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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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August 4, 2017

Ha'aretz

Israel Police Confirm: Netanyahu Suspected of Bribery and Fraud

Prime Netanyahu is suspected of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in two cases, Israel Police confirmed on Thursday when it requested a gag order on the ongoing talks to recruit a state witness. The gag order was granted and is effective until September 17. A response on behalf of the prime minister stated on Thursday: "We reject the unfounded claims made against the prime minister. The campaign to change the government is underway, but it is destined to fail, for a simple reason: there won't be anything because there was nothing." Also on Thursday, Attorney General Mendelblit said that progress was being made in talks with a former top aide Ari Harow, about becoming a state witness. See also, ["Benjamin Netanyahu suspected of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, police say" \(Independent\)](#)

Times of Israel

Netanyahu: No Government has Done More for Settlers than Mine

Speaking at a cornerstone-laying ceremony for a new neighborhood in this ultra-Orthodox settlement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted that his government has been doing everything in its power to address the problems faced by Israelis over the Green Line. "There is no government that does more for the settlement [movement] in Israel than the one under my leadership," he said to a crowd of some 100 people. Netanyahu cited his chief of staff, Yoav Horowitz, who was in the Netiv Ha'avot illegal outpost hours earlier, speaking with residents of the neighborhood where 15 homes are slated to be demolished after the High Court of Justice ruled that they had been constructed on private Palestinian land. See also, ["State doubles budget for new settlement after shortfall" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Taylor Force Act Moves Forward On Path to Become Law

A Senate bill that would force the Palestinian Authority to end its program of compensating convicted murderers and terrorists in Israel passed through a critical committee markup and vote on Thursday. The Taylor Force Act – originally drafted exclusively by Republicans – earned support from Democratic senators and several Israel advocacy organizations that were previously holding out for edits to the legislation. Sixteen members of the committee voted in favor of the bill while five voted against it. The legislation will now proceed to the Senate floor for a full vote. Should it pass, the Taylor Force Act would compel the State Department to cut off funding to the PA over its "martyr" compensation scheme. See also, ["Palestinian Authority now uses half of all foreign aid to reward terror" \(New York Post\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Jordan's King Coming to Ramallah to Meet With Abbas

Jordan's King Abdullah II is to travel to Ramallah on Monday to meet with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the recent events on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and political developments. Abdullah recently announced the allocation of \$1 million to support the Waqf, the religious trust that manages the Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem, and a special grant for its employees. He is expected to arrive in the afternoon for a personal meeting with Abbas and senior Palestinian officials. See also, ["King Abdullah to visit PA in Ramallah" \(Ynet News\)](#)

UN Chief to Make First Visit to Israel, Palestinian Territories

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres will pay his first visit since taking the UN helm to Israel and the Palestinian territories, including the Gaza Strip, at the end of the month, diplomats said Thursday. The UN chief will hold talks with Israeli leaders, travel to Ramallah to meet Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and to the Gaza Strip, where the United Nations runs a major Palestinian aid program, during the three-day visit beginning August 28. Israel's UN Ambassador Danny Danon said the visit will allow Guterres to "build a relationship" with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

At Ruins of Evacuated Settlement, MK's Demand Return

Hundreds gathered on the ruins of the evacuated Sa-nur settlement Thursday, calling on the government to allow Israelis to return to the West Bank communities demolished on the sidelines of the 2005 Gaza disengagement. "We have come here today, 12 years since we were expelled from our homes, to cry out to our government — the most nationalist in the history of the state — do not stand idly by!" Samaria Regional Council chairman Yossi Dagan, himself a former resident of Sa-nur, shouted from the stage. "Don't give up on the historic opportunity to correct this injustice!" While Dagan shared the stage with 11 lawmakers from the Likud and Jewish Home factions, attendees, mostly women and children, picnicked on mats under a large canopy protecting them from the hot August sun.

