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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

February 13, 2018

Ha'aretz

Trump: Netanyahu's Claims of Talks on Annexing WB are 'False'

The White House denied as false claims by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday that he had spoken with the United States about a specified proposal regarding Israeli annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. "Reports that the United States discussed with Israel an annexation plan for the West Bank are false. The United States and Israel have never discussed such a proposal, and the president's focus remains squarely on his Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative," said Josh Raffel, a White House spokesman. Netanyahu had said that for some time now, he has been "maintaining a dialogue with the Americans" about "the issue of expanding Israeli sovereignty" to the settlements. [See also, "White House dismisses idea of U.S.-Israel discussing settlement annexation" \(Reuters\)](#)

i24 News

Bill to Extends Israeli Law to West Bank Universities Passes

Israel's parliament on Monday passed a law extending Israeli sovereignty to higher education institutions in the West Bank, only a day after a bill that allow Israel to annex Jewish settlements was put on hold. Education Minister Naftali Bennett, of the pro-settlement Jewish home party which proposed the legislation, declared that "discrimination against students in Judea and Samaria is over," after the bill passed its final reading, referring to the West Bank by its biblical Jewish name. The legislation is known as the "Ariel bill" because it is chiefly aimed at boosting Ariel University, in one of the West Bank's largest Israeli settlements. [See also, "Knesset applies Israeli law to Ariel University in West Bank" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Despite US Pushback, Bennet Determined to Advance annexation

Naftali Bennett, Education Minister and leader of the Bayit Yehudi party, said on Tuesday that he plans to push ahead with his plan to extend Israeli sovereignty over Jewish settlement in the West Bank, despite the apparent objection of the Trump Administration to the move. "The prime minister asked me not to raise the Sovereignty Bill [at the Ministerial Legislative Committee on Sunday] because of the security incident in the north and because of the discussions with the Americans until further notice," Bennett said in an interview with KAN Public Radio. "I agreed to hold off because of the security situation, but wanted to hear more about the situation with Washington. I maintain the right to raise it again next Sunday." [See also, "Netanyahu says in talks with US over West Bank sovereignty" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Haa'retz

Trump to Putin: 'Now Is the Time' to Forge an Israeli-Pal' Peace

U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday told his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, that "now is the time" to work toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. The two leaders spoke on the phone shortly before Putin met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. According to statements released by both the White House and the Kremlin, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was an important part of the conversation between the two leaders. In the statement, the White House said that after Trump said that now is the time to work toward an enduring peace agreement. [See also, "Putin discusses Mideast with Trump, hosts Abbas" \(i24 News\)](#)

Israeli Military Court to Try Palestinian Teen Protest Icon

Palestinian protest icon Ahed Tamimi is to go on trial before an Israeli military court for slapping and punching two Israeli soldiers in December in a case that has drawn wide criticism of Israel for prosecuting the teenager. It has also underscored what Palestinians say constitutes legitimate resistance to Israel's rule, now in its 51st year after Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem in 1967. Israel has treated Tamimi's actions as a criminal offense, indicting her on charges of assault and incitement that could potentially lead to years in prison. Tamimi's father, Bassem, told The Associated Press as he headed into the court on Tuesday that he comes "with no good expectations, because this a military court."

Ynet News

Trump Budget Funds Countries That Opposed Jerusalem Move

After repeatedly threatening to cut aid to countries that voted against the United States over its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, US President Donald Trump left foreign assistance to them untouched in his 2019 budget proposal published on Monday. Despite the threats, 128 countries voted for the December resolution, and aid to all those countries was unaffected in the \$4.4 trillion budget plan that envisions steep cuts to America's social safety net but mounting spending on the military. "If you look at our budget, it is focused on where we think the most appropriate assistance level should be based on where our security needs are," said Hari Sastry, director of the Office of US Foreign Assistance Resources.

Jerusalem Post

After Praising Arafat, Modi to Host Iran's Rouhani

Five days after visiting Ramallah and calling Yasser Arafat one of the world's greatest leaders, India's prime minister is to host one of Israel's staunchest enemies: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. According to the Iranian Mehr News Agency, Rouhani will spend three days in India on his maiden visit there as Iran's president. The visit comes just a month after Narendra Modi gave Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a royal welcome when he visited last month. Modi's welcome of Netanyahu, followed quickly by his current trip to the Palestinian Authority, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, and now his hosting of Rouhani, reflects his foreign policy of being able to deal individually, for the benefit of India, with different countries, even if they are at loggerheads.

