



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, January 4

Headlines:

- **Report: U.S Gave Israel Has Green Light to Assassinate Iranian General**
- **France: Israeli, US Rhetoric on Iran ‘Would Lead Us to War’**
- **Ex Mossad Official: Iran Protest Means Deal Didn’t Fix Economy**
- **Death Bill Passes Preliminary Reading with PM’s Support**
- **IDF Opens Investigation into Palestinian Double Amputee’s Death**
- **Palestinian Government: Gaza Power Supply to be Restored**
- **Poll: Most Jewish Israelis Think Trump is Good for Israel**
- **Modi’in Passes Bylaws to Circumvent Supermarket Bill**

Commentary:

- **AI Monitor: “Why Netanyahu Needs Votes of Israelis Living Abroad”**
– By Danny Zaken, journalist of Kol Israel
- **Washington Post: “Trump is Right to tell Iran the World is Watching”**
– By David Ignatius, foreign affairs contributor

News Excerpts

January 4, 2018

Ha'aretz

U.S.: Israel Has Green Light to Assassinate Iranian General

Washington gave Israel a green light to assassinate Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, the overseas arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Jarida reported on Monday. Al-Jarida, which in recent years had broken exclusive stories from Israel, quoted a source in Jerusalem as saying that "there is an American-Israeli agreement" that Soleimani is a "threat to the two countries' interests in the region." It is generally assumed in the Arab world that the paper is used as an Israeli platform for conveying messages to other countries in the Middle East. The agreement between Israel and US comes three years after Washington thwarted an Israeli attempt to kill the general. See also, ["Kuwaiti report: US gives Israel go-ahead to kill powerful Iranian general" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

France: Israeli, US Rhetoric on Iran 'Would Lead Us to War'

French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday criticized Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia for encouraging the Iranian anti-regime protests, saying the three countries could "lead us to war." "The official line pursued by the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, who are our allies in many ways, is almost one that would lead us to war," Macron said. Calling for dialogue with the Islamic Republic, Macron said France wanted to avoid "surreptitiously rebuilding an 'axis of evil,'" a reference to countries singled out by former US president George W. Bush including Iran, North Korea, and Iraq. See also, ["Macron urges dialogue with Iran, rebukes U.S., Israel for bellicose comments" \(Reuters\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Ex Official: Iran Protest Means Deal Didn't Fix Economy

The current Iran protests confirm that the 2015 nuclear deal did not fix Iran's embattled economy as Tehran had hoped and as Israel had feared, ex-senior Mossad official Sima Shine wrote in an analysis on Wednesday. Shine, now a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, told *The Jerusalem Post* that while her analysis reviewed a wide range of economic issues confronting the Islamic Republic, the nuclear deal economic relief performing below Iranian expectations had certainly contributed to the protests. Two years after nuclear sanctions were removed thanks to Iran's deal with the West, "the hopes of President [Hassan] Rouhani that the deal would lead improving Iranian economy to new highs have not transpired," she wrote.

i24 News

Death Bill Passes Preliminary Reading with PM's Support

Israel's parliament on Wednesday gave preliminary approval to a bill making it easier for "terrorists" to be sentenced to death after a push by right-wing politicians for the deeply controversial legislation. The bill, approved 52-49, would ease the requirements military courts must meet to sentence those convicted of "terrorist" crimes to death. Israel has not carried out any executions since 1962, when Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann was sentenced to death in a trial that inspired Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil". See also, ["Terrorist death penalty bill passes early Knesset vote" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

IDF Opens Investigation into Pal' Double Amputee's Death

The army on Thursday morning announced that the Military Police was launching a criminal investigation into the death of a disabled Palestinian man during a riot along the Gaza security fence on December 15, after an earlier IDF probe failed to determine how he had died. Since Ibrahim Abu Thurayeh's death, Palestinian officials have been insisting that the man, a wheelchair-bound double amputee, was killed by Israeli sniper fire during a protest against US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The death of Abu Thurayeh sparked angry denunciations by Palestinians and others, who said he could not have presented a serious threat during the protest. His image emerged as an international symbol of resistance to Trump's December 6 Jerusalem declaration, which the Palestinians see as siding with Israel. See also, ["Israeli army to reopen probe into Gaza paraplegic's death" \(AP\)](#)

