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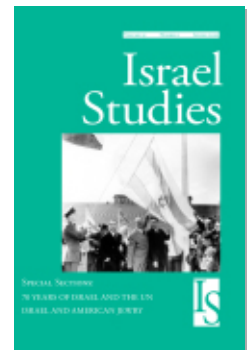
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Not Just Tolerated—A Global Leader: Lessons Learned from  
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Combat Desertification

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# Not Just Tolerated—A Global Leader: Lessons Learned from Israel’s Experience in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

## ABSTRACT

Israel’s influential role in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification since the agreement’s inception is explored. Several factors can explain the country’s successful diplomatic interaction. A combination of: low international interest and competition for expertise about the issue; Israel’s unique, achievements in combatting desertification as part of its agricultural and forestry activities; and Professor Uriel Safriel’s extraordinary stature in the field—contribute to its exceptional involvement. The case constitutes a “proof of concept” for Israel’s potential to be effectively engaged in other UN programs. This will require greater government commitment and contribution to international initiatives, along with a willingness to authorize experts and academics to represent the country in additional global frameworks.

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE SYRIAN DIPLOMAT PRESSED THE “ON” BUTTON ON HIS MICROPHONE, stood up, and indignantly interrupted the otherwise staid speechifying, making an impassioned intervention: “This UN body,” he argued, “should condemn Israel for its army’s systematic uprooting of Palestinian olive

trees—actions which exacerbate soil loss and desertification in the occupied West Bank.” The site of the outburst was the 2005 CRIC—Committee for Reviewing the Implementation of the *United Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)*.<sup>1</sup> Some 600 representatives from 136 countries and innumerable international agencies were gathered in Bonn Germany at the 3rd bi-annual CRIC meeting, evaluating ongoing global efforts under the treaty to reduce one of the planet’s most pernicious ecological scourges.<sup>2</sup> Only that year 1000 of the world’s top scientists authored the authoritative *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* reporting that the “number of people affected by desertification is likely larger than any other contemporary environmental problem.”<sup>3</sup>

The plenary session was chaired by Mahmoud Ould El Ghaouth, a senior diplomat from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, a Muslim country without formal diplomatic relations with Israel. But the chair rejected the polemical bombast. “The honorable delegate from Syria can kindly save these types of interventions for the General Assembly. Here at the Desertification Convention, we have professional, not political deliberations. And Israel has a much to teach us all about combatting desertification.”<sup>4</sup>

Such an unhesitating defense of an Israeli perspective at an official UN event, by an unfamiliar Muslim ally, was the kind of fantasy Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) could only dream about when considering UN politics. Israel’s pariah international status at the time, (and subsequently) make it the target of a litany of censures, condemnations and resolutions in UN bodies which magnify and manufacture Israeli crimes and misdemeanors. For example, during its 2013 deliberations, the United Nations General Assembly passed twenty-one condemnations of Israeli policies and actions -- compared to only four for the rest of the world combined.<sup>5</sup>

But the UNCCD is different. Ever since the convention negotiations began in 1992, and its ratification several years later, Israel was not only a tolerated presence in international discussions about desertification. Its representatives took on a leadership role. Numerous examples of this unique participation occurred over the years, culminating in the 2013 election of Israel’s UNCCD national focal point, Uriel Safriel, to the position of chair of the Committee for Science and Technology.<sup>6</sup> The post constitutes the chief scientific authority advising the convention parties regarding global desertification policies. This constituted a formal recognition of Safriel’s long-standing influential stature in the ongoing design and implementation of international policies to combat desertification.

This article highlights the prominent role played by Israel over the years in the UNCCD and international efforts to address desertification. It considers why it contrasts so dramatically with Israel's endemic role and engagement in UN initiatives in general, and environmental agreements in particular. How is it that in this one field, Israel's diplomatic achievements are so prominent and its status so influential?

An evaluation of Israel's experience in the convention suggests that several factors combine to make the UN desertification program anomalous, producing a diplomatically extraordinary outcome:

- a) An exceptional individual who was both willing and able to embrace an environmental challenge, master its scientific facets and patiently and persistently navigate the associated diplomatic dynamics;
- b) The relatively low-level of interest in desertification within the international diplomatic and environmental community, creating a "niche" in the otherwise crowded arena involving global environmental issues;
- c) Israel's idiosyncratic experience and relative success in restoring degraded drylands and reversing desertification trends;
- d) The perceived level of Israel's engagement in assisting African efforts to combat desertification; and
- e) Representation of Israel in a UN forum by a university and its scientists rather than by professional diplomats.

These features combine to make the UN's desertification dynamics unique. But this case study also offers many insights about Israel's potential as an international player in other UN forums. It suggests that Israel's marginal status at the UN and modest involvement in its broad range of activities is a self-fulfilling prophesy. A new diplomatic strategy for Israel, particularly involving global environmental affairs, should integrate the lessons learned at the UNCCD to ensure that Israel makes a more significant contribution to myriad challenges facing the planet. The MFA should consider *diplomatic professionalization* as a new paradigm for upgrading Israeli influence in the international community and strengthening the historically troubled relationship between UN bodies and Israel's representatives. Leading experts need to be identified; the academic community will need to step up to the proverbial "plate". Most of all, this new approach requires that Israel make a more serious commitment to doing its part in addressing global international challenges and assisting developing countries.

## THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO DESERTIFICATION

Desertification is an environmental challenge as old as human civilization. The vulnerability of soil to human mismanagement has long been known to farmers and pastoralists, especially in dryland environments. At the heart of early conflicts described in the Bible between Abraham's and Lot's herders (Genesis 13:5-9) is the ecological consequence of overgrazing and the need to respect carrying capacity in semi-arid regions.<sup>7</sup> Other phenomena, such as soil salinization, water logging or gully erosion have plagued agrarian societies from ancient times until the present.<sup>8</sup> Ecological historian, Jared Diamond attributes the collapse of many civilizations to the misfortune of living in low-rain, ecologically fragile environments.<sup>9</sup> In the drylands, where primary production is modest, regrowth of vegetation simply cannot keep pace with destruction wrought by human activities.<sup>10</sup>

By the twentieth century, the combination of population pressures, mechanized farming and imprudent water management technologies produced land degradation on a hitherto unknown scale.<sup>11</sup> From the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s<sup>12</sup>—to the intermittent famines in the Sahel<sup>13</sup>—to the salty, sterility of salinized Australian farmlands, land degradation increasingly emerged as a global scourge.<sup>14</sup> The term “desertification” was first coined in 1949 by a French colonial forester to describe the massive loss of productivity seen in the vast dryland regions of West Africa.<sup>15</sup> Soil erosion can happen anywhere land is disturbed by human activity. But it is particularly pernicious—and difficult to reverse—in arid and semi-arid lands where precipitation and baseline soil fertility are inadequate for vegetative rejuvenation and soil restoration. This unfortunate geographical and climatic reality is the proximate reason for human-induced, dryland degradation or “desertification”.

By 1977 the UN recognized that the problem was sufficiently acute and global in its dimensions to convene an international conference in Nairobi to coordinate responses.<sup>16</sup> But vague, voluntary national commitments proved to be of little value and the crisis grew in severity, especially in semi-Arid regions of Africa, where lands were pushed beyond their carrying capacities. Here, the symptoms were most unforgiving in terms of pervasive crop failures, vulnerability to droughts, hunger and humanitarian crises.<sup>17</sup>

Every decade since June 1972, when the UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, heads-of-state from around the world convene to consider the condition of the earth and international interventions required to address common ecological challenges. The agenda for the 1992 meeting was ambitious, with expectations for adopting framework

conventions on the emerging issue of climate change and biodiversity loss.<sup>18</sup> So it was, that world leaders convened in Rio de Janeiro to discuss the planet's most acute environmental problems.

While wealthier developed countries wished to focus on the crises of biodiversity loss and climate change, African countries argued that poverty constituted a greater existential threat. They saw international assistance as a “zero-sum game”, concerned that resources directed at international efforts to protect the environment would come at the expense of the economic assistance needed to extricate the continent from pervasive destitution. After the *developed* countries made it clear that an anti-poverty agreement was not in the cards, a deal was struck whereby, in return for supporting Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions and the green, ideological manifesto, Agenda 21, developing nations would benefit from a convention to combat desertification. The assumption was that desertification constituted a major driver of poverty, especially in Africa. Passing such an agreement would marshal additional resources to support development in dryland regions.<sup>19</sup>

In retrospect, the developed countries kept their promise: in relatively swift time, negotiators cobbled together a draft United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. In 1994, the document was deposited in Paris for the international community to sign. The awkward name given to the *UN Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and /Or Desertification, Particularly in Africa*, not only reflects the clumsy nature of negotiated titles. It also declares that this environmental accord was first and foremost designed to focus on lost land productivity in Africa.<sup>20</sup>

The convention offered a formal definition for desertification: “land degradation or processes of reduction or loss of biological or economic productivity in drylands.”<sup>21</sup> Misconceptions of desertification, as the relentless expansion of deserts and waves sands smothering adjacent farmlands, are common. In fact, the new UN convention was designed to combat the degradation and loss of fertility in lands located in arid and semi-arid regions.

Typically, drivers of desertification are divided into two categories: immediate or *direct* drivers and *indirect* drivers which describe underlying social phenomena that give rise to damaging activities.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, direct drivers of desertification include:

- Transformation of rangelands to cultivated lands;
- Inappropriate water management and irrigation practices that salinize soils;

- Farming practices which expose soils, creating erosion vulnerability;
- Overgrazing of rangelands, with vegetation unable to reestablish itself before being washed or blown away; and
- Deforestation, where a canopy covering the land is removed and underlying soil exposed to the elements.<sup>23</sup>

These direct drivers reflect indirect social dynamics, which frequently need to be addressed before real progress in abating land degradation is made. For example, land tenure policies can reduce motivation for land stewardship among agricultural communities. Women, the majority of the world's farmers, frequently lack the training to adopt sustainable practices or the authority to make decisions about selecting appropriate farming techniques. And of course, poverty and overpopulation are frequently at the heart of desertification pathologies.

The adoption of a multi-lateral convention did little to solve the problem. There are innumerable success stories involving land restoration and conservation which can be attributed to UNCCD associated programs. Overall trends, however, are abysmal.<sup>24</sup> In many areas of sub-Saharan Africa, loss of land productivity due to desertification is as high as 10%. Some 85% of Middle East rangelands are affected. The economic viability of entire communities is compromised by loss of land fertility with resulting mass migrations, food shortages and political instability.<sup>25</sup>

Israel's experience, however, offered a more optimistic narrative about how public policies, commitment to land restoration and innovative agriculture and forestry programs can combine to arrest the seemingly inexorable process of land degradation. With 97% of its lands classified as drylands (including hyper-arid, arid, semi-arid and dry, sub-humid zones) for most of the past two millennia the country offered an extreme example of desertification or loss of land productivity. Poor land stewardship and the minimal soil conservation practices produced disastrous results.<sup>26</sup> Over 90% of its woodlands were obliterated, with no systematic program for replanting.<sup>27</sup> Ancient terraces were not maintained, so much of the peasant farming along the hillsides over the centuries resulted in steady soil erosion; overgrazing was rampant.<sup>28</sup> As late as 1938, a leading American soil scientist visiting Palestine offered detailed testimonials of massive quantities of red soil ripped from the slopes during rain events, estimating the cumulative loss of a full meter of soil.<sup>29</sup>

These discouraging trends changed with Israeli independence. An ambitious afforestation program, overseen by both the Jewish National Fund and a government forestry department informed a new national

ethos. Eroded knolls were filled with saplings that eventually grew into thriving woodlands.<sup>30</sup> Grazing was highly regulated and vegetation on rangelands and the wildlife it supported flourished once again.<sup>31</sup> Soil conservation extension agents at the agricultural ministry offered farmers professional support to ensure that yields did not come at the expense long-term soil health. Increasingly low impact, uber-efficient irrigation practices were adopted.<sup>32</sup> The results were dramatic. Ideological declarations about “making the desert bloom” moved from the realm of political rhetoric to a new ecological reality, especially in the country’s most desertification-vulnerable, semi-arid drylands. The international professional soil conservation community took note.

