

Peace
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Israel's relations with the Arab world have never been better than they are today, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday, even without a peace accord with the Palestinians.

Addressing the Foreign Ministry personnel at an event ahead of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, Netanyahu said that the extent of relations has not yet been fully made public, but added that their scope was greater than "any other period in Israeli history."

"What's effectively happening with the bloc of Arab countries has never before happened in our history, even when we signed peace treaties," Netanyahu said.

Israel has peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. In recent years it has grown closer to Sunni nations over shared concern about Iran's growing influence in the region. However, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries are hesitant to normalize ties before a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is secured.

He added that "the various types and levels of cooperation" are still being kept away from the public eye, but explained that "beneath the surface of exposure, the [collaboration] extends far beyond any other time in Israel's history. What we have here is a tremendous shift and it is happening despite the unfortunate fact that the Palestinians have not yet changed their preconditions for a diplomatic agreement -- preconditions that are unacceptable to a large portion of the [Israeli] public."

Netanyahu has been promoting Israel's improved international relations under his leadership. Next week he will visit Latin America -- the first sitting Israeli prime minister to do so.

"We raise our glasses for success as we embark on a historical journey -- it turns out this is the first time an incumbent Israeli prime minister flies to Central and South American countries. This is a very large bloc that we haven't yet visited," Netanyahu said.

The prime minister stressed that "today, we are on different ground. Our relations with the U.S., and with North America in general, are stronger than ever. We have strong ties with Europe and we are developing eastern Europe. We are forging relations on every continent, returning to Africa and expanding the scope of the technological assistance we provide."

"Our efforts are also focused on Asia. There has never been such strong contact with China or such meaningful relations with India or Japan, not to mention the Muslim nations, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan," he went on to say.

Netanyahu, who also serves as Israel's foreign minister, said that "there is also a big change in our relations with Russia," adding that this change was in the socio-economic strategic connection shared by the countries, as well as "coordinating expectations and intentions on the strategic level as much as possible, and you understand how critical this is in our day. The connection is nurtured and strengthened by both us and Russia."

"These are tremendous changes," he continued. "We have gotten as far as Australia."

"Now we are working on relations with Latin America. There is a major shift here and I'll explain why this is happening: The basic assumption is that if we make a peace deal with the Palestinians, which is something that we've always wanted and still want, the world would open up to us. While there is no doubt that it would help, the world is opening up even without it. That's not to say that the diplomatic process and normalization aren't important," he said.