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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, August 9*

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- **Israel Strikes Hamas Positions in Gaza After Rocket Attack**
- **Rivlin to Meet Merkel in Berlin to Discuss German-Israeli Relations**
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– By Dr. Ido Zelkowitz, Lecturer and Research Fellow, University of Haifa

# News Excerpts

August 9, 2017

## Jerusalem Post

### **Thousands Expected at Mass Rally for Beleaguered Netanyahu**

More than 3,000 people are expected to attend a mass rally on Wednesday night at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds in support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu amid his efforts to deal with multiple criminal investigations. Buses will shuttle people from Haifa, Netanya, Beersheba, Ashkelon and Ashdod. The Likud will be spending between NIS 300,000 and NIS 500,000 on the rally, sparing no expense to put on a show of force. The event was moved to a larger hall at the Fairgrounds to accommodate the expected crowd. It will be addressed by Netanyahu and coalition chairman David Bitan under the banner "We love Netanyahu and maintain democracy."

See also, ["Coalition Chairman Warns Against Undermining Netanyahu" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## NRG

### **Pal. Demand Full Control of Area A, Supervision of Crossings**

Mohammed al-Habash, PA Chairman Abu Mazen's adviser, announced the Palestinian leadership's terms for restoring security coordination with Israel last night. Al Habash said there had been attempts by Israel to reach agreement with PA officials on resuming coordination, halted due to the Temple Mount crisis a few weeks ago. Al Habash said the PA did not rule out a return to talks if Israel met certain terms. Among them, the PA is demanding no Israeli entry into Area A which is under full Palestinian control. PA officials are furious over the situation today in which in addition to security coordination, Israelis freely enter Palestinian territories using undercover soldiers. Another term is free Palestinian movement and PA control over the crossings from Area A to Areas B and C.

See also, ["Abbas Issues New Demands of Israel, But Is Quietly Still Arresting Terror Suspects" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Illegal Homes Going Up in Settlement Next to Lieberman Aide**

A dozen homes are being built illegally next to the home of the defense minister Avigdor Lieberman's adviser on settlement affairs in the WB settlement of Eli. Construction on homes that will more than double the size of the illegal outpost of Hayovel, technically part of Eli in the central WB, has been going on for several months, but the homes have never been authorized by the Defense Ministry. The Civil Administration — the Defense Ministry body responsible for authorizing WB construction — confirmed in a statement that the building currently lacks necessary permits and that "stop-work orders had been issued months ago when the construction was first spotted."

## Ynet News

### **Israel Strikes Hamas Positions in Gaza After Rocket Attack**

The Israeli military says it carried out airstrikes against two Hamas positions in Gaza overnight Tuesday in response to a rocket fired from the strip which landed in open territory in the Hof Ashkelon Regional Council. Ayman Sahbani, an emergency director at Gaza's Shifa hospital, says 3 Palestinians were wounded, including a 26-year-old man who was in serious condition after being struck in the head by shrapnel.

## **Rivlin to Meet Merkel in Berlin to Discuss German-Israeli Ties**

President Reuven Rivlin will meet on Thursday, September 7 with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin. The meeting has not yet been officially announced, but it will be held against the backdrop of Germany's decision to suspend its signing of the submarine deal due to the investigations in Case 3,000, which raises heavy suspicions of corruption in the deal between Israel and the German corporation Thyssenkrupp. The president's meeting with Merkel will be held against the backdrop of the tension in the relationship between Germany and Israel. Just this past February, Germany announced the cancellation of an inter-governmental meeting in Jerusalem. In April 2017, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu canceled his meeting with the German foreign minister in protest of the latter's meeting with Breaking the Silence, and if that were not enough, Germany also announced the suspension of a UAV deal with Israel.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Held Secret Talks w/Russia, US Over Cease-fire in Syria**

Israel, the United States and Russia held a series of secret meetings early last month in Amman and in a European capital regarding the cease-fire in southern Syria. The parties focused in part on the establishment of "safe zones" on the Syrian-Israeli and Syrian-Jordanian borders, according to Israeli officials and Western diplomats. At these meetings, which were held a few days before Russia and the United States announced the cease-fire agreement, Israel presented numerous objections to the deal, saying the two powers were not paying enough attention to the importance of removing Iranian forces from Syria.

See also, ["Nikki Haley Urges UN Force in Lebanon to Prevent Hezbollah Weapons" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Egypt Clears the Way for Imports of Israeli Natural Gas**

After years of delays and uncertainty, Egypt could be on its way to becoming a major market for Israeli natural gas exports after President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi signed legislation on Tuesday forming a gas regulatory authority and permitting private sector companies to import gas. Egypt, along with Turkey, is one of two regional markets that could buy large quantities of gas from Israel's Tamar and Leviathan reservoirs, but none of the deals reached in the past have panned out.