### THE ACCIDENTAL DIPLOMAT

In the long and somewhat stale debate over whether ideas or individuals make history, it is hard to discount the powerful personal factor that made Israel’s engagement in this UN environmental program so exceptional. At the heart of this story is an exceptional individual. Uriel Safriel was the rare scientist who had the stamina, intelligence, self-confidence and concern for the planet to emerge, against all odds, as a celebrity of sorts in the meeting place between desertification research and diplomacy.

Safriel was born in 1936 and completed his military service in the IDF as a lieutenant at age 21. Like many of his generation, he was an avid naturalist growing up. The young veteran was talented enough to attract the attention of Amotz Zahavi, the charismatic co-founder of the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel. Upon meeting Safriel in 1957, Zahavi conducted an impromptu test for basic zoological literacy, which included identification of random bird calls. Safriel passed with flying colors. The nascent NGO immediately sent him south to the new city of Eilat where he served as a local warden for nature protection. Lacking a budget, organizational infrastructure or even any statutory authority, Safriel managed to set up *de facto* nature reserves along the resplendent Coral Beach and the near-by rare doum palm trees as well as a support program for the depleted gazelle population. He even issued fines for the common practice of removing corals from the Red Sea waters.<sup>33</sup>

It would take another twelve years for Safriel to accrue full academic credentials, including advanced degrees at The Hebrew University, a doctorate at Oxford and a post-doc at the University of Michigan. By 1969 he settled into an academic post as an ecology lecturer at The Hebrew



University, where he would stay affiliated for another fifty years.<sup>34</sup> Safriel's research initially focused on marine ecosystems,<sup>35</sup> and later on increasingly on terrestrial ecosystems, grazing,<sup>36</sup> bird migrations<sup>37</sup> and extinctions.<sup>38</sup>

In 1988, Israel's Nature Reserve Authority wanted to upgrade the scientific integrity of its staff and sought a chief scientist with stellar academic credentials. Safriel met the criteria. So, he took a four-year leave from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Right away he began to replace the government's intuitive culture of nature preservation with one based on empirical findings and modern principles of conservation biology.<sup>39</sup> In retrospect, it was this foray into public service that led Safriel to the global arena of desertification.

Israel's newly established environment ministry decided that Safriel was a natural choice to represent it during the 1993 negotiations over the convention. He was curious and answered the call. As the convention became operational, he was one of the few original pioneers who had "gotten in on the ground floor" of global desertification regulatory efforts and was part of the UNCCD community from the very beginning. He also was one of few scientists associated with the process.

Safriel soon realized that advocating for scientific coherence would lead to conflict with the different political interests of different parties. These dynamics became apparent during the initial negotiations of the convention. He relates:

The UNCCD is predicated on mobilizing support from "developed" countries to assist developing countries address their desertification problems. In order to receive support, you need to be experiencing desertification and be a developing country. Saudi Arabia is a country that actually does not suffer from desertification because it is a desert; there is no need to combat desertification in a place that is already a natural desert.

Saudi Arabia might seem very rich, but most of its citizens are very poor. So, when you calculate per capita GDP, it is rather low. In the negotiations, one issue that had to be decided was: which dry-lands were threatened with desertification and how much "desertification" was required for a developing country to be supported by developed countries? A proposal was put on the table that the only dry-lands that are potentially at risk of desertification are those that are non-desert dry-lands.

Saudi Arabia demanded that hyper-arid lands also be eligible for support, because it saw itself as a developing country, and has plenty of desert. Most of the delegates that came to these negotiations were not knowledgeable about what constitutes desertification. The negotiations were never fully

about combatting desertification or even pursuing sustainable development anyway. Rather, the focus of the discourse became: how much will the developed countries support the developing countries? Behind this position was a narrative of colonialism: You owe us, because you exploited us in the past.

Another challenge Safriel encountered involved bridging the gap between expectations of the convention for Israel—and the actual willingness of the country to meet such responsibilities,

By the time the UNCCD was negotiated -- between 1993 and 1995 -- Israel had already been moved from being defined as a developing country to a developed country. First of all, Israelis were not aware of this. Those in the Israeli government were aware because they interact with other governments. But all the general public knew was that Israel was a country that enjoys donations and support from Jews and Jewish organizations. Israel was used to receiving support, not giving support.

When I came to the first negotiation meeting, the attitude I found among the other diplomats was: 'Here is the representative of a country that knows everything about how to eradicate desertification.' So, I received very good publicity. Of course, they knew that Israel and Muslim countries had a problem. But many developing countries are not Muslim; some of them have mixed populations; and most really did not care about our controversies.

They would come up to me, give me their business cards, and seemed sure that Israel would be able to support them --not only by academic training and providing information—but also with financial resources. They expected us to supply desertification experts who would not only tell them what to do, but also give them the necessary technologies, or at least sell them below market rates. There was this atmosphere of: "here are the Israelis; they also had a desertification problem. They were just like us, but they solved their problem and now they are developed."<sup>40</sup>

Safriel soon came head-to-head with the diplomatic isolation that Israel faced in UN forums. Initially, it seemed as if once again, tensions might hamper Israel's ability to participate and take on a leadership role in the UNCCD. The negotiations over the text of the convention are instructive vis-à-vis the complex dance required of Israel's representatives to establish the country as a legitimate player in global desertification policy making.

