



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, January 9

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News Excerpts

January 9, 2018

Ha'aretz

Bill That Bans Stores From Operating on Shabbat Passes

The Knesset has approved the third and final reading of a bill that would shut down most stores on Shabbat. The so-called Supermarkets Bill, which was advanced by Interior Minister Arye Dery of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, passed in a 58-57 vote on Tuesday morning after a two-hour delay. Under a compromise reached on Monday, convenience stores at gas stations will be permitted to remain open on the Jewish day of rest. The legislation gives the interior minister the authority to repeal municipal bylaws and in the process prevent the opening of grocery stores on Shabbat. *See also, ["Controversial bid to shutter minimarkets on Shabbat squeaks through Knesset" \(Times of Israel\)](#)*

i24 News

Report: Israeli Jets Strike Army Positions near Damascus

Syrian media reports claimed Tuesday that the Israeli air force launched strikes targeting military outposts belonging to Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad's regime forces northeast of Damascus. According to unconfirmed reports carried by outlets affiliated with Syrian rebel groups, Israeli jets fired at least four missiles from Lebanese airspace at an army base in Al-Qutaiba, east of the Syrian capital. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) did not immediately comment on the reports. Israel has acknowledged carrying out repeated air and missile strikes in Syria since the outbreak of the bloody civil war six years ago to stop arms deliveries to Hezbollah, with which it fought a devastating 2006 conflict. *See also, ["Report: IAF attacks Syrian army base in Al-Qutayfah" \(Ynet News\)](#)*

Times of Israel

Hague Criminal Court Set to Open Israel War Crimes Probe

Israel's National Security Council reportedly warned members of the Knesset's powerful Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee last week that the International Criminal Court will likely open an investigation at some point this year into the 2014 Gaza war and West Bank settlement construction. One of the slides on security threats listed a concern that, in 2018, the prosecutor of the ICC in The Hague will move from the examination phase and open investigations into 2014's Operation Protective Edge and construction in the West Bank," the report said. In addition, he reportedly warned that in the absence of peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, there is likely to be an increase in both attempts to delegitimize Israel and calls to boycott the Jewish state.

Jerusalem Post

Germany Reprimands Iran for Spying on Pro-Israel Groups

Germany's Foreign Ministry rebuked Iran's ambassador at a December ministry meeting for illicit espionage activities against pro-Israel groups, according to a Monday report on the website of the public TV outlet program Tagesschau. The report claims that Iran employed a Pakistani agent named Mustufa Haidar Syed-Naqfi to spy on Reinhold Robbe, former head of the German-Israel Friendship Society, and an Israeli-French economics professor in Paris. A Berlin court sentenced 31-year-old Pakistani citizen Syed-Naqfi in March to four years and three months in prison for working for Iran's intelligence service to spy "against Germany and another NATO member."

WH: Pence to visit Egypt, Jordan, Israel in January

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence will visit Egypt, Jordan and Israel from Jan. 20 to 23, the White House said on Monday, embarking on a tour originally planned for last month after President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Pence will hold talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Jordan's King Abdullah and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the White House said in a statement. Pence, a strong supporter of Trump's decision on Jerusalem, will also visit the city's Western Wall and give a speech at the Israeli parliament, it said. Trump's decision on Jerusalem and announcement in December that the US would start the process of moving its embassy from Tel Aviv led to uproar and protest in the region. See also, "[Pence to head to Middle East late next week](#)" (CNN)

Jerusalem Post

PM's Son Taped Trying to Cash in On Gas Deal to Pay for Strippers

Amid an ongoing debate on whether the state should pay for 24-hour security for Prime Minister Netanyahu's two grown sons, a secret tape was aired by Channel 2 on Monday of one of those sons making disparaging comments about women, and boasting that his father arranged a massive business deal for the father of one of his friends. The tape was of a conversation in a car on a Friday night in the summer of 2015 after Yair Netanyahu, 26, and two of his friends visited some Tel Aviv strip joints. One of those friends was Ori Maimon, the son of Kobi Maimon, one of the main shareholders in Isramco which owns the Tamar gas field. In the tape, Yair, Maimon and a third friend – identified as Roman Abramov – are heard joking about how much money they spent at the clubs. "My dad arranged for your dad \$20 billion, and you're fighting with me about NIS 400?" Yair is heard saying in the recording. He said that his father "arranged for your father a great deal" and fought for it in the Knesset. At one point Maimon is heard saying that if this conversation got out, it would be "hell." See also, "[Netanyahu son bragged about gas deal outside strip club, tape reveals](#)" (Guardian)

Ynet News

Likud Court Rejects Petition Against Rebellious MK

The Likud's internal court decided to reject a petition to remove MK Sharren Haskel from the party over her open opposition to the supermarkets bill. Filed by Likud Coalition Chair David Amsalem, the petition sought to dismiss Haskel due to her being a member of the Likud who serves on its behalf in the Knesset, and is therefore obligated, in accordance with the Likud constitution, to implement the movement's decisions and to promote their advancement. Likud legal adviser Avi Halevi, who made this argument in the petition, asked the court to therefore "summon (Haskel) as soon as possible before the vote on the bill in second and third readings and to order the termination of her membership in the movement." See also, "[Likud court rejects expulsion of MK Haskel](#)" (Jerusalem Post)