Times of Israel

## **Iran's Rouhani Names Two Female Vice Presidents**

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani appointed two female vice presidents on Wednesday, a day after coming under fire from reformists for nominating no women ministers. Massoomeh Ebtekar, known internationally for her role as spokesperson during the 1980 US embassy hostage crisis, was named as vice president in charge of women's affairs, having previously run the environment brief in Rouhani's office. Laya Joneydi was appointed as the vice president for legal affairs, while another woman, Shahindokht Mowlaverdi, was named as a special adviser for citizens' rights. Rouhani, who had three female vice presidents during his previous term, still has several more deputy positions to fill and it was unclear if any would go to women.

See also, ["All Male Iran Minister List Draws Ire After Rouhani Gender Vow" \(Bloomberg\)](#)

## **As Investigations Intensify, Israel Imagines Life After Netanyahu**

By Isabel Kershner

- **JERUSALEM** — A black curtain went up a few months ago near Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's official residence on Jerusalem's leafy Balfour Street. It screened pesky protesters from Mr. Netanyahu's view — and prevented the public from seeing lawyers and detectives come and go as criminal investigations of the prime minister intensified. Now, with one of Mr. Netanyahu's closest former aides having turned state's witness in two cases involving suspicions of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, Israelis across the political spectrum are trying on the idea of the curtain coming down on Mr. Netanyahu's durable political career.
- For the past eight years, Mr. Netanyahu has dominated the Israeli political scene and become nearly synonymous with the state on the world stage. Long called "the magician" for his survival skills, he has quashed rivals from right and left despite never enjoying particular popularity in the street. Yet Mr. Netanyahu, the longest-serving prime minister since Israel's first, David Ben-Gurion, suddenly appears not so invincible after all.
- "All the alliances, discussions and thinking about the day after have taken on much more significance," said Yoaz Hendel, the chairman of the Institute for Zionist Strategies, a right-leaning research group, and a former spokesman for Mr. Netanyahu. "For the first time, people are thinking that Netanyahu won't be the prime minister next time around, whether elections take place in a few months' time or a year and a half."
- Mr. Netanyahu has fought off swirling scandals for much of his public life, but experts say that Friday's signing of a state's witness agreement by Ari Harow, who served as Mr. Netanyahu's chief of staff and directed his 2015 re-election campaign, could be a game changer. Mr. Harow was offered a light sentence in an unrelated matter in return for information about Mr. Netanyahu in what the police have called Case 1000 and Case 2000. In Case 1000, investigators are looking at whether Mr. Netanyahu offered favors in return for gifts of expensive cigars, pink Champagne and other goods from wealthy friends, including Arnon Milchan, the Israeli Hollywood producer.
- Case 2000 involves back-room dealings with a local newspaper magnate. Mr. Netanyahu was recorded negotiating with the publisher of Yedioth Ahronoth for favorable coverage in exchange for curtailing the circulation of a free competitor, Israel Hayom. The police came across recordings of Mr. Netanyahu's talks with the newspaper while searching Mr. Harow's belongings, the Israeli news media has reported. Mr. Hendel, who worked in the prime minister's office during the first of Mr. Harow's two stints there, said Mr. Harow worked in the "very broad, gray area" between Mr. Netanyahu's personal, familial and national obligations. He added, "Someone like Ari would see it all."
- Mr. Netanyahu has vehemently denied any wrongdoing, and on Tuesday he made a statement about terrorism after a hospital visit to the victim of a recent attack, with no mention of the criminal investigations. He and his office have repeatedly lashed out at the news media and his critics, asserting that the focus on the investigations is meant to topple him under the weight of baseless accusations, rather than at the ballot box.