AP

Palestinian Government: Gaza Power Supply to be Restored

The Palestinian government in the West Bank says it will restore the supply of electricity to the Gaza Strip after it asked Israel to cut it off last summer. Israel, the main provider of power to Gaza, cut supplies in June at the request of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who was trying to pressure Hamas. The Islamic militant group seized power in Gaza in 2007 after driving Abbas' forces out. Palestinian official Hussein al-Sheikh said Wednesday that his committee, which liaises with Israel, has requested that the power be restored. The cutoff left the coastal territory with just four hours of power a day, and blackouts have worsened this winter. Hamas called the power cuts collective punishment. See also, ["Israel to Resume Sale of Electricity to Gaza After 6-month Hiatus" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Poll: Most Jewish Israelis think Trump is Good for Israel

While the US declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel continues to cause diplomatic disputes, a poll released Wednesday revealed that the majority of Jewish Israelis believe the announcement was good for Israel and that President Donald Trump understands Israel's interests. The monthly Peace Index of the Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University found that 65% of Jewish Israelis believe Trump's December announcement was in Israel's best interest, while two-thirds of Arab-Israeli respondents think it was not. Furthermore, 64% of Jews think that the recent UN resolution rejecting the US declaration, is not likely to cause harm to Israel's interests. A majority, though smaller (59%), also thinks Trump understands Israel's interests to a very great or moderately great extent. See also, ["Is President Trump's public declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel in Israel's best interest?" \(IDI\)](#)

Ynet News

Modi'in Passes Bylaws to Circumvent Supermarket Bill

The Modi'in city council amended a municipal bylaw Wednesday evening that will allow for the operation of limited commerce on Shabbat, making it the third city to attempt to outmaneuver national legislation that would grant the interior minister the authority to cancel such bylaws. Led thus far by [Rishon LeZion](#) and [Givatayim](#), Modi'in joined the scramble to ensure that some shops remain open on the weekend despite the fact that the controversial supermarket bill is scheduled to be brought before the Knesset next week.

Why Netanyahu Needs Votes of Israelis Living Abroad

By Danny Zaken, journalist of Kol Israel

- The coalition agreements signed by the Likud Party with its government partners in May 2015 include a clause saying that the government will formulate a legislative proposal enabling Israelis who are abroad on Knesset election day to vote. Indeed, previous coalition agreements between the Likud and its partners, which included similar stipulations, amounted to little in past years. But according to a senior Likud source who spoke with AI-Monitor, in the remaining two years of this government's term, a real effort will be made to advance this initiative.
- The proposed legislation is the baby of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been seeking to promote it for over a decade, so far unsuccessfully. It would enable every registered Israeli voter who is out of the country on election day to cast a ballot at an official Israeli mission abroad. Then-Likud Knesset member Moshe Arens submitted the first version of the bill to the Knesset in 2001, but it did not pass.
- The Likud supports the idea in light of surveys among Israelis living in the United States, which indicate that the right wing might pick up one or two additional Knesset seats from absentee constituents. In 2015, a senior Likud minister told Haaretz that the initiative was also designed to weaken the Arab parties, given that the proportion of Arab Israeli citizens living abroad is smaller than their 20% share of the population in Israel.
- Estimates made in 2010 put the number of Israelis residing abroad at about 540,000. Experts are divided on the question of their voting preferences, and whether they would even show up to vote. Most experts support the idea of absentee voting, allowed by many countries. According to an analysis by AI-Monitor columnist Akiva Eldar, judging by voting patterns among well-to-do Israelis, and given the relatively high socio-economic standing of Israelis living overseas, the Likud cannot count on absentee balloting giving them an advantage.
- According to estimates by sources at the Israeli Embassy in Washington and by various groups of Israelis active in the United States, some 600,000 Israelis currently live in the United States. This includes children born to Israelis who immigrated to the United States. Out of these 600,000, some 500,000 would be eligible voters — a number constituting more than 10% of the 4.2 million eligible voters registered in Israel in 2015. Nonetheless, past discussion about such a law stipulated that the right to vote would be limited to Israelis living abroad for a set time period of three or five years, significantly reducing the number of eligible voters.
- The Israel Democracy Institute issued a position paper last year supporting the bid, but suggested limiting the right to vote to Israelis whose stay abroad is limited and who consider Israel their primary residence and center of life. Efforts by the current government to promote the law began with the formation of a team headed by Tourism Minister Yariv Levin, followed by a broad-based initiative supported by Knesset members from the ruling coalition and also from the opposition. This group is led by Likud lawmakers Sharren Haskel, together with David Bitan and Amir Ohana; Eitan Cabel, Stav Shaffir and Itzik Shmuli of the opposition Zionist Camp; Eli Cohen of the center-right (coalition) Kulanu Party; and Yoav Ben-Tzur of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party.

