claim the territory. This led to bitterness and a possible cold war between the two nations over what the Jews felt they were rectifying the injustices of the past while the Arabs were experiencing this injustice daily. In addition to that, the Partition Plan, and Israeli Independence from 1947 to 1948, this is where the United Nations proposed a plan dividing Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states.

Thus, Israel declared independence in 1948 as a recognized sovereign state. However, the Arabs, disgruntled by this decision, felt that the UN treaty was biased, and they were given less land than what they were or should be entitled to. This was especially so since the Jews were the ones who were seeking refuge. The Arab states opposed Israel and intervened militarily, resulting in displacement and refugee crises for Palestinians. This led to wars and occupation conflicts in which several disagreements ensued over the following decades, leading to Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. All these territories are regarded as important landmarks within the history of both Palestine and Israel. They hold sentimental, economic, religious, and social values among others.

However, several attempts have been made by the international community to solve the conflict in the Middle East, such as the peace process and the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s. The Oslo Accords aimed to establish a framework for Palestinian self-governance in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but the peace process failed due to continued violence and disagreements.¹¹ Both states failed to have a reasonable agreement in relation to the deal, thus leading to its fallout. On to the more recent developments, efforts to resolve the conflict have continued through various diplomatic initiatives,

⁸ Brian Lai, "Terrorism and Foreign Policy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017.

⁹ Simona Sharoni and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, 2000, 161–200.

¹⁰ William M Mathew, "The Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate, 1917–1923: British Imperialist Imperatives," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2013): 231–50.

¹¹ Rauhala and Fahim, "South Africa Presses Genocide Case against Israel at International Court."

including peace talks, international mediation, and proposals for a two-state solution. However, challenges persist, including ongoing violence, settlement expansion, and internal divisions within the Palestinian leadership. This has also seen the international community, including Africa, calling for peace. South Africa, especially has tried to plead with the state of Israel to exclude the killing of children, women, and/or civilians in a general sense.

South Africa's Intervention through the ICJ

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) played a significant role in addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict through its advisory opinion on the construction of Israel's separation barrier in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.¹² The ICJ's judgment focused on the illegality of the barrier, the right to self-defence versus the right to self-determination, and the obligations of third-party states. The advisory opinion of the ICJ sparked international debate and condemnation of Israel's actions, emphasizing the importance of respecting international law and human rights principles in resolving the conflict. The judgment remains a significant milestone in the quest for justice, accountability, and peace in the region. The judgement was guided by numerous reasons, which also included the Geneva Convention of 2004.

Over and above that, scholars such as Alexander and Rauhala and Fahim also alluded that South Africa brought this case to the ICJ for the following reasons: South Africa claimed that Israel was violating its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) in the context of the war in Gaza.¹³ In addition, South Africa cited 'widespread starvation' in Gaza and requested the ICJ to order an 'immediate halt' to Israel's war in the enclave and to enable the provision of humanitarian relief to Gaza.¹⁴ South Africa argued that Israel was again violating the Genocide Convention by starving Palestinians and causing serious physical or mental harm to them. South Africa sought to uphold the principles of international law and human rights and to prevent further atrocities and suffering in Gaza. The Genocide Convention is an international treaty that defines genocide as a crime under international law and obliges the Contracting Parties to prevent and punish it.

It also provides for the investigation, trial, extradition and prevention of genocide and other acts of genocide. It was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 and came into force in 1951. Some of the main features of the Genocide Convention included any act(s) that constitute genocide, such as killing, causing serious harm, or deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. It establishes the responsibility and liability of individuals, regardless of their official status, for committing or participating in genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in the Convention. In addition, it requires the Contracting Parties to enact the necessary legislation to give effect to the provisions of the Convention and to provide effective penalties for persons guilty of genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in the Convention. It grants jurisdiction to the competent courts of the State in the territory of which the act was committed, or to an international penal tribunal, to try persons charged with genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in the Convention.

Furthermore, it prohibits the recognition of genocide and the other acts enumerated in the Convention as political crimes for the purpose of extradition and pledges the Contracting Parties to grant extradition in such cases. It further authorizes any Contracting Party to call upon the competent organs of the United Nations to take such action as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in the Convention.¹⁵ Therefore, the judgment remains a significant milestone in the quest for justice, accountability, and peace in the region. South Africa's justification remains the idea of seeking a better life for everyone across the world. However, this also reflects that the African philosophical ideologies and approach can be applied to the crisis and conflict within the international system for the betterment and growth of the world in and around Africa. This would be a testament to how other states also joined forces with South Africa to ensure that they intervened

¹² Atul Alexander, "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) at the International Court of Justice," *Chinese Journal of International Law* 23, no. 1 (2024): 185–90.