- There is, as yet, no clear contender to replace Mr. Netanyahu, who is serving his third consecutive term and fourth over all. An Israel without Mr. Netanyahu at the helm would, in any case, be an unfamiliar place for its inhabitants, the Middle East and the world.
- Mr. Netanyahu has had abrasive relationships with some international leaders, including President Barack Obama, particularly over his championing of settlement expansion and his efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear program. President Trump's victory came as a great relief to Mr. Netanyahu and his coalition — the most right wing in Israel's history — alleviating the pressure from Washington.
- In May, Mr. Trump paid a bonding visit to Israel. But Mr. Netanyahu has not been given totally free rein on settlement building, and Mr. Trump's election promise of moving the United States Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv remains unfulfilled.
- Mr. Netanyahu has also built strong alliances with other leaders, including President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and has expanded Israel's global reach based on its prowess in intelligence, counterterrorism and technology.
- The Israeli leader has also become a fixture at the annual meetings of the United Nations General Assembly, showcasing a combative, theatrical style of diplomacy. A peak — or nadir, depending on the perspective — of his leadership was his March 2015 speech against the Iran nuclear deal in front of a joint meeting of Congress.
- His tenure has been one of impasse in the Palestinian peace process. But inside Israel, he is credited with having maintained stability as Arab neighbors descended into chaos. A departure would leave Israel, its allies and its enemies in uncharted terrain.
- It could take many months for Mr. Harow's information to be substantiated. Any police recommendation for an indictment would have to be approved by the state prosecutor and attorney general; there is no precedent in Israel for a sitting prime minister to be charged.
- But one or more of Mr. Netanyahu's coalition partners may bolt before that to protect their own reputations. There are already some signs of unease from within his own Likud Party.
- On Friday, when Mr. Harow signed his deal, the anchor of Israeli public radio's noon news program said that the only one of Likud's 30 Parliament members willing to discuss the case was David Amsalem, a novice elected in 2015.
- Since then, the coalition whip has threatened the others that they would pay a price in party primaries if they kept silent. One by one, Likud ministers have expressed support, many in Facebook posts. A political cartoon published Tuesday showed the whip holding a gun to the heads of several ministers while ordering, "Again — with feeling!"
- A Likud rally in support of Mr. Netanyahu is scheduled for Wednesday evening.
- Late Monday, Israeli news outlets reported that the attorney general would soon announce charges against Mr. Netanyahu's wife, Sara, on accusations that public funds were misused in the family residences. And, responding to a journalist's freedom of information request, Israel's Supreme Court has given Mr. Netanyahu two weeks to disclose the call logs of his conversations with executives of Israel Hayom, a newspaper widely considered to have been established to support him.

- Yehuda Ben Meir, an expert in national security and public opinion at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, said that recent political polls showed “a degree of erosion in the support” for Mr. Netanyahu, but that “there are no indicators at this moment that his position has been dealt a fatal blow.” Mr. Netanyahu’s durability can be attributed at least in part to the fractured field of potential rivals. Naftali Bennett, leader of the far right Jewish Home party, and Avigdor Lieberman, of the nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu, would like to contend for the premiership but have relatively small parties that make it difficult.
- The Likud has several people jostling for the top spot, including Yisrael Katz, the minister of transportation and intelligence affairs; Gilad Erdan, the minister of public security; and Gideon Saar, a former education minister who recently returned to public life. Support for Yair Lapid, a former finance minister, and his centrist Yesh Atid party has grown over the past year. Avi Gabbay has injected new spirit into the Labor Party after being elected its chairman last month, replacing Isaac Herzog. “There are no two ways about it,” Mr. Gabbay wrote in a recent Facebook post. “There is only being for or against the corruption and the rot.”
- Dahlia Scheindlin, a political analyst, said all the chatter was not so different from what she heard before the election two years ago. “Then, too, people were complaining that Bibi had been in for too long, that it was time for change,” she said, referring to Mr. Netanyahu by his nickname. “But in the same breath they would say, ‘But there’s nobody else.’ It’s the same thing now.”
- Gadi Wolfsfeld, a professor of political communications at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, said, however, “At some point, people in his party are going to say enough is enough.” The notion that there is nobody to replace Mr. Netanyahu holds “until it happens,” Professor Wolfsfeld said. “They said nobody could replace Ben-Gurion.”

*Isabel Kershner is an Israel and Middle East correspondent at the New York Times.*

**Summary:**

***For the past eight years, Mr. Netanyahu has dominated the Israeli political scene and become nearly synonymous with the state on the world stage. Long called “the magician” for his survival skills, he has quashed rivals from right and left despite never enjoying particular popularity in the street. Yet Mr. Netanyahu, the longest-serving prime minister since Israel’s first, David Ben-Gurion, suddenly appears not so invincible after all.***

## **Sanwar, Dahlan: An Egyptian-Brokered Alliance Against Abbas**

*The renewed relationship between the Hamas leader and the former Fatah strongman, who grew up together in the Khan Younis refugee camp, proves that the key for creating change in the Palestinian society is based on strengthening the regional-geographical connection.*