Country Club Changes Rules to Prevent Arab Members

For the past seven years the country club in the local council Kochav Yair-Tzur Yigal has refused to accept Arab members. Yet the community's Jewish neighbors were welcome to enjoy the club's three swimming pools, fitness room, lawns and other facilities. Following a petition filed by a resident of the nearby Arab village Tira against the club's policy three years ago, the club recently decided to sanitize the ban: From now on, membership will be restricted to Kochav Yair-Tzur Yigal's residents, who of course are all Jewish, while no outsiders, Jewish or Arab, will be allowed in, the local council decided. "We don't want the Arabs to swim with us," says a Kochav Yair resident. "When they were here, it wasn't pleasant." See also, ["For Israel's Jews and Arabs to Truly Coexist, This Is What Needs to Happen" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

More Than 22,000 Attend Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade

More than 22,000 people attended Thursday's gay pride parade in Jerusalem. Thousands of people gathered in the Liberty Bell Park, as police and security forces blocked nearby streets in preparation for a large turnout. At the entrance to the parade, the participants were checked carefully—each examined with a hand-held metal detector. Twelve people were detained for questioning on suspicion that they intended to disrupt and harm the march. One of them was found carrying a knife. Dozens of people also gathered at an event commemorating Shira Banki, who was murdered in the parade two years ago. The participants scattered white flowers as they marched through the location where Banki was murdered, and her parents, Uri and Mika, also participate in the events. See also, ["Man arrested for online threats against Jerusalem pride marcher" \(i24 News\)](#)

The Next War in Gaza Is Brewing. Here's How to Stop It

By Nathan Thrall and Robert Blecher, senior analysts at the International Crisis Group

- When violence erupts in Jerusalem and the West Bank, it is usually not long before the Gaza Strip follows. At Gaza's border with Israel on Friday, a Palestinian teenager was killed while protesting in solidarity with Palestinians in Jerusalem. Several days earlier, two rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza, and the next day Israeli tanks destroyed a Hamas position.
- It's an all-too-familiar echo of the events that preceded the Gaza conflict of 2014: widespread Palestinian protests in Jerusalem, Israelis murdered in the occupied territories, a sharp rise in Palestinians killed by Israeli forces, mass arrests of Hamas officials in the West Bank, and a steadily tightening noose around Gaza.
- In February, Israel's state comptroller released a report that strongly criticized the government's failure to prevent the 2014 conflict. The report highlighted a statement made by Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon days after the war began: "If Hamas's distress had been addressed a few months ago, Hamas might have avoided the current escalation."
- The population of Gaza is now suffering far more than it was before the 2014 eruption. Once again, the three parties responsible for the blockade causing that distress — Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority — are bringing the next war closer.
- The 2014 violence was precipitated by a change in Egyptian policy: Upon taking power in July 2013, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt closed his country's sole border crossing with Gaza for long periods and shut nearly all of the tunnels that had smuggled in fuel and other goods that the Gaza government taxed. Starved of revenue, the Hamas-led government could not sustain itself. In desperation, Hamas agreed to hand administrative responsibility to a Palestinian Authority government that was dominated by the rival Fatah party.
- But the new government changed little for Gazans: civil servants remained unpaid, most residents were trapped inside the territory and spent half their days without electricity. A new war — leading, as in November 2012, to a new cease-fire deal easing restrictions on Gaza — was seen as the only way out.
- Today, it is the Palestinian Authority worsening Gaza's distress. In recent months, the Authority has conditioned the supply of fuel to the Strip on the payment of a large tax; severely cut compensation to Palestinian Authority employees in Gaza; reduced payments to Israel for providing Gaza's electricity; prevented large numbers of patients from receiving treatment outside the territory; forced thousands of Gaza government employees into early retirement; barred Gaza banks from transferring payments to Egypt in order to obtain fuel for the Strip's only power plant; and threatened to cut off welfare payments to some 80,000 families.
- The result has been a humanitarian catastrophe. Gaza is on the verge of collapse. Electricity is in short supply, water is undrinkable and raw sewage is being dumped in the sea. Patients denied transfers out of Gaza have died.