¹³ Alexander, "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) at the International Court of Justice"; Rauhala and Fahim, "South Africa Presses Genocide Case against Israel at International Court."

¹⁴ Rauhala and Fahim, "South Africa Presses Genocide Case against Israel at International Court."

¹⁵ Rauhala and Fahim, "South Africa Presses Genocide Case against Israel at International Court."

in the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the key principles of African philosophy are at the centre of this intervention, these include Ubuntu, collectiveness and protection of all human lives regardless.

African Philosophical Approaches to the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Ubuntu Philosophy and Human Dignity

Central to African philosophical thought is the concept of ubuntu, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity.¹⁶ Ubuntu underscores the intrinsic value of everyone and the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships within communities. Motswaledi and Marumo noted that South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy was deeply influenced by ubuntu, as exemplified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which sought to heal the wounds of the past through dialogue and forgiveness.¹⁷ In the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, South Africa's adherence to ubuntu principles underscores its commitment to upholding human dignity and promoting dialogue as a means of resolving differences. By emphasizing the humanity of both Israelis and Palestinians and recognizing their shared aspirations for peace and security, South Africa advocates for inclusive and empathetic approaches to conflict resolution.

From the lenses of the South African government, the intervention is not to dismay the idea of sovereignty in both states, especially for the Israelites; however, this is about having a collective understanding for all parties involved. Similarly, the Israeli government has accused the South African government of standing in solidarity with the Hamas group and said that they are disregarding that they started the war first and this is just a retaliation or retribution for their actions.¹⁸ However, this is an intervention of Ubuntu by the South African government, which contests that the world did not just sit and watch as they suffered through the Apartheid government, but they have tried to intervene. Their intervention included boycotting games that included the Union of South Africa. This was because they strived to put pressure on the government and ensure that they were unhappy with the government of Apartheid.

Reconciliation and Healing

Another cornerstone of South Africa's approach to conflict resolution is the emphasis on reconciliation and healing. Drawing from its own experiences of transitioning from oppression to democracy, South Africa recognizes the importance of addressing past injustices and promoting societal healing. The TRC served as a platform for acknowledging the suffering of victims, holding perpetrators accountable, and fostering reconciliation among diverse communities.¹⁹ In the Israel-Palestine context, South Africa's emphasis on reconciliation offers valuable insights into promoting dialogue and understanding between conflicting parties. By facilitating channels for truth-telling, acknowledging historical grievances, and promoting empathy and forgiveness, South Africa contributes to building bridges between Israelis and Palestinians. Moreover, South Africa's support for initiatives that promote economic development and social cohesion in the region reflects its commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting sustainable peace.

Collective Responsibility and Solidarity

African philosophical perspectives also underscore the importance of collective responsibility and solidarity in addressing societal challenges. South Africa's struggle against apartheid was not just a national endeavor but also a global movement supported by solidarity networks and international activism. This ethos of collective responsibility informs South Africa's engagement in international conflicts, including the Israel-Palestine dispute.

In advocating for a just and peaceful resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, South Africa emphasizes the need for international solidarity and cooperation. By mobilizing diplomatic efforts,

¹⁶ Thabang Richard Motswaledi and Phemelo Olifile Marumo, "Utilizing Ubuntu Philosophy in the Deconstruction of South African Politics through Sex, Gender, and Masculinity," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 3 (2022): 19806–14.

¹⁷ Thabang Richard Motswaledi and Phemelo Olifile Marumo, "Analyzing the 2021 July Uprising in South Africa: A Case Study of KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng," *African Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 12, no. 3 (2023): 9.

¹⁸ Rauhala and Fahim, "South Africa Presses Genocide Case against Israel at International Court."

¹⁹ Motswaledi and Marumo, "Analyzing the 2021 July Uprising in South Africa: A Case Study of KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng."

supporting multilateral initiatives, and championing the rights of the Palestinian people, South Africa exemplifies its commitment to collective action in pursuit of peace and justice. Moreover, South Africa's journey towards reconciliation serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for societies grappling with protracted conflicts, demonstrating the transformative power of dialogue, forgiveness, and inclusive governance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, African philosophical perspectives play a significant role in shaping South Africa's approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, particularly in the context of the Israel-Palestine dispute. Ubuntu's philosophy underscores the intrinsic value of human dignity and interconnectedness, guiding South Africa's efforts to promote dialogue and empathy between Israelis and Palestinians. Moreover, South Africa's emphasis on reconciliation, healing, and collective responsibility offers valuable insights into fostering sustainable peace and justice in conflict-affected societies. Drawing on its own experiences of overcoming oppression and division, South Africa continues to be a vital actor in advancing the cause of peace and reconciliation on the global stage.

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