- The current proposal would allow voting by any registered Israeli who is abroad on election day and who picked up their voting form 12 months before the scheduled elections. In other words, one visit to Israel in the year preceding the elections would suffice to determine eligibility. All previous efforts to push through absentee voting have failed. Levin's office told Al-Monitor that the two ultra-Orthodox coalition parties — Shas and Yahadut HaTorah — are the ones preventing progress of the legislation. Shas declined to comment on this claim, but a senior party source told Al-Monitor that such an initiative could hurt the party. "We're not interested," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.
- The bill's sponsors, however, are undeterred. The Likud is expected to try and bring the bill to a vote in 2018. A top Likud source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that "if Shas and Yahadut HaTorah are demanding that we implement coalition agreements on issues concerning religion and state, they had better stop undermining a coalition clause that's important to the prime minister."
- Views are mixed among the opposition and left-wing parties. Some Zionist Camp Knesset members support the bid; others, like former Labor Chair Shelly Yachimovich and Zionist Camp co-leader Tzipi Livni, oppose it. One of the arguments cited by left-wing opponents of the law is concern about meddling by Republican donor and gambling mogul Sheldon Adelson, until recently Netanyahu's Jewish-American patron. Adelson recently took over the sponsorship of the Israeli American Council (IAC), an organization dedicated to strengthening ties between Israelis living in the United State and the State of Israel. Several years ago, Adelson joined the IAC's main patron, Democratic Party billionaire donor Haim Saban, who has since pulled out of involvement with the group.
- J-Street, the liberal, pro-Israel American lobbying group, believes Adelson is guiding IAC activity in a right-wing political direction in a bid to influence the Israeli community in the United States. The organization pointed to a statement issued by the council last week applauding the US veto of the UN Security Council resolution rejecting President Donald Trump's Dec. 6 recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
- Shoham Nicolet, co-founder and CEO of the council, does not deny involvement in American politics as long as it favors Israel. The council acts in accordance with Israeli policy without interfering in its domestic politics, and helps it in the United States with every tool at its disposal, he told Al-Monitor. Among other activities it cites is mobilizing support for laws and regulations against the anti-Israel boycott (BDS) movement, such as those adopted in Nevada, Massachusetts and California.
- The IAC also has a lobbying arm, IAC for Action, operating vis-a-vis governors and in Congress. "We're not the antithesis of J-Street," Nicolet said. "We invite representatives of the [Israeli] political left and right to our events." He noted that Knesset member Isaac Herzog, at the time leader of the left-leaning Labor Party, was a keynote speaker at the IAC's annual conference.
- When asked whether Adelson or his wife, Miriam Adelson, were involved in the contents generated by the IAC for its Israeli membership in the United States, Nicolet replied, "We have never received any guidance on one type of content or another. What interests the council and the Adelsons is the connection of Israelis, regardless of their political views, to the Jewish-Israeli community in America." He added that the IAC does not take any position on the proposed law granting voting rights to some Israeli Americans. Having said that, the fate of the

initiative, as that of all government legislation on the drawing board, will be determined by Netanyahu's political and legal timetable.

SUMMARY: The current proposal would allow voting by any registered Israeli who is abroad on election day and who picked up their voting form 12 months before the scheduled elections. In other words, one visit to Israel in the year preceding the elections would suffice to determine eligibility. All previous efforts to push through absentee voting have failed. Levin's office told Al-Monitor that the two ultra-Orthodox coalition parties — Shas and Yahadut HaTorah — are the ones preventing progress of the legislation. Shas declined to comment on this claim, but a senior party source told Al-Monitor that such an initiative could hurt the party. "We're not interested," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The bill's sponsors, however, are undeterred. The Likud is expected to try and bring the bill to a vote in 2018. A top Likud source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that "if Shas and Yahadut HaTorah are demanding that we implement coalition agreements on issues concerning religion and state, they had better stop undermining a coalition clause that's important to the prime minister."