Like many environmental conventions, implementation of global desertification policy is to be conducted on a regional basis. Because Israel is located in Asia, as a matter of course, Safriel was invited to

Thailand where 50 Asian countries convened to draft the Annex that would serve as a roadmap for cooperation in the continent. The Chinese representative was selected as chair of the Annex due to his country's vast dimensions and enormous desertification problems. The new Chair announced that with fifty different national representatives attending, the plenary was an unwieldy forum for preparing a text for the convention. His suggestion to appoint a drafting committee of three or four people was unanimously accepted.

Having already worked with Safriel, and liking his plain-speaking, scientific competence, the Chinese chairman did not hesitate to appoint him as chair of the drafting committee. None of the other delegates paid the appointment much attention, relieved perhaps that someone else would do the work. Over the next few days, Safriel toiled late into the night along with several colleagues and produced a draft that was unanimously accepted by the attending representatives. Then everyone went home. The approved text for the Asian Annex was forwarded to the Convention Secretariat in Bonn. And that's when the troubles began.

In order for the document to become officially part of UNCCD provisions, additional texts had to be approved by a vote of all parties to the convention at the bi-annual *Conference of the Parties*. Once the UNCCD Secretariat forwarded the draft Asian Annex to the countries' focal points, Iran and Iraq's foreign ministries "woke up" to Israeli involvement and formally protested its participation in their Annex. Safriel recalls:

All these people who were in Bangkok, apparently were low-ranking politicians and low-ranking diplomats. They didn't know much about Israel or understand that as an enemy, they needed to oppose the appointment of an Israeli as chair of the drafting committee. So, when their superiors saw that they had approved an Israeli authored report, all of them were fired. That's my assumption at least, because I never saw any of them again.

From that point on, representatives of Arab countries refused to continue deliberations due to Israeli participation in the UNCCD's Asian Annex. The implicit legitimacy conferred by Safriel's presentation of a formal UN document as chair was completely unthinkable at the time. As a result, the vote approving the convention's entire revised text was frozen because of Arab opposition to Israel's participation in their Annex. Given the impasse and general discomfort it created the MFA eventually thought it best to simply opt out of the Annex. With that minor revision, the text of the convention was quickly approved.

This decision, however, was more than a mere technical matter. It held significant repercussions regarding Israel's future ability to influence decisions at the Conference of the Parties, the UNCCD's bi-annual meeting, where revisions to the convention are made. The UN typically divides countries according to common characteristics and interests. In so doing, it creates a manageable framework for making decisions. Once Israel was no longer part of its natural geographical framework, it had trouble finding another group in which it could operate. And so, not only was it excluded from the internal discussions of the Asian bloc, for many years it was not privy to EU strategizing or that of other developed country factions.

Technically, Israeli delegates could—and frequently did—speak up in plenary decisions. But their absence from internal meetings where caucusing took place and the real positions were formulated meant, that they were essentially “outsiders” in convention deliberations. This handicapped status makes the leadership role that Safriel attained and maintained for decades, even more impressive.

#### ACADEMIA AND DIPLOMACY

When the UNCCD came into force in 1996, the Israeli Ministry of Environmental Quality (as it was then called) was responsible for representing the country and overseeing Israel's positions at a range of multi-lateral environmental conventions—from ozone to biodiversity protection. During this period, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, a protégé of founding Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion who had thoroughly internalized Ben-Gurion's vision of “making the desert bloom,” was confident that Israel's achievements in combating desertification would be a strong selling point for the country's international image. Peres had little interest in Israel's position regarding conventions involving regulating transboundary transport of hazardous waste or protection of migrating birds. But he was keen on being personally involved in matters concerning desertification. He insisted on the MFA maintaining formal authority to oversee the UNCCD.<sup>41</sup> In 1998 Peres was no longer Foreign Minister and the MFA found itself responsible for a convention it did not fully understand and for which it lacked any professional capacity to supervise.

Managing multi-lateral conventions, with close to 200 participating countries, is a formidable logistical challenge for the coordinating Secretariat. It is by no means self-evident which government agency or person might be in charge within a given country. Rather than hunt down possible

institutions which might be qualified to represent different parties, convention secretariats rely on “focal points”—designated individuals formally authorized to speak in convention deliberations and make commitments on behalf of their governments. Typically, in Israel, civil servants at the environmental ministry serve as “focal points” for environmental conventions

Recognizing Safriel’s expertise and the stature attained by being a lone voice of scientific know-how in the establishing of the UNCCD, the MFA asked him to stay on as Israel’s “focal point”. Safriel had by then been recruited to head the Institute for Desert Research at Ben-Gurion University’s (BGU) Sede Boqer campus. He sensed an institutional opportunity. He suggested that the MFA rely on academic faculty members at his Institute to support Israel’s work in the convention, and join him on Israel’s UNCCD delegation. The MFA readily agreed, even providing modest financial assistance.

Safriel and BGU faculty colleagues who would periodically join him at meetings, made token efforts to keep their handlers at the MFA updated about issues and controversies that arose at UNCCD meetings. For the most part, however, decisions were made and initiatives launched independently. Desertification was hardly a priority at the MFA. Mostly officials there seemed to know that Uriel Safriel’s involvement in the convention constituted an Israeli public relations coup, and that his judgment could be trusted. They had the good sense to adopt an “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it” strategy.

