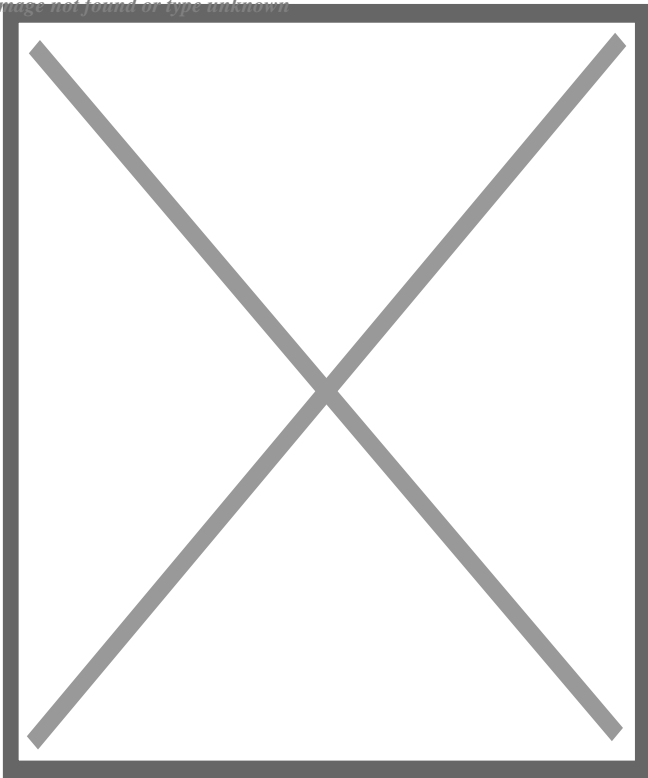


African Union says Israel's observer status suspended

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Security guards ask an Israeli observer delegation headed by Sharon Bar-Li (center) to leave the African Union summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on February 18, 2023. (Screen capture/Twitter; used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)

Addis Ababa, February 20 (RHC)-- The African Union has said that Israel's observer status at the bloc was suspended which is why it was not invited to attend the weekend summit. The news comes after Israeli ambassador Sharon Bar-li was removed from the African Union's annual summit in Ethiopia on Saturday as she attempted to attend using a non-transferable invitation issued only to Israel's ambassador to the African Union, Aleli Admasu.

Video circulating on social media showed guards escorting Bar-li out of the AU assembly hall in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. "The status is suspended until such time as this committee can deliberate ... and so we did not invite Israeli officials to our summit," AU Commission chief Moussa Faki Mahamat told reporters on Sunday, adding that an investigation was being conducted into Saturday's incident.

A spokesperson for Israel's foreign ministry said Bar-li was "an accredited observer with an entry tag", and accused the AU of being taken hostage by a "small number of extremist states like Algeria and South Africa, which are driven by hatred and controlled by Iran."

The incident highlighted a spat within the pan-African bloc over a unilateral 2021 decision by Mahamat to give Israel observer status, triggering protests by several member states. Israel obtained observer status after two decades of diplomatic efforts. It had previously held the role at the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) but was long thwarted in its attempts to regain it after the OAU was disbanded in 2002 and replaced by the AU.

The Israeli foreign ministry said at the time that the new status could enable Israel and the AU to forge stronger cooperation on various aspects, including the fight against the coronavirus and the prevention "of the spread of extremist terrorism" on the African continent.

Last year's AU summit suspended a debate on whether to withdraw the accreditation and established a committee of heads of state to address the issue.

The South African government said the African Union's decision to award Israel the status was "even more shocking in a year in which the oppressed people of Palestine were hounded by destructive bombardments and continued illegal settlements of the land".

South Africa backs the Palestinian cause, with formal diplomatic relations established in 1995, a year after the end of apartheid. It downgraded its embassy in Tel Aviv to a liaison office in 2019.

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