Ynet News

Petition Against Police PM's Recommendations Rejected

The High Court of Justice rejected Monday a petition calling on Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan to instruct Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh not to include police recommendations on indictment in investigation files, including in the cases against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Justice Uri Shoham stated in his decision that the petition, filed by attorney Yossi Fuchs, "should be dismissed out of hand," as Fuchs failed not give any substantial legal reason for intervening in such a way. Earlier that week, the State Attorney's Office said the petition is destined to be rejected, clarifying that the police do not give the prosecution a "recommendation" as to whether a suspect should be prosecuted, ie, whether to indict him. See also, ["High Court rules police allowed to make recommendations in PM's cases"](#) ([Jerusalem Post](#))

As Syria and Iran Threaten Israel, America Signals Its Ally Is on Its Own

By Daniel B. Shapiro, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel

- Even before Saturday's dramatic events across the Israeli-Syrian border, there were legitimate questions about the degree of American engagement to help Israel manage the increasingly complex challenges it faces to the north. A visit to the region by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, upon which he embarked this weekend, has a chance to change that, to the benefit of both U.S. and Israeli interests.
- The U.S. focus in Syria has been to complete the defeat of ISIS in central and eastern Syria, provide support for Kurdish and Sunni allies in preventing an ISIS resurgence, and, to a degree, stemming an Iranian or Syrian-regime advance into areas formerly under ISIS control. The tools to effect these goals are limited: primarily 2,000 American troops, support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, and USAID-led stabilization efforts.
- Much less American attention has been directed at preventing the establishment of Iranian military facilities in Syria that could be used to launch attacks against Israel. An agreement intended to keep Iranian and Iranian-backed elements from approaching the Israeli border has no enforcement mechanism, and visitors to Israeli observation posts in the Golan Heights can look into Syria and see it observed in the breach.
- One reason for that lack of emphasis has been Israel's effectiveness in addressing these threats by itself. Nearly 100 times over the past five years, according to former Israeli Air Force Commander Major General (ret.) Amir Eshel, Israel has struck at targets in Syria, primarily Iranian weapons shipments destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon. In the past six months, this campaign has been more openly acknowledged and more directed at actual Iranian assets inside Syria.
- The Trump Administration's policy, much like the Obama Administration's, has been to support Israel's freedom of action to carry out such strikes. Neither Administration has deemed it desirable to engage in military action directly in such cases, and, in fairness, Israel has sought no such American role.
- Now, with yesterday's penetration of Israeli airspace by an Iranian UAV, a serious escalation, the United States needs to upgrade its involvement. Israel responded to the incursion with strikes on multiple Syrian and Iranian targets, losing an F-16 to heavy Syrian anti-aircraft fire. Thankfully, the plane went down in Israeli territory with its crew members wounded, but alive. But it was the first Israeli fighter aircraft downed in combat in decades, and the prospect that it could have gone down in Syria, and its crew captured or worse, tells us how close we were to a far more dangerous event.
- As it happens, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is about to embark on a tour of Middle East capitals. It is a perfect opportunity to stop in Israel, coordinate substantive policy and strategic messaging with the Prime Minister, and execute a joint U.S.-Israeli strategy on other stops. Many Secretaries of State have done exactly that during similar moments of crisis. But oddly, Israel does not appear on the itinerary. Tillerson's stops include Amman, Ankara, Cairo, Kuwait City,

and Beirut, but not Jerusalem. That made little sense before the Iranian incursion yesterday. It would be malpractice now. The Secretary needs to come to Israel.