In Israel too, desertification was a widely invisible and unknown international crisis. Worldwide, familiarity with the biophysical phenomenon and its consequences was minimal. In an effort to raise the profile of the global challenge and garner greater traction around the issue, the year 2005 was declared by the UN General Assembly as the International Year of Desertification. Every country worldwide was challenged to sponsor activities to raise public awareness about the problem. Answering the call, BGU decided to hold an international scientific conference: *Drylands, Deserts and Desertification*, that soon became known by its acronym: “the DDD”.<sup>42</sup>

The DDD organizing committee was comprised of representatives from major Israeli universities, relevant government agencies and civil society activities. The conference organizers were surprised to discover that no competing regular or meaningful international conferences made up of scientists, experts and practitioners working together in the many disciplines associated with desertification were scheduled to take place. Several hundred participants from a few dozen countries attended the first conference at the university’s remote Sede Boqer campus. The meeting

generated considerable enthusiasm and calls for establishing a regular, inter-disciplinary professional gathering. The university decided to make the event a bi-annual affair. The next DDD was double the size and scope. By the sixth such gathering, Israel's desertification conference was firmly entrenched as the premier scientific meeting on the issue of desertification in the world. Researchers and activists could enjoy lectures and presentations on related topics ranging from desert agriculture, land reclamation and afforestation, to gender, education and desert ecology. A broad menu of field trips on different themes highlighted Israeli innovation in these fields.<sup>43</sup>

The conference not only provided a platform for international experts who were not engaged in the UNCCD framework to meet in an informal setting and share their ideas, but also reinforced the impression that Israel was home to a community of desertification experts and that interesting things were happening there. The university's commitment served to inflate international perceptions of engagement by Israel's government in local efforts to combat desertification and improve land productivity.

#### ISRAELI LEADERSHIP IN A UN INSTITUTION

As the UNCCD became better established, Safriel's stature grew as an expert who understood the pathology of desertification processes and successful land rehabilitation. He was happy to speak plainly and clearly about the science. Senior staff members at the UNCCD Secretariat generally listened. This was true at the highest level. Between 1993 and 2007, Hamo Arba Diallo, a long-time diplomat from Burkina Faso, oversaw the Secretariat operations from its first days in Bonn. Diallo's influence was exceptional. A diplomat, ever courteous in his demeanor, Diallo's somewhat imperious presence increased over time as he became independent in his decision making.

While Burkina Faso is 60% Muslim, Diallo was open to Israeli involvement in the UNCCD. At the same time, he was aware of the limits and circumspect in maintaining intermittent, discrete consultations with Safriel, making sure that Israel's engagement remained "below the radar". Diallo even came to visit Israel to see Israeli innovations first-hand. Knowing full well that the trip would hardly endear him to the many Arab delegations, he did so without fanfare. Indeed, an extensive Google search today reveals no mention of the visit.

While the Executive Secretary and Secretariat personnel cautiously sought out Safriel's counsel, at meetings of the Conference of the Parties,

delegates of all stripes would openly seek out his opinions. Even the Iranian focal point, who was prohibited from making any contact with Israelis, quietly asked Safriel for a copy of his PowerPoint presentations after one of his many thought-provoking lectures.

Eventually, Diallo's independence and lack of deference to the developed countries (who were footing the bills for his Secretariat's expenses) proved a liability to the convention. Donor nations continued to cut back on their support for the Secretariat, whose budget was already modest by UN standards. A consensus emerged that after fourteen years, it was time for him to go. Diallo returned to Burkina Faso, and passed away seven years later, in 2014, at the age of 75.<sup>44</sup>

Given the sensitivities associated with white, Western countries dismissing a black African UN leader, it was understood that his replacement should also come from the continent, especially given the convention's historic geographic orientation. Luc Gnacadja, a young and energetic former-Minister of Environment from Benin was tapped to replace Diallo as Executive Secretary. With Gnacadja at the helm, it did not take long for a meaningful improvement in relations between the UNCCD and Safriel and Israel to take place. During the course of his six-year tenure, Gnacadja visited Israel three times, an unprecedented frequency for the head of a UN institution. Subsequently, his successor, French career diplomat Monique Barbut, continued the practice of regular visits to Israel.

Israel's presence at UNCCD gatherings likewise became more conspicuous. Depending on the availability of funding and level of commitment to international public service among BGU's leadership, Safriel was joined by university colleagues and other Israeli experts at UNCCD meetings. This allowed for a series of Israeli-sponsored side-events, typically during the lunch break or in the evening, when decisions were being made behind closed doors and most of the conference participants were free to learn something new. Topics usually involved areas of Israeli expertise such as dryland forestry practices, drip irrigation or water management for arid regions.

Pedro Berliner, a professor of desert agriculture was among the BGU faculty members who joined Safriel at UNCCD gatherings and began to take an active role in UNCCD committees. He describes the secret of Safriel's effectiveness:

Uriel Safriel is a well-known scientist and ecologist who has a gift for collecting the data and opinions of different people and then making a coherent picture of different perspectives. It is not easy for a scientist to accommodate

different outlooks, without giving up on basic principles. Uriel never compromised his academic views in order to be popular or attain acceptance by all parties. But he found ways to explain the science and convince people to support a given approach or language in a decision.<sup>45</sup>

Due to Gnacadja's uncompromising commitment to upgrading the scientific rigor of the convention and the competence of UNCCD related interventions, Safriel's influence became even more pronounced. Gnacadja was surprised to discover that many top international scientists did not want to become involved in the convention because it was considered excessively political and politicized: long on rhetoric and short on concrete action. With the "credibility of the convention at stake", one of Gnacadja's key initial priorities was to "strengthen the scientific foundation of the Convention and build a policy/science interface". Safriel proved to be a critical partner in this endeavor. "Israel has surely had unusually great influence on the policies of the UNCCD," Gnacadja explained, "but really, this was primarily through the work of Uriel."<sup>46</sup>

Good chemistry and trust between the two quickly developed. "I was very pleased to connect with Uriel on a personal level", recalls Gnacadja:

He was not one of those UNCCD delegates who simply came to hang around. He is someone who is deeply committed on a personal level. Uriel is pragmatic and looks for real solutions. I knew that when I sent him an email with a question at night, by the next morning I would have a clear and authoritative answer waiting for me.