Times of Israel

Diaspora Leaders Urge PM not to Deport African Migrants

A group of North American Jewish leaders sent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a letter Monday urging him to rethink plans to deport tens of thousands of African refugees, offering to assist in their care. "We are asking Israel to do the right thing, the Jewish thing, to be a light unto the nations in the way we treat the strangers among us." See also, "[T'ruah Joins Jewish Organizations Urging Israel Not to Deport Asylum Seekers](#)" (Trua'h)

Trump's Peace Deal: A Gaza-Centered Palestine

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor

- On Jan. 2, US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman met with new Zionist Camp leader Avi Gabbay. It was a friendly meeting to give the two men a chance to get to know each other. There were no major revelations and just a single comic pause, when Gabbay asked about the fate of the American peace plan. The ambassador's response was unequivocal: The United States has not abandoned the idea of reaching an arrangement. One might wonder when the Americans would realize that the peace plan idea has abandoned them.
- Meanwhile, there isn't a single member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet who has any expectations about President Donald Trump's peace initiative. Instead, they share a rare consensus: It's all about nothing, and it will never amount to anything. The same sentiment prevails in Ramallah: Trump's "ultimate deal" is dead and buried. Please avoid any condolence calls.
- In Ramallah, a 10-minute drive from Jerusalem, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is all holed up on top of a tall tree. People close to him say that he's done with the United States. Matters have reached a point that his office has issued unambiguous instructions to Palestinians in any official capacity whatsoever to cut off all ties with the US Consulate in East Jerusalem. Abbas doesn't want to hear from Trump. He has finally been convinced that the president is little more than a Zionist agent who is working with Netanyahu to decimate the Palestinian people and incite the entire Middle East against them. The much-discussed book "Fire and Fury" only infuriated the Palestinians even more: "We read in it that Trump sent [White House senior adviser Jared] Kushner to consult with [Jewish-American billionaire] Sheldon Adelson before putting together his peace plan," one senior Palestinian official said disparagingly on the condition of anonymity. "And then he pretends to be an honest broker."
- The sense of euphoria among the Israeli right has reached record highs over the past few weeks. A tidal wave of new initiatives and legislation intended to bury the two-state solution is flooding the Knesset. There is the United Jerusalem law, which would require a special majority of 80 Knesset members to enact any changes to Jerusalem's municipal boundaries (in case of a diplomatic agreement), the decision by the Likud party's Central Committee to support the immediate annexation of the settlements in the West Bank, and a whole slew of similar initiatives and ideas. The purpose behind these initiatives and legislation is to establish facts on the ground by taking advantage of the Trump momentum. The prime minister is not blocking these initiatives as he did in the past. On the contrary, he is promoting them in what can only be called a free-for-all.
- Meanwhile, some of the ideas that the American team looked into are starting to leak out, explaining why Abbas beat such a hasty exit from the scene. Although they have no formal confirmation, reports about them have started to appear on Al Jazeera's English-language website and various other places. These reports refer mainly to an old plan, already raised a decade ago. Now it seems as if most of the main players in the region, including the US team, are giving this plan another look. This would involve an exchange of territories by three or more parties (perhaps even four or five). What makes it different from prior efforts is that this time, the Egyptians and Saudis are in on it.

- At the core of the idea is the creation of a major Sunni-Israel alliance, which would serve as a counterbalance to the victorious Shiite axis, which poses a threat in the north. The basic idea includes an extensive territorial exchange, in which Egypt would cede a piece of the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip. With this, Gaza's territory would extend southward along the seashore, making it three or four times larger than it currently is. This would make it possible to relieve some of the pressure in Gaza, but it would also shift the balance of power between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
- According to this plan, the center of power in the future Palestinian state would be in the Gaza Strip, expanded toward the north of Sinai, rather than the West Bank. In exchange for the expanded territories that they would receive in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians would give up territories in the West Bank, allowing Israel to annex the settlement blocs along with a generous amount of land around them, thereby maintaining some degree of territorial integrity between the various blocs. At the same time, Israel would give Egypt a narrow strip of territory along the lengthy southern border between the two countries. There is also the possibility that Saudi Arabia and Jordan would also participate in these territorial exchanges, with various ideas proposed.
- As noted, a similar plan was already proposed in Israel in the first decade of the 21st century. It was developed by Israeli geography professor Yehoshua Ben Aryeh and adopted by head of the Israeli National Security Council Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon sent a representative to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to see if the plan was even feasible. The Egyptians responded by tossing it into the dustbin of history. They refused to give up a single grain of sand from their territory in Sinai. The situation today is entirely different. Sinai constitutes a serious economic and security drain on Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime. He'd be happy to have someone relieve him of this problem, for the right price, of course. Sisi has already transferred two Egyptian islands to Saudi Arabia and survived.
- Hints that this major plan is being formulated together with the Egyptians and Saudis could be discerned in a series of leaks over the past few weeks concerning both those countries' real position concerning Trump's Dec. 6 Jerusalem declaration. Despite all the official denials, Ramallah is convinced that Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have betrayed them by giving a discreet nod to the Trump declaration.
- In one of his tweets, Trump hinted that Israel would also be expected to pay a "political price" for his declaration (tweeting that "We have taken Jerusalem, the toughest part of the negotiation, off the table, but Israel, for that, would have had to pay more.") Still, nothing came of it once the Palestinians blew up the talks. Diplomatic sources believe that Israel's anticipated concession revolved around a plan proposed by Likud Knesset member Anat Berko under which certain Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem would be transferred to the Palestinian Authority. That plan, which was described by Al-Monitor in an earlier article, is constantly being discussed and refined in secret discussions, with Netanyahu fully aware of it.
- As of now, the whole idea has been put on ice, and not because of the cold wave hitting North America either. Abbas immediately recognized the risk and took advantage of the Trump declaration to escape as fast as he could. "That's what happens when people make plans that have no basis in reality," one senior Palestinian official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "Abbas would rather die with nothing than live with such a plan."