- The substantive objective would be to ensure that Israel and the United States are on the same page regarding threats from Syria and Lebanon. Since the Second Lebanon War of 2006, Israel's policy has been to prepare for the next conflict with Hezbollah, which, in light of Hezbollah's massive build-up of missiles and rockets aimed at Israel, appears inevitable, but to seek to postpone that conflict as long as possible.
- But several new elements complicate that calculus. One is, as noted, Iran's increasingly aggressive push to insert weapons and personnel, both Iranian and Shia militia, at key locations in Syria to enable direct attacks on Israel. The base that the Iranian UAV flew from yesterday, which Israel struck later in the day, is one such facility.
- A second factor is the prospect that Hezbollah, under Iranian sponsorship, will establish production lines for precision-guided missiles in Lebanon. These weapons, which, in the next war, could pose a direct threat to critical Israeli targets like the Defense Ministry, airfields, and power plants, have been the primary focus of Israeli strikes on shipments from Syria to Lebanon. The prospect of a domestic production capability in Lebanon might cause Israel to recalculate whether it can afford to wait, or whether it must destroy those facilities in Lebanon sooner, potentially igniting a broader conflict.
- Third, the role of Russia as a sponsor and protector of the Assad regime and an ally of Iran complicates Israeli strategy and even operations, but also presents opportunities to engage Russia to impose restraints on Iranian behavior. Tillerson and Prime Minister Netanyahu need to try to reach agreement on the U.S. diplomatic support for Israel's ability to defend itself, chiefly by reinforcing Netanyahu's own conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Secretary would be well-advised to add one additional capital to the end of his itinerary: Moscow.
- But Tillerson can also use his regional stops to seek support from other leaders, so the Russians, who are active throughout the Middle East, hear from a chorus of voices about the importance of reining in Iranian aggression before it produces a destabilizing war that no one wants — and Russia should not want either.
- Beirut may be Tillerson's most important stop of all. Hezbollah, while a wholly-owned Iranian proxy, is also a player in Lebanese politics. As such, it is not immune from considerations about its standing with the Lebanese public, even beyond its Shia base. Some clear messages from Tillerson to his Lebanese hosts about the risks posed to Lebanon's infrastructure and population, where Hezbollah has embedded itself, if Iranian and Hezbollah threats against Israel trigger a full-scale war, could reinforce Israel's deterrence.
- In the event of war, the United States will inevitably seek to lead the diplomacy to bring it to an end after Hezbollah has been dealt a decisive blow. But there will be immense suffering on both sides before it is through.
- Players throughout the Middle East watch for symbols. President Trump's and Vice President Pence's visits to Israel conveyed strong support and friendship, and the lead White House role in managing this relationship. But the Secretary of State arriving at a moment of crisis demonstrates something else: Detailed coordination and determined vigilance by American and Israeli allies to jointly confront and deter real-time threats. And just as clearly, his absence - as

he lands in capitals all around Israel - would tell the region that against Iran in Syria, Israel is on its own.

SUMMARY: The U.S. focus in Syria has been to complete the defeat of ISIS in central and eastern Syria, provide support for Kurdish and Sunni allies in preventing an ISIS resurgence, and, to a degree, stemming an Iranian or Syrian-regime advance into areas formerly under ISIS control. The tools to effect these goals are limited: primarily 2,000 American troops, support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, and USAID-led stabilization efforts. Much less American attention has been directed at preventing the establishment of Iranian military facilities in Syria that could be used to launch attacks against Israel. An agreement intended to keep Iranian and Iranian-backed elements from approaching the Israeli border has no enforcement mechanism, and visitors to Israeli observation posts in the Golan Heights can look into Syria and see it observed in the breach.