Gnacadja's decision to have science inform UNCCD policies often meant relying on Professor Safriel's personal credibility: "Uriel has a quiet way of being a facilitator. He likes to elaborate on substance. I really connected with him on that level."<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, in 2013, Gnacadja spearheaded a new UNCCD initiative: "the SPI"—The Science-Policy Interface. The group's mandate is to translate current science into policy-relevant recommendations resulting from assessment and synthesis of current science. It works to produce peer-reviewed technical reports as well as science-policy briefs designed to support policy development.<sup>48</sup>

The SPI is overseen by the convention's Committee on Science and Technology (CST). Mandated in the original Convention provisions, the Committee is roughly analogous to the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the vaunted collection of 1000 scientists whose reports on the state of climate science proved to be so important that its members



collectively won a Nobel Peace prize.<sup>49</sup> The chair of the CST can have tremendous influence on the convention's scientific agenda, making it the second most important elected position associated with UN desertification efforts.

The story behind Safriel's election to the post is instructive, showing how competence can overcome seemingly insurmountable political constraints when UN bodies seek a professional orientation. Louise Baker, a long-term senior staffer at the UNCCD Secretariat, was a close observer of the process. When asked how an Israeli was elected to such a senior position she states simply: "Uriel Safriel emerged as the wise man involving all things surrounding desertification. It's difficult to argue with someone when you are renowned as simply the best in the world."<sup>50</sup>

Appointment of senior positions under the UNCCD takes place via rotation, with different regional groups entitled to representation and chairs in key UNCCD bodies for a three-year period. In 2013, it was WEOG's (The Western Europe and Others Group's) turn to appoint a chair to the CST. As a result of Canadian and US intercession, Israel had at long last been accepted as a member of this group. Safriel was frequently asked to resolve technical questions during internal consultations. Baker explains that when the issue of an appropriate WEOG candidate for chair was raised, "it was pretty much a no-brainer. It just didn't make sense to appoint anyone else."

After Safriel's candidacy became public, some Arab countries approached the UNCCD leadership and asked to nominate an alternative. But the US delegation was quick to weigh in with a resounding veto and Safriel's election was ensured. Ironically, with the exception of South America, members from other geographic regions appointed to the Science and Technology Committee that year, were entirely from Muslim countries: Bosnia, Indonesia and Sudan all sent representatives to Safriel's committee. In retrospect, because members of the committee had scientific backgrounds and weren't pursuing political crusades, no friction was perceived among the Committee members during Safriel's tenure.<sup>51</sup>

This appears to be the norm in Israeli interactions in UN desertification efforts. After his retirement, Professor Pedro Berliner succeeded Safriel as the BGU representative to the UNCCD. He recalls isolated incidents where he faced push-back from Arab delegates, like publicizing an Israeli scholarship initiative for agricultural training of students in developing countries. The Syrian delegate protested that such a notification was outside the committee's mandate. Claims by the Palestinian delegation, blaming desertification in the West Bank on Israeli occupation are intermittent.

But on the whole, Berliner's impression is that Israel's reputation as one of only a few countries to have successfully developed desert areas, generally trumps such disparaging outbursts. Israeli representatives typically enjoy a warm reception and good social dynamics.<sup>52</sup>

So long as Israel maintains a reasonable level of patronage among key players in the Secretariat and key allies, (especially the US) it will continue to overcome the hostility of the many Muslim and Arab countries party to UN conventions. For example, former-UNCCD Executive Secretary Gnacadja recounts an incident when the Secretariat needed to select a country in which the next Conference of the Parties would be held. Several Arab countries contemplated hosting the event. It required a modest amount of organization by the host country, but also brought together at least a thousand international guests. They let the Secretariat know that while they were keen to accommodate the Convention, Israel's participation at the meeting would constitute a problem. Gnacadja told them that this matter was non-negotiable; the countries were never selected to host the meeting.<sup>53</sup> The present UNCCD chair, Monique Barbut, comes from France and has been unfailingly warm to Israel. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that a representative from a Muslim country will again be appointed to the post, at which point, Israel's level of engagement may be significantly reduced.

### A PROFESSIONAL AGENDA

Once the UNCCD became operational, Safriel took an active role in putting substantive issues on its agenda. To begin with, it was important to explain to the "focal points" representing the 180 odd countries, most of whom had little scientific or ecological background, exactly what desertification was. The point was that the UNCCD was not intended to address *deserts*—arid or hyper-arid regions—but rather drylands in general, particularly the semi-arid zones that boasted modest soil productivity. These lands are highly vulnerable to erosion and loss of fertility. Safriel found a perfect vehicle for making the case when he was made a lead author for the Dryland component of the highly regarded *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* and its synthesis report on desertification. The report succinctly and convincingly sets forth the biophysical dynamics of the process and what can be done to combat the process.

Such distinctions were important in establishing a new Northern Mediterranean coalition, which solved part of Israel's UNCCD identity

crisis. Countries where rain falls only during the winter months of the year are not entirely unique to the Mediterranean basin. Parts of Australia and California have similar weather patterns. Greece and Italy are also quintessential Mediterranean lands. Scientists from these countries were repeatedly integrated into their national delegations, and soon became friends and allies with Safriel. Most of Europe has no real desertification problem and its only real role in the convention is to provide economic aid. Mediterranean countries, however, face significant land degradation challenges.<sup>54</sup>

Safriel helped spearhead the consensus that their shared climatic conditions were sufficiently idiosyncratic to warrant a special annex for Mediterranean countries. An international professional workshop was convened in Israel to consider the effects of intermittent rainfall on soil degradation and restoration.<sup>55</sup> Because local weather patterns are so fundamentally different than those prevailing in Africa and Asia, it was decided to establish a special group within the UNCCD of Northern Mediterranean countries. Israel's delegation was instrumental in articulating the potential benefits of cooperative activities justifying the creation of a special alliance. As opposed to the Asian Annex, where he had been so unwelcome, Safriel would eventually serve as chair of the Northern Mediterranean Implementation Annex of the UNCCD.