Trump is Right to tell Iran the World is Watching

By David Ignatius, foreign affairs contributor

- Think of the Iranian uprising as a bottom-up revolt by people who feel they've been ignored by a corrupt elite. The issues and the faces in the street are very different from those of the populist movements that swept the United States and Europe in 2016, but you sense a resonance: "Make Iran Great Again" and "Iran First."
- This revolt probably won't topple the Islamic Republic, but it certainly has deepened the fault lines. It shows that Iran's revolutionary adventures in the Middle East carry a cost at home. And it puts a cocky, belligerent regime on its back foot. For unlike the 2009 Green Movement, this isn't primarily an urban, elite protest, but something potentially broader. A crackdown could backfire.
- "This is a nationwide uprising taking place all over Iran," argues Alireza Nader, a senior policy analyst at the Rand Corp. who has been monitoring the protests since they began. "The government has been taken by surprise, and the security forces have been slow to act." It's a revolt of the mostazafin, or dispossessed, Nader says, but also of the urban middle class.
- President Trump's enthusiasm for the protesters has bubbled over in his tweets. Explains a senior administration official: Dissent shows Iran has "deep structural problems" and a corrupt economic system, dominated by the Revolutionary Guard Corps, that is "unsustainable." The White House sensibly plans to work with allies to hold Iran accountable for any violence against its citizens. The senior official said: "Iran is now encountering the cost of the choices they've made. That's not going away until they make different choices."
- Like most social upheavals, this one was obvious only in hindsight. But there were hints. In April, as moderate President Hassan Rouhani was on his way to reelection, voters clearly wanted economic growth. Asked about their income levels, 54 percent of Iranians surveyed by the Toronto-based IranPoll answered either "I hardly get by" or "It is very difficult to get by." Last year, Gallup reported that Iran ranked third on its Negative Experience Index, after Iraq and South Sudan.
- Partly, this is a revolution of rising expectations. Iranians had hoped that Rouhani and the nuclear deal he championed with the West would bring new investment, jobs and the dynamic, modern life Iranians want. But this hasn't happened. Frustrated people get angry, and their rage eventually surges into the streets.
- The protesters denounce both Rouhani's reformers and the hard-liners led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. They come from Iran's equivalents of "red states" and "blue states" alike. On videos, you can see protesters taunting two of the regime's most sacred cows, Khamenei and Gen. Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force.
- As U.S. officials have tried to reconstruct events of the past week, they see a spontaneous, diffuse movement that ignited like sparks on dry tinder. The first big protest occurred Thursday in the conservative stronghold of Mashhad in eastern Iran. U.S. officials think it was initially organized by Khamenei's supporters to protest Rouhani's economic policies, but it quickly spread so that the mullahs, too, became a target.

- The next big protest came in Kermanshah, a Kurdish-dominated area along the western border. The region was rocked by a powerful earthquake in November, which killed more than 500 and wounded nearly 10,000, and protesters blamed corrupt building inspectors. Protests then spread to Ahvaz, an Arab-dominated city in the south, to Isfahan in the center and to several dozen other cities.
- The people in the streets have defied government intimidation, which had crushed the 2009 revolt. Watch their videos and you can hear the chants that echo across the country: “Death to the dictator,” “Leave Syria, think of us,” “Don’t be afraid, we stand together” and “We’ll die to get Iran back.” One clip shows a female protester calling out the men around her: “What are you waiting for? Be men. Come forward.”
- Karim Sadjadpour, a leading Iran analyst with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, summarizes the surprise explosion: “No one anticipated this. It happened in the Islamic Republic’s heartland. It reflects a feeling of utter frustration and despair toward everyone and every part of the system.”
- The world is watching. That’s the right message for Trump, and every other leader who cares about Iran’s future. Rouhani may sympathize with this revolt — these are the people who voted for him, after all — but Khamenei will want to crush it. The best gift the United States can give the Iranian people is a digital lifeline, so humanity can witness their brave struggle and encourage them to prevail.

SUMMARY: The world is watching. That’s the right message for Trump, and every other leader who cares about Iran’s future. Rouhani may sympathize with this revolt — these are the people who voted for him, after all — but Khamenei will want to crush it. The best gift the United States can give the Iranian people is a digital lifeline, so humanity can witness their brave struggle and encourage them to prevail.