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Yair Netanyahu's Strip Club Tape Proves Prime Minister's Barrel of Brutishness Has No Bottom

By Yossi Verter, political columnist at Ha'aretz

- Just when we thought nothing could surprise us about the Netanyahu family any more, just when we thought we could no longer bear any new revelations of corruption and greed, piggishness and vulgarity, brutishness and verbal aggression on the part of the imperial family, on Monday the recording of their eldest son's after-party pops up.
- It turns out that this barrel has no bottom. We once again discovered that this family is totally unprincipled, that something very fundamental is broken on the residential floor of the prime minister's Jerusalem home, that these people will never accept responsibility, repent their sins or ask forgiveness. They will always retreat to their default option: slinging mud at anything that moves. This is evident from the statement the family issued, which begins, incredibly, with the words, "every parent should think."
- Later Monday night the prince himself issued a response, in which actually apologized and expressed regret for the "nonsense" he had uttered. At least he did that much. He certainly didn't apologize when he posted a cartoon on his Facebook page that emitted a strong whiff of anti-Semitism. The recording disclosed on Israel Television News' main broadcast Monday night has 50 faces, each one more nauseating and more worrying than the next. There's the fact that the prime minister's son is in the habit of going to strip clubs with his friends, accompanied by bodyguards provided by the state and driven from place to place in a government car with a government driver; the disgusting conversation between the three young men in the car.
- One of the nadirs of which was when Yair, with the infinite generosity of a garden-variety pimp, offered to "set up" his friends with an ex-girlfriend as they swapped their experiences with prostitutes; and of course, the apparently close friendship between the prime minister's son and the son of gas tycoon Kobi Maimon during the very period when the media, political and economic worlds were intensively discussing the government's troubling deal with the natural gas companies, which went all the way to the Supreme Court.
- We shouldn't be shocked by his statement, "My dad set up \$20 billion for your dad, and you're fighting with me about 400 shekels [about \$115]?" This definitely isn't the smoking gun that opponents of the gas deal have been seeking. But it's certainly legitimate to wonder whether the father was unaware of the friendship between the sons, as claimed in the family's statement, and whether no forbidden messages were transmitted around the family dinner table.
- Just as it's legitimate and necessary to once again raise the question of whether party boy Yair really needs a 'round-the-clock bodyguard. Even senior government ministers in the security cabinet who belong to classified ministerial committees no longer receive 24-hour protection as they one did. Is it really necessary for the prime minister's son to drag a government bodyguard and driver and car with him when he goes out partying with friends, merely because his parents (and especially his anxious mother) insist on it?
- Obviously not. This reflects a thorough contempt for the rules and regulations that until a decade ago were considered sacred. The children of previous prime ministers received no

protection at all, yet not a hair on their heads was ever harmed, thank God. The protection provided to Yair and Avner Netanyahu is a caprice — one of many — of their mother Sara and their father Bibi, nothing more and nothing less, as attested recently by the former head of the [Shin Bet](#) security service, Yoram Cohen.

- It's too soon to predict the recording's political and electoral ramifications. After all, in Israel, anything is possible. In certain circles, it could even be viewed as continued persecution of the family. The question that clearly must be asked is whether the publication of the recording will cause Benjamin Netanyahu political damage among his base on the right. Many people who vote for Netanyahu and his [Likud](#) party are traditional or conservative, and some are certainly religious. Yet they're willing to put up with a lot without it denting their loyalty to the party and the leader. We see this both in polls and in election results.
- Nevertheless, what we heard Monday night surely increased the level of disgust with the prime minister's family, even among his most diehard fans. And that's even before we've become privy to the details of the crimes attributed to Netanyahu in the case of illicit favors he allegedly received from businessmen.

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