Tillerson's Mideast Trip Was Already Daunting. Then Israel and Iran Collided

By Gardiner Harris and Margaret Coker, New York Times correspondents

- An intense military clash between Israel and Iran over the weekend presented Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson with an unexpected crisis as he headed to the Middle East on a five-nation tour that was already shaping up to be the most challenging trip of his tenure.
- Israel's cross-border strikes in Syria on Saturday — which the Israelis said were in response to an Iranian drone's penetration of its airspace from that territory — give even greater urgency to one of Mr. Tillerson's top priorities for the trip: managing the aftermath of the expected final defeat of the Islamic State in Syria. Mr. Tillerson is also facing unforeseen difficulties as he tries to rally support for the reconstruction of Iraq, an effort seen as vital to preventing the Islamic State's rebirth and curtailing Iran's expanding influence there.
- While Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had been expected to open their vast checkbooks at a conference in Kuwait on Tuesday to contribute much of the roughly \$100 billion that is needed, those two nations are now expected to pledge little for the effort, according to organizers of the meetings and regional diplomats. Tensions over an embargo of Qatar, with the United States at odds with Saudi Arabia and the emirates, have contributed to the shortfall in pledges, as has the Saudi war in Yemen, which is bleeding its military and creating a humanitarian crisis.
- The United States is expected to commit little of its own money to the effort beyond facilitating some loans, as the Trump administration has vowed to avoid nation-building. And while the World Bank and a collection of corporations and nongovernmental organizations attending the conference will offer some help, the lack of big-ticket pledges will break what Western governments had long seen as a gentleman's agreement that the United States and Europe would prosecute and pay for the war, while the Saudis and Emiratis would underwrite the peace.
- The expected failure at the Kuwait conference, while a potential embarrassment for Mr. Tillerson, represents a severe blow to the Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, whose political position remains tenuous despite his orchestration of the Islamic State's defeat in his country and successful efforts to subdue well-armed Iranian-linked militias. Of the \$100 billion that Mr. Abadi was hoping to receive, Iraq was struggling last week to get commitments of even \$5 billion, diplomats said.
- The disappointment is an enormous change from last year's euphoric trip by President Trump to the region, but it follows a pattern faced by almost every American administration of the modern era, as hope for shared solutions to the region's endemic conflicts inevitably gives way to a more discouraging reality. The Trump administration accelerated that process by upending decades of consensus American policy in the Middle East as it recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and slashed support for Palestinian refugees.
- The result is that on his stops in Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, Mr. Tillerson will either be delivering difficult messages — urging partners to follow through on promises — or trying to assuage furious allies. And while previous administrations had papered over

differences with generous promises of financial aid, Mr. Tillerson's goody bag will be all but empty.

- Still, Mr. Tillerson will face those considerable challenges newly fortified. His standing appears to have risen in the White House after a year in which his tenuous relationship with the president undermined his diplomatic efforts, as senior administration officials predicted his imminent departure and foreign leaders quietly wondered whether he actually spoke for his mercurial boss. But he still must cope with the president's intemperate remarks about other countries, and he is forgoing a visit to Jerusalem, perhaps because Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and senior adviser, is still Israel's principal American intermediary.
- Mr. Tillerson begins his official visits on Monday in Cairo, but the most difficult stop on his itinerary will be Ankara. The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has threatened to attack the Syrian city of Manbij, where American forces and their Kurdish allies are entrenched after evicting the Islamic State. Turkey views the Kurdish forces as part of a violent insurgency within Turkey. "They tell us, 'Don't come to Manbij.' We will come to Manbij to hand over these territories to their rightful owners," Mr. Erdogan said Tuesday in a speech to his party. As for American assurances that arms given to the Kurds will be used only to fight the Islamic State, "don't expect us to believe," Mr. Erdogan said. "We don't buy it."
- Turkey, a NATO ally, has allowed American forces to use Incirlik Air Base as a crucial staging ground for the air campaign over Syria. But Mr. Erdogan's creeping authoritarianism, his security detail's attack in Washington on peaceful protesters, his saber-rattling on Syria and Turkey's arrests of American citizens and State Department employees have left the relationship severely strained. For the Turks, fury at the administration's refusal to begin the process of extraditing the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who Turkey says orchestrated a 2016 coup from his self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, compounds the anger at American support for Kurdish forces. On Thursday, Serkan Golge, an American citizen and NASA scientist, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison for alleged links to Mr. Gulen, although no proof of such links was offered in court. The State Department said it was "deeply concerned" by the decision.
- Mr. Tillerson's stops in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon will not be much easier. In Jordan and Lebanon, the administration's Jerusalem decision and its cuts in refugee and Palestinian aid have been body blows to governments seen as bulwarks against the region's metastasizing chaos. Both countries have millions of refugees. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is overseeing an election next month that is devolving into farce, as Mr. Sisi has sidelined, jailed or threatened with prosecution his most potent rivals. Amid all these troubles, Mr. Tillerson has little leverage as the United States turns inward, analysts say. "This administration has no strategic vision and a very weak State Department," said Eliot A. Cohen, who served as the State Department counselor during the administration of George W. Bush.