By Dr. Ido Zelkowitz

- The intra-Palestinian split, which has been going on for about a decade now, points to the Palestinian leadership's weakness and creates political dynamics of violence and uncertainty, affecting the nature of the relationship with Israel as well.
- From a historical perspective, this is one of the worst moments in the history of the Palestinian national movement. The political-geographical split is making it difficult for the PLO leadership to navigate through the diplomatic route toward the two-states-for-two-people solution, as it committed to in the Oslo Agreements. The alternative Hamas tried to present in the form of jihad collapsed too, leading to a serious humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.
- The crisis the two leaderships—the PA and Hamas—are experiencing obligates them to find solutions that could give the young generation a sense of hope. Naturally, the weakness of the national system and party affiliation makes it possible to create political alliances based on alternative identities. So far, it seems the key for creating change in Palestinian society can be found in the creation of communal alliances around strengthening the regional-geographical connection while bolstering the national connection as well.
- That's the background for the recent Egyptian-brokered unnatural affair between Mohammad Dahlan, who was expelled from Fatah in 2011 but sees himself as Mahmoud Abbas's future successor, and Hamas's newly elected leader, Yahya Sanwar. Dahlan, the former head of the Palestinian Preventive Security Force, was described by the Hamas leadership on the eve of the military takeover of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007 as a corrupt person damaging the values of Islam.
- From refugee camp to political meetings in Cairo
- The parties have surprisingly moved closer not just thanks to a political meeting of interests, but due to traditional cultural identity components, led by the interpersonal connection and the local identity. Sanwar and Dahlan grew up together in the Khan Younis refugee camp, share the refugee mindset and the same background. In addition, there is no history of bad blood between them. Dahlan and Sanwar's ways parted in the beginning of the first intifada. Since then, until their recent meeting in Cairo, there has been no animosity between the two, but perhaps yearning.
- The personal acquaintance and the local identity shared by Dahlan and Sanwar is seen as an asset by Egypt too, which is interested in severing the ties between Hamas's military wing and Islamist organizations in the Sinai Peninsula.

- The creation of an economic-political dependence system, which passes through Dahlan and is backed by Sanwar, will make it possible for Egypt to achieve these goals. Thus, the local Gazan identity, which receives a lot of legitimization from Egypt, allows Hamas to find a formula that would make its political survival possible.
- For Dahlan, the local identity could serve as a renewed stepping stone to a national leadership position. The purpose of the alliance between Dahlan and Hamas is to lead joint moves that would create a better day-to-day life for the strip's residents, who are suffering from a shortage of electricity, water and basic civilian infrastructure. Dahlan and the donation money from the Gulf are supposed to fill the void left behind by Abbas. The Palestinian president chose to withdraw funds to harm the Gaza Strip's bureaucratic systems and civilian infrastructure in an attempt to subdue Hamas, following Sanwar's efforts to create an alternative government that would neutralize the influence of the Palestinian Authority's government offices in the Gaza Strip.
- Abbas refusing to reconcile
- Beyond the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, the internal Fatah battle between Abbas and Dahlan is personal and filled with bad blood. In the past, Abbas rejected Egyptian attempts to reconcile between the parties, and he is determined to block Dahlan's way back into Fatah and prevent him from reaching an influential position in the future.
- As part of his attempts to try to thwart Dahlan's return to a political position of power, Abbas initiated last week a meeting with the Hamas leadership in the West Bank, led by Nasser al-Din al-Shaer. The meeting between the Fatah and Hamas leaderships in the West Bank focused on the efforts to reach an intra-Palestinian reconciliation and a solution to the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. Abbas, like Dahlan and Sanwar, is using communal-regional politics to advance issues of national importance and shape a political agenda.
- From the West Bank, the message reached the Gaza Strip. One of the Hamas leaders, Salah al-Bardawil, in response called for a return to the reconciliation path. He said Hamas was willing to cancel the alternative government workers' council in exchange for setting a general election date and implementing a reform in the PLO's structure.
- Fatah, Hamas and Dahlan are using the local identity to make some gains in the Palestinian national political arena. Local, clan and tribal identity components are usually seen as an obstacle to the national pattern of action. In the Palestinian case, the communal-regional politics is being painted in national and Islamic colors and serving as a future engine of growth, which will have a future key role in the inheritance battles in the post-Abbas era.

*Dr. Ido Zerkovitz, an expert on Palestinian society and politics, is a lecturer at the Department of Middle Eastern History, a research fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at Haifa University and a member of Mitvim—the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies. His recent books are "The Fatah Movement: Islam Nationalism and Armed Struggle Politics," published by Resling in 2012, and "Students and Resistance in Palestine: Books, Guns and Politics," published soon by Routledge in 2015.*



**Summary:**

***The personal acquaintance and the local identity shared by Dahlan and Sanwar is seen as an asset by Egypt too, which is interested in severing the ties between Hamas's military wing and Islamist organizations in the Sinai Peninsula. The creation of an economic-political dependence system, which passes through Dahlan and is backed by Sanwar, will make it possible for Egypt to achieve these goals. Thus, the local Gazan identity, which receives a lot of legitimization from Egypt, allows Hamas to find a formula that would make its political survival possible.***