Safriel was also an outspoken advocate for addressing not only the *direct* drivers of desertification (e.g., overgrazing, deforestation, transforming rangelands to cultivated lands, flood irrigation) but also the *indirect*, social drivers (e.g., land tenure norms, gender roles) that set the process in motion. He was the first to characterize the interactions between *climate change* and *desertification*, even running the first international workshop on the subject in Israel.<sup>56</sup> This proved politically important for the UNCCD. Such synergies opened the possibility of syphoning attention and resources from relatively well-funded international climate change efforts to desertification problems.

The most important substantive product of the Gnacadja/Safriel partnership was the adoption of a new global strategy for addressing desertification. Gnacadja reached the conclusion that the rhetoric of “combatting desertification” was an obstacle to gaining traction and support for land conservation and restoration worldwide. The misconception created by the word “desertification” led many to envision it mistakenly as a problem of menacing sand dunes inexorably engulfing fertile farmlands. Gnacadja preferred to steer discussions to the more common problem of land degradation and fertility loss, a global challenge that went far beyond Africa—one to which all countries could relate.<sup>57</sup>

After twenty years of efforts, Gnacadja was acutely aware that despite isolated success stories, on the whole, there was little progress in reducing desertification on the ground worldwide. He sought a paradigm shift in the international community's approach to the scourge. This recognition led to the formulation of a new concept whose operational objective is now known as *Land Degradation Neutrality*. Ensuring no-net loss of soil fertility at the local, national and global levels, has both tactical and substantive components.

In retrospect, the change in orientation can be attributed to the partnership between Safriel and Gnacadja, at the time, the leading political and scientific figures in the UNCCD. The *LDN* concept was essentially pragmatic, realizing that some degradation of land is inevitable due to food and fiber demands imposed by a growing population and the associated land exploitation. The resulting soil disturbance invariably exacerbates degradation trends. The approach also takes into account massive areas of degraded lands whose productivity can be restored.<sup>58</sup> Rather than calling for *zero* land degradation, the strategy is based on *zero net* degradation, assuming a balance between land development and restoration in drylands and beyond.<sup>59</sup>

Originally, Gnacadja called the concept *Zero Net Land Degradation* and sought scientific validation. Accordingly, Gnacadja asked the 2014 DDD conference to consider the issue in its various sessions and conduct workshops about how the theoretical concept might be operationalized.<sup>60</sup> The logic behind the ZLD approach was widely embraced. Eventually proceedings from the conference were published in a special issue of the distinguished *Journal of Arid Environment*.<sup>61</sup> Gnacadja had the blessing of leading scientists in the field who convened in Israel.

Eventually, opposition was raised by some countries for the numeric term "zero". By then a seasoned diplomat, Gnacadja simply repackaged the concept under a different title: *Land Degradation Neutrality*. It was adopted as part of the 2030 desertification strategy by the convention.<sup>62</sup>

#### LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE UNCCD: ISRAELI INFLUENCE IN A UN FRAMEWORK

The story of Israel's involvement in global desertification efforts suggests that there is nothing ineluctable about Israel's isolation in the context of United Nations initiatives. Zionism aspired to make the Jewish people "normal". Consequently, disengagement by Israel from the UN constitutes

a certain acquiescence to anti-Semitism (or its modern expression as anti-Zionism) and the abandonment of a central ideal: to be a full and contributing member of the international community. There is no reason why the Jewish state cannot help heal the world. Having reached hitherto unimaginable levels of prosperity, it has a responsibility to do so. Understanding Israel's experience in the UNCCD offers insights about how such engagement might be scaled up and expanded to other international challenges.

The desertification experience suggests that individual leadership matters. Such leadership is more likely to be found among the ranks of Israel's talented academicians than among political appointees. Uriel Safriel's influential role had nothing to do with rhetorical skills or cunning, manipulative acumen and everything to do with applied scholarship, stamina and intelligence. These are the kinds of people Israel should seek to enlist in representing the country in UN frameworks.

Israel's institutions of higher education should consider the potential to become global players when they partner with the MFA in addressing a global challenge. There is tremendous room to develop new initiatives which emulate the commitment BGU exhibited during this period to sharing expertise on desertification. Israelis love to travel—and Israeli academics travel more than most. Many scientists and tenured academics may agree to expand their work beyond typical teaching and research loads to include international service on behalf of a global, greater good. This will only happen, however, if universities provide modest remuneration for such activities (or at least not penalize faculty with delayed academic promotions). Israel's universities have always enjoyed philanthropic generosity from around the world. In the great tradition of Israeli opportunism, promoting projects that address international problems via UN frameworks can expand the pool of potential donors and donations.

The fact that desertification was considered an “orphan” among the major global environmental problems was also a factor in the successful experience at the UNCCD. When you are not playing a popular sport, it is easier to be a star. Israel remains a small country and cannot do everything. But it can identify those challenges facing the international community where Israeli know-how and experience are exceptional and might make a unique contribution. Having true expertise and real-world models of success make for a more compelling and inspirational sell.