- The crisis has awoken some Israeli analysts and policy makers to the increased risk of a new conflict. In late April, Giora Eiland, a national security adviser under former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, warned that the Palestinian Authority “is pushing Hamas to take the only option they have and this is to open fire on Israel and attract again the attention of the international community.” He added: “The P.A. wants to make the situation in Gaza as poor as possible in order for Fatah to succeed against Hamas. So both the people of Israel and of Gaza are going to pay the price of the P.A.’s cynical political game.”
- But the Palestinian Authority is not the only, or even primary, party to blame. The real basis of Gaza’s problems lies in Israeli and Egyptian moves to isolate Gaza, as well as in Israel’s and the international community’s decision to uphold the fiction that the Palestinian Authority controls the territory and should therefore be entitled to tax its goods and receive and administer its aid.
- For 10 years, Israel and most of the international community have sought to weaken Gaza’s rulers by pretending they don’t exist. Israel collects taxes on all the goods it sends into Gaza and transfers that money to the Palestinian Authority, knowing full well that the Authority spends most of it not on services for Gaza but on the Palestinian Authority’s former employees there, who for a decade have been paid to stay home in order to cripple the Hamas-led government.
- To compensate its own employees and cover its operating expenses, the Gaza government had relied on taxing goods that came through the Sinai smuggling tunnels. Unlike goods that enter from Israel, these did not arrive with price tags inflated by taxes that went to the Palestinian Authority. When the tunnels were almost entirely closed by Egypt in 2013, the amount of goods entering Gaza from Israel greatly increased. Gazans were now doubly taxed on many imports — first by the Palestinian Authority, before the goods entered the territory, then by the Gaza government.
- While the switch to goods from Israel put an extra burden on the people living in Gaza, it was a boon to the Palestinian Authority’s coffers. But instead of spending more on the Strip, the Authority started to spend less, hoping to bring an already weakened Hamas to its knees. Meanwhile, the international community helped uphold this unjust system, refusing to engage with the Gaza government and instead directing much of the budgetary aid that was ostensibly intended for the people of Gaza — roughly 40 percent of Palestinians in the occupied territories — to the Palestinian Authority.
- To stabilize Gaza, Egypt has begun to allow in some fuel. That is a positive first step. But much more needs to be done, above all changing the system in which the people of Gaza are taxed by a government that not only does not represent them but is actively seeking to do them harm.
- This can be achieved in three ways. First, Israel — which refuses to engage with any Hamas-led government — could transfer tax revenues on Gaza-bound goods to the people of Gaza, either through an internationally supervised trust or by using the tax revenues to pay for increased electricity. Second, Egypt could export more goods to Gaza, thereby reducing the amount taxed by Israel and increasing the amount taxed directly by Gaza’s government. Third, Hamas could allow the formation of a new administrative body in Gaza, led by a non-Hamas figure, in which case Israel and the international community could engage with it directly to improve life in Gaza and establish a long-term cease-fire.

- The objection to any of these options in Ramallah — beyond the blow to the Palestinian Authority's budget — is that they would deepen the separation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and sound the death knell for the Palestinian national movement. (The irony of the Palestinian Authority warning against division as it chokes Gaza seems to be lost in Ramallah.) Some in Gaza have a similar concern: that changes to its status could leave the territory even more vulnerable if they required it to rely on a single lifeline to the outside world through Egypt, which might act even more harshly and with greater impunity in the event of, for instance, another attack near Gaza's border in Sinai.
- But fear of potential consequences should not lead to the perpetuation of harm and the disregard of imminent threat. In the foreseeable future, a new Gaza-Israel conflict, and another after that, are much more likely than bridging the West Bank-Gaza rift. The easiest and most sustainable way to head off that even more catastrophic future is for the goods consumed by two million people in Gaza to be taxed solely by the government that serves them.

SUMMARY: To stabilize Gaza, Egypt has begun to allow in some fuel. That is a positive first step. But much more needs to be done, above all changing the system in which the people of Gaza are taxed by a government that not only does not represent them but is actively seeking to do them harm. This can be achieved in three ways. First, Israel — which refuses to engage with any Hamas-led government — could transfer tax revenues on Gaza-bound goods to the people of Gaza, either through an internationally supervised trust or by using the tax revenues to pay for increased electricity. Second, Egypt could export more goods to Gaza, thereby reducing the amount taxed by Israel and increasing the amount taxed directly by Gaza's government. Third, Hamas could allow the formation of a new administrative body in Gaza, led by a non-Hamas figure, in which case Israel and the international community could engage with it directly to improve life in Gaza and establish a long-term cease-fire.

Netanyahu: The Great Juggler of the Israeli Discourse

Netanyahu throws balls in the air and catches them, furthers initiatives and curbs them. People fall in love with promises the prime minister seems dead serious about, but then it turns out they were just another distraction. It's a way of governing, but it's not a way of getting anywhere.

