



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, February 9

Headlines:

- **Netanyahu's People Slam Top Cop: 'Trying to Stage Coup'**
- **Judicial Officials Dismiss Police Chief's Allegations as 'Rumors'**
- **Police Yet to Decide Whether to Indict Milchan**
- **U.S. Envoy Tells Lebanon Israel Does Not Want Escalation**
- **PM Blocks Settlement Annexation Bill from Coming to Vote**
- **Pal' Envoy: Collective Approach Required for Peace Process**
- **Modi to Become First Indian PM to Visit West Bank**
- **Meretz MKs in Africa to 'Expose' State's Deportation Plan**

Commentary:

- **Ynet News: "Netanyahu's Big and Small Troubles"**
 - By Moran Azulay, political correspondent at Ynet News
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "This Has to be Investigated"**
 - By Ben Dror Yemini, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

News Excerpts

February 9, 2018

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu's People Slam Top Cop: 'Trying to Stage Coup'

The head of the government coalition, MK David Amsalem (Likud), called Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh "smug" following Alsheikh's comments that powerful forces had collected material about police investigators working on the Netanyahu files. "The target has been marked," said Amsalem, in comments to Uvda, Channel 2's current affairs program. His remarks come days before Israeli police are expected to issue their recommendation whether the prime minister should be charged in relation to two ongoing corruption investigations into the prime minister. "This is an attempted coup by the police. They see the Prime Minister as a personal enemy and are trying to topple him." [See also, "Opposition: Netanyahu 'acting like a criminal' in attack on police chief" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Judicial Officials Dismiss Police Chief's Allegations as 'Rumors'

Judicial officials on Thursday evening dismissed as "rumors" the [claims](#) made by Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh that "powerful" elements had tried to collect information about police officers investigating Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "The commissioner turned to the attorney general about a year ago and reported this suspicion to him. The attorney general asked to receive evidence on this, (Alsheikh) didn't give him anything. These are just rumors," one official said. Both Channel 10 and Channel 2 also reported on Thursday that the commissioner went to AG Avichai Mandelblit with what his officers suspected, but failed to provide any concrete information to support his claims. [See also, "Lieberman: Alsheikh needs to focus on crime, not media interviews" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Police Yet to Decide Whether to Indict Milchan

Police are said to be considering recommending an indictment on bribery charges against Israeli-born Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan, who is suspected of allegedly bribing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his family with expensive gifts, a report on the Ynet news site said Thursday. On Tuesday, a [report](#) by Hadashot TV said police are set to recommend pressing bribery charges against Netanyahu next week in the case. Hebrew-language media reported the following day that senior police officials are in unanimous agreement on the matter, and that a "final" discussion on the investigation by top police brass had been held. [See also, "Police said mulling charges against billionaire" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Reuters

U.S. Envoy Tells Lebanon Israel Does Not Want Escalation

A U.S. envoy has assured Lebanon that Israel does not seek an escalation between the countries following a surge in hostile rhetoric, Lebanese and Israeli officials said on Thursday. The neighbors have exchanged threats and condemnation over a border wall being built by Israel, a tender issued by Beirut for oil and gas exploration in disputed waters and arms flows to Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah group. Lebanese and Israeli officials said David Satterfield, acting assistant U.S. secretary of state, was in Israel last week and in Lebanon this week on a mediation mission. U.S. officials confirmed his travels without detailing his agenda.

PM Blocks Settlement Annexation Bill from Coming to Vote

Prime Minister Netanyahu on Thursday pulled legislation aimed at annexing Israeli settlements in the West Bank that was slated to come before a key Knesset committee for a vote next week. A spokesman for a senior member on the Knesset's Ministerial Committee for Legislation told The Times of Israel that the prime minister wants to coordinate the measure with the White House first, but that the bill would still be debated by coalition leaders in their own meeting scheduled to take place on Sunday. The proposal, drafted by Yoav Kisch (Likud) and Bezalel Smotrich (Jewish Home) seeks to apply Israeli sovereignty over all areas of Jewish settlement in the West Bank, which are currently under military rule. "In the 70th year of the rebirth of the State of Israel and after the 50th anniversary of the return of the Jewish people to its historic homeland in Judea and Samaria (West Bank)...we move to designate the status of these territories as an inseparable part of the sovereign State of Israel," the legislation reads. See also, ["Netanyahu said to put brakes on West Bank annexation bill" \(i24 News\)](#)

Pa' Envoy: Collective Approach Required for Peace Process

A collective Middle East peace process could be led by the UN Security Council, a "Quartet" expanded to include China and Arab states or an international conference, the Palestinian UN envoy said on Thursday, all options involving the United States. Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour laid out the possibilities after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas last month said he would only accept a broad, internationally-backed panel to broker peace talks with Israel. "We're saying a collective approach involving several players at minimum would have a better chance of succeeding than the approach of only one country that is so close to Israel," Mansour told reporters.

Modi to Become First Indian PM to Visit West Bank

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to arrive in Ramallah on Saturday and become the first Indian prime minister to visit the West Bank. Modi is not scheduled during this visit to travel to Israel, which he toured for three days in July. B. Bala Bhaskar, a joint secretary in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, told reporters earlier this week that Modi's decision to exclusively visit Ramallah is a part of his country's "de-hyphenation policy." According to Bhaskar, India sees its ties with Israel and the Palestinians as "exclusive and independent" of each other. Modi will fly by helicopter on Saturday morning from Jordan to the Palestinian Authority's presidential headquarters in Ramallah, according to a PA security official.

Meretz MKs in Africa to 'Expose' State's Deportation Plan

Two lawmakers from the left-wing Meretz party arrived in Rwanda on Thursday for a four-day visit aimed at "exposing" the Israeli government's "failure" to deal with its African asylum seekers. Michal Rozin and Mossi Raz will meet with public figures and human rights organizations in Rwanda and neighboring Uganda, the reported destination countries in Israel's deportation plan, to explain the plan to expel thousands of African migrants and to try to convince them to oppose it. Israel has deported approximately 4,000 asylum seekers to the two East African states since December 2013. See also, ["MERETZ MKS ON 'EMERGENCY TRIP' TO RWANDA TO CHECK ON DEPORTED MIGRANTS" \(JPost\)](#)

Netanyahu's Big and Small Troubles

If the prime minister's name is eventually linked to the submarine affair, he is set to suffer huge political damage; meanwhile, the tensions between the prime minister and the Knesset speaker reveal the silent battle taking place in Likud over who will replace Netanyahu if he is suddenly forced to resign.

By Moran Azulay, political correspondent at Ynet News

- The submarine affair is the most dangerous affair concerning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While all other affairs are considered by Netanyahu's political base as insignificant (“a government isn’t toppled over cigars and champagne”), recent reports that the prime minister will be asked to give a testimony in the affair, and may even be questioned under caution, as journalist Amnon Abramovich reported, could deeply stain