Israel's experience with desertification also highlights the importance of greater governmental involvement and willingness to put real “skin in the game” or “budget lines” to address challenges beyond its borders. When the UNCCD was first being vetted thirty years ago, the original concern

expressed by developing countries was that the substantial support from wealthy, first-world nations required to overcome desertification through sustainable development would be slow in coming. In retrospect, their fears were not misplaced. During two decades that have transpired since the convention came into force, the preponderance of global resources and attention in developed nations have focused on other international, environmental challenges, such as ozone layer depletion, climate change and species extinction. When desertification crises do emerge, they are often considered to be an African problem, filed away with Ebola, Boko Haram, malaria, AIDS, schistosomiasis and the continent's other intractable public health, political and economic conundrums.<sup>63</sup>

While Israel signed and ratified the UNCCD with alacrity, it never really intended to meet the commitments of foreign aid expected of the convention's developed countries. In that way it was no different than most OECD countries. For twenty years Safriel faced this gaping disparity between formal expectations under a UN Treaty and Israel's actual, financing dynamics:

I knew that I could give nothing to these African and Asian countries because our government always faced budget shortfalls and pressing problems here. To me, the real problem was the mindset. The MFA had long ago established *Mashav*, its wing for international development. But it never had a sufficient budget to really support the developing countries under this Convention. From the second the negotiations unfolded, I had constant requests, especially from African countries, for assistance. This was in spite of the fact that after the Yom Kippur War, almost all the African countries severed their diplomatic relations with Israel. Israel continued to send experts, notwithstanding the lack of diplomatic relations.

Now of course, Israel's aid agency did not have sufficient funding to do this seriously. What it did was to approach the bodies responsible for international aid in the US, Canada, and several European countries, and told them about the assistance it wanted to give. I don't know who talked to whom, but these countries decided that instead of supporting Kenya directly, they would give the money to a government agency in Israel, because Israelis presumably know better how to implement development programs. So just as it had been in the past, Israel remained active in Kenya, and sent experts.

But Israel never supported anti-desertification interventions in cash; rather it supported by sending Israeli experts there or by running training programs here. Under the UNCCD, every party to the convention is supposed to submit a report, detailing how much it supported and which country it

supported. I always received such information from MFA, even though we didn't really support with funds generated by Israeli taxes.<sup>64</sup>

The trouble of course is that over time, many international donors became less enamored of supporting Israel's modest international assistance program. They had their own agencies, experts and NGOs engaged in development work and were growing more confident in their ability to run programs every bit as competent as the Israeli ones.

For the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that Israel's influence in the desertification field will come from the actual foreign assistance it provides developing dryland countries. On paper, the MFA still runs its *Mashav* division, the foreign aid agency, established by Golda Meir during her tenure as Foreign Minister. But there has been a steady decline in the level of *Mashav's* funding since those idealistic days, especially when one considers Israeli foreign assistance as a percentage of overall government expenditures or per capita GDP.<sup>65</sup>

Gil Haskel presently heads the *Mashav* program. A former ambassador to Kenya, he is strongly committed to expanding Israeli engagement in African development. For a diplomat he is uncharacteristically frank about real associated obstacles, calling out the massive corruption and citing figures that estimate 80% embezzlement of public funds by some political leaders on the continent. Haskel also knows that political support for a more robust Israeli program of foreign assistance for developing countries affected by desertification is nowhere on the horizon. This might explain his waxing enthusiastic about the potential of engaging the private sector.

I always say that development is a state of mind. It's not connected to skin color. If an African president decides not to purchase a presidential jet, more resources will be available for critical projects. It's a question of priorities. The BOT (Build/Operate/Transfer) model has proven itself as viable, so that pretty much any project can be implemented through a private/public partnership. For instance, water shortages in many countries can be solved through desalination. But it means that even people in developing countries will have to start paying for water.<sup>66</sup>

The gap between expectations among recipient countries and the Israeli government's "willingness to pay" is not lost on UNCCD officials. Luc Gnacadja is ever polite, but even as a proven ally and advocate for Israel, his disappointment is unmistakable.

I don't want to discount the value of Mashav's work in Africa. But their efforts are very limited in scope and reach. Senior government officials are not involved in the decision-making level. If Israel has played an influential role in global desertification, it was because Uriel was influential.

## CONCLUSION

Some may question whether the present case study is useful as a model for improving UN-Israel relations. The answer is "yes": desertification offers a compelling proof of concept for innumerable other contexts. There are several multi-lateral *environmental* conventions, in which Israeli academics could be tapped and empowered to take on leadership roles. The UN Convention on Biodiversity is a natural place for the extraordinary competence of Israel's ecological professors and researchers to be engaged. Until now, Israel's general involvement has been marginal. The Barcelona Convention to protect the Mediterranean Sea could also benefit from growing Israeli expertise in new, common challenges facing the Mediterranean (e.g., discharge of desalination brine or reducing plastic contamination), as exemplified in the new School for Marine Studies at Haifa University.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is a particularly high-profile institution, where expanding Israel's influence is more challenging. Nonetheless, appointing a delegation head with a niche expertise (in fields such as forestry and carbon sequestration; adaptation strategies for dryland agriculture or other areas of agro or cleantech) could set the Israeli delegation apart. These are merely some examples within the environmental realm. From UN conventions on hijacking and human trafficking to child labor to biological warfare conventions—Israeli expertise is unique. Letting experts take the lead, Israel could leverage its professional competence to attain a more prominent international standing.

Israel's experience with desertification suggests that thoughtful, strategic, professional involvement at the UN can not only produce diplomatic dividends, but also benefit the world. Unfortunately, after decades of deflecting relentless attacks in international forums, diplomatic success for Israel's Foreign Service is often measured only in terms of avoiding a censure or deflecting a hostile resolution. The UNCCD shows that Israel can do much more in the international arena. It can contribute to the global effort for a healthier and more harmonious planet. "If we will it, it is no



dream.” But this leaves unanswered the question of Israel’s political will to be a significant, contributing member of the family of nations.

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