By Nadav Eyal, Channel 10's chief international correspondent

- Is there anyone among the readers who believes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will hand Umm al-Fahm over to the Palestinian Authority? And who thinks the government is about to approve the death penalty for terrorists? And what about the much more contentious move of deporting the workers at Al-Jazeera's offices in Israel?
- These are three promises the prime minister made again less than a week ago, while wiping the cold sweat from his forehead following the removal of the metal detectors from the Temple Mount. Rightwing politicians and Bayit Yehudi leader Naftali Bennett launched a firm attack, and Netanyahu didn't exactly demonstrate political composure. The spins came out of his office at the pace of worshippers visiting the Al-Aqsa Mosque for the Friday prayer.
- These initiatives are disputable—I believe they are loaded with empty foolishness—but there's one thing we can find a consensus about in Israeli reality: There isn't a reasonable chance that Netanyahu will keep his promises.
- Umm al-Fahm can be handed over to the Palestinian state in a permanent agreement, which is nowhere in sight; transferring the land won't revoke its residents' citizenship in any event, and there is nothing in the Israeli government system which makes it possible to revoke the citizenship of tens of thousands of people. A death penalty exists in military laws and is a dead letter, and security officials consistently recommend leaving it that way. And as for Al-Jazeera, Israel is anyway using that network to convey its messages in the Arab world.
- But this isn't really a relevant discussion. Netanyahu is making promises, because that's what he's been doing for many years. There's always a series of balls in the air, alternately thrown by the great juggler of the Israeli discourse. Sometimes it's the Nationality Bill, sometimes open skies in the Israeli media, and now the death penalty and giving away Umm al-Fahm.
- Netanyahu throws the balls and catches them, furthers the initiatives and curbs them, builds the dam and then allows an intentional spillover. These are fantasies of a large political camp—the largest one—which Netanyahu is nurturing and painting in saccharine colors. People fall in love with the initiatives the prime minister seems dead serious about, and then it turns out they were just another ball in the air, another distraction. Caving at the Temple Mount? Look, a bird!
- Our political discourse has become increasingly contaminated with false statements. Usually, it's the opposition which makes empty promises. In the opposition's case, after all, talk is cheap. The power isn't in its hands in any event. But in the current government, the tables have turned, and the dreams are being sold by the government and the coalition. One can feel the frustration among writers and supporters in the Israeli right, who simply fail to understand why all the promises aren't being fulfilled. The right is in power, after all, yet reality isn't changing in a way that matches the generously scattered fantasies.

- **We know the answer. Many politicians don't mean it. They come up with an initiative but will easily admit, in a pleasant and private talk in the Knesset cafeteria, that it's hopeless. As far as they're concerned, it's "part of the game." The right's base shouts loudly on social media, so it can be satisfied with some proposal that evokes anger and criticism in the media, and the mission has been accomplished. The legend about the politicians who calls and asks the newspaper to write against him is no legend, it's reality.**
- **We've gotten so used to this state of affairs, that there are people who believe it's healthy politics. In some sense, US President Donald Trump's world is moving towards this reality. Almost all his big election promises have been revealed as a totally empty tool, filled with spins. We have a reason to be proud: Our political discourse preceded the American reality by nearly an entire generation. Now, they're degenerating too.**
- **Is it possible to keep governing this way, when all the balls are in the air, and the courts, the political rivals or the media are always blamed for the fact that the political platform isn't really implemented? Absolutely. The truth is that you can reach one term that way, and then another term, and even break David Ben-Gurion's record. But what's the goal of this government? What legacy will it leave behind? The answer is bonfires of frustration and enmity. In the Left, because of proposals threatening the its basic values; and in the Right, because these proposals are rarely implemented and are blocked by allegedly hidden forces. That's a way of governing, but it's not a way of getting anywhere.**

SUMMARY: Our political discourse has become increasingly contaminated with false statements. Usually, it's the opposition which makes empty promises. In the opposition's case, after all, talk is cheap. The power isn't in its hands in any event. But in the current government, the tables have turned, and the dreams are being sold by the government and the coalition. One can feel the frustration among writers and supporters in the Israeli right, who simply fail to understand why all the promises aren't being fulfilled. The right is in power, after all, yet reality isn't changing in a way that matches the generously scattered fantasies. We know the answer. Many politicians don't mean it. They come up with an initiative but will easily admit, in a pleasant and private talk in the Knesset cafeteria, that it's hopeless. As far as they're concerned, it's "part of the game." The right's base shouts loudly on social media, so it can be satisfied with some proposal that evokes anger and criticism in the media, and the mission has been accomplished. The legend about the politicians who calls and asks the newspaper to write against him is no legend, it's reality.