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Benjamin Netanyahu Seeks Deeper Ties With Africa

Israel's prime minister kicks off a four-nation African visit in Uganda



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pictured on Sunday. The Israeli leader is seeking East African allies to bolster support for Israel in international forums. *PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS*

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Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu kicked off a four-nation African visit in Uganda, his latest effort to forge deeper diplomatic and commercial ties on the continent.

“The African continent constitutes vast potential for Israel,” Mr. Netanyahu said before the trip, which began Monday and will include meetings with the leaders of Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda.

The Israeli leader seeks East African allies to bolster support for Israel in international forums, including the United Nations, as he faces criticism from Western countries over the dim prospects for a resolution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli officials have repeatedly said that Arab nations band together to propose resolutions that affect Israel at the U.N. and at other international bodies.

Israel's relationship with African nations has historically been fraught because of



The Abayudaya Jewish community waits for Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits as its members hope for greater ties with the international Jewish community. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

support for the Palestinian cause from many countries on the continent.

A report last week from the Quartet for the Middle East peace process, comprising the U.N., U.S., Russia and the European Union, criticized both the current Israeli and Palestinian approaches to peace. It highlighted Israel's settlement enterprise in the West Bank as an obstacle to a two-state solution, drawing a scathing response from Israel.

Israel hopes to strengthen ties enough to secure an observer seat at the 54-nation African Union, an effort to shore up long-term African support at the U.N., according to a report from South Africa's Afro-Middle East Centre. Those efforts were bolstered Wednesday by Ethiopia's election to the U.N. Security Council, where it joins Egypt and Senegal.

“The African countries have traditionally voted against Israel [in international forums],” said Aryeh Oded, a former Israeli ambassador to East Africa nations and a research fellow at the Jerusalem-based Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace. “[Mr. Netanyahu] wants to change this situation.”

Mr. Netanyahu is joined in Africa by a delegation of 80 Israeli business executives representing 50 companies working to strengthen commercial and economic ties.

‘The African continent constitutes vast potential for Israel’

—Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

With
insurgencies
growing across
Africa, including
al Qaeda-
affiliated al-
Shabaab in East

Africa, Israeli officials are looking to sell advanced military equipment to national governments as well as technology for agriculture, fisheries and water.

The move comes as Israeli exports to traditional markets in the EU and U.S. have become volatile, said Ohad Cohen, head of foreign trade at Israel's Ministry of Economy and Industry. Israeli exports to Africa totaled about \$1 billion last year, about 2% of its total exports.

"We are trying to diversify our exports through channeling efforts to markets that are growing more rapidly than [others]," he said. "Africa is one of them."

Mr. Netanyahu's visit to Uganda included a trip to Entebbe International Airport to commemorate the 40th anniversary of a daring hostage rescue there by Israeli commandos, in which his older brother was killed. The mission was launched after pro-Palestinian terrorists hijacked an Air France flight from Tel Aviv to Paris and diverted it to Uganda, where they had political support from then-dictator Idi Amin.

Israel sent commandos on a 2,200-mile rescue mission and saved more than 100 hostages. Three Israeli hostages were killed. Seven hostage-takers and more than 25 Ugandan soldiers who guarded the airport also died in the raid.

Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, the operation's commander, was the only fatality among the Israeli soldiers. After his death, he became a national hero and inspired his brother to enter politics.

The Israeli leader's high-profile visit comes the month after Israel restored diplomatic ties with Turkey. The countries severed relations six years ago, after Israeli commandos raided a Turkish ship carrying activists trying to break Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. Nine Turkish citizens and a Turkish-American died.

Like Israel and certain East African nations, Turkey is under threat from extremist groups including Islamic State.

"The threat of Islamic State and Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen is close to Israel," said Emmanuel Navon, lecturer on diplomatic studies and international relations at Tel-Aviv University. "In that sense, it's beneficial to develop ties with countries that also feel threatened."

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