In Africa, Benjamin Netanyahu Looks for Friends, and U.N. Votes, for Israel

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/world/africa/israel-africa-netanyahu-uganda-kenya-rwanda.html?_r=0>

[Benjamin Netanyahu](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/n/benjamin_netanyahu/index.html?inline=nyt-per), the prime minister of [Israel](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/israel/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), cruised around the capital of [Kenya](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/kenya/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) with an entourage of dozens of Israeli executives, hoping to sell Africa everything from Israeli-made plastic wrap, sprinklers and irrigation pipes to software, CCTV cameras and military equipment. Even cantaloupe seeds.

But Mr. Netanyahu was also on the lookout for something else: precious [United Nations](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations/index.html?inline=nyt-org) votes.

“There are 50 countries in Africa,” Mr. Netanyahu said (actually, [there are 54](http://www.au.int/en/history/oau-and-au)). “Just about all of them,” he continued in an interview in recent days, “could be allies of Israel. They vote at international forums, and I know people don’t believe this, but I think we can change the automatic majorities in the U.N. and so on if you begin to shift this.”

Arab states often galvanize blocs of support within the United Nations to pass resolutions condemning Israeli policies. And with European and other nations increasingly critical of Mr. Netanyahu’s right-leaning government, blaming him for the impasse in the peace process with the [Palestinians](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/palestinians/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier), reinvigorating ties with Africa seems to be part of a global Israeli survival strategy.

Israel used to be big in Africa.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Israel felt a kinship to newly independent nations in Africa and dispatched diplomats across the continent, opening two dozen embassies, a lot for a little country.

No place was too remote. In the Central African Republic, the Israeli ambassador doubled as a kosher butcher, slaughtering chickens for his family in the backyard.

But in the mid-1970s, after the [Yom Kippur War](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/world/middleeast/11israel.html) between Israel and a coalition of Arab states, many African countries severed diplomatic ties with Israel. Today, it operates only 10 small embassies in sub-Saharan Africa, and its development projects tend to be low-key, like sending Kenyan students to study farming in Israel or helping Tanzanian beekeepers make more honey.

Mr. Netanyahu has said he is determined to change that, and this week he has been taking a four-nation Africa tour, the first for an Israeli premier in decades. What he faces from Africans is a mixture of warmth and suspicion.

Many sub-Saharan Africans, even if they have never met a Jew, are enamored with Israel because of its links to biblical places and “because of the common enemy, the Islamic fundamentalist Arabs and terrorists,” said James Solomon Padiet, a political science lecturer in South Sudan.

But many Africans also identify with the Palestinians, who are seen as oppressed underdogs in the Middle East conflict.

“I think the notion of Africa returning to Israel is a huge fiction,” said [Angelo Izama](http://www.angeloizama.com/), a journalist and human rights activist in [Uganda](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/uganda/index.html?inline=nyt-geo). He called Israel’s treatment of Palestinians a form of “apartheid” and said African immigrants in Israel were often regarded “as vermin.”

He added that Israel’s offers of more aid, especially for security, smacked of a patronizing “transactional relationship” that Africa was trying to escape.

Like any other nation, Israel constantly scans the horizon, trying to push its economic, strategic and diplomatic interests, looking for new friends and new markets.

But unlike most other nations, Israel has to contend with a large swath of the world, from Morocco to Pakistan, that is deeply hostile, and it seems to be pursuing sub-Saharan Africa with urgency.

Ron Prosor, a former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, said the strategy had begun to pay off. In 2014, the Security Council [rejected a Palestinian resolution](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/31/us-israel-un-reject-palestinian-resolution-nigeria-security-council) calling for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. Abstentions by [Rwanda](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/rwanda/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) and Nigeria, he said, helped tip the balance.

But, he added, changing the dynamics at the United Nations “is not instant pudding.”

Mr. Netanyahu has repeatedly emphasized that Israel has a mutual interest with Africa in cooperating on security matters, especially in the battle against Islamic extremists. Several African countries, including Kenya, receive Israeli military training and equipment; Africa has become one of the biggest growth markets for [Israel’s arms industry](http://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20150526-israeli-military-technology-sales-to-africa-increase-by-40).

On Tuesday, Mr. Netanyahu pledged to share intelligence with Kenya to pre-empt terrorist attacks. There was even talk of Israel, which has built gigantic walls along the West Bank, helping the Kenyans build [a wall along the Kenya-Somalia border](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/22/world/africa/kenya-plans-to-build-a-border-wall-that-keeps-shabab-violence-out.html).

Each of the countries on the tour was selected because of its link to Israel. Uganda, where the tour began Monday, was the site of a hostage rescue in 1976 when Israeli commandos stormed the Entebbe airport and saved more than 100 people. [Mr. Netanyahu’s older brother, Yoni](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/05/world/middleeast/netanyahu-entebbe-israel-africa-terrorism-brother-yoni.html), led that raid and was killed during it.

The next stop, Kenya, is one of Africa’s biggest markets and has its own Entebbe connection. Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta, father of the current president, Uhuru Kenyatta, took what was a risky decision at the time by allowing Israeli planes to refuel in Kenya after the raid.

During an event Tuesday with evangelical Christians, a Kenyan apologized to Mr. Netanyahu for Yoni’s death, saying he was speaking on behalf of Africa. The usually taciturn Mr. Netanyahu seemed surprised — and touched.

“His body language was completely different than what we see in Israel,” said Yosef Abramowitz, an Israeli renewable energy executive, who was in the room. “It was like his face was debating whether to let this penetrate deep into his soul. I was afraid he was going to cry.”

He didn’t, but Mr. Abramowitz said it was close.

On Wednesday, Mr. Netanyahu flew to Rwanda, which shares with the Jews a history of [genocide](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/rwanda/genocide/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier). Israeli experts were consulted in constructing Rwanda’s memorial to the estimated one million people massacred in 1994. Historians have said more civilians were killed in Rwanda during that three-month span than during just about any other three months in human history, including the Holocaust.

According to the Israeli news media, Israel made a pact with Rwanda and Uganda for them to take asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan who had migrated to Israel; in return, it is widely believed, Israel supplies extra military equipment or special training to Rwanda and Uganda.

Mr. Netanyahu’s last stop will be [Ethiopia](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/ethiopia/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), home to Africa’s largest indigenous Jewish population until Israel organized airlifts and brought thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, though the process of integration has hardly been seamless. Last year, Ethiopian-Israelis violently protested what they called a pattern of racism.

At the ceremony commemorating the Entebbe raid on Monday, Uganda’s president, Yoweri Museveni, kept referring to Israel as “Palestine,” which raised some eyebrows in the Israeli delegation sitting in front of him. It was not clear whether he misspoke or was intending to be contentious.

Mr. Museveni, who has been in office for 30 years and is notorious for giving long, rambling, bombastic speeches, belittled the sensitive negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, saying that people “waste a lot of time with these international meetings” and that he often fell asleep during them. He then offered to help mediate the talks. He also ridiculed as “nonsense” an old colonial proposal to [resettle Jews in Africa](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/Uganda.html).

In 1903, Theodor Herzl, considered the father of modern Zionism, discussed with British officials the possibility of finding [a haven in East Africa](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/this-day-in-jewish-history/1.672878) for Jews fleeing the deadly pogroms in Europe.

“You can see how these fellows are not really serious,” Mr. Museveni said of the old proposal with a chuckle, though the only other people laughing during his speech were doing so uncomfortably, looking side to side.

Mr. Museveni said it was a good thing the plan never materialized.

“Those Jewish leaders were very, very clever,” he said. “Otherwise we would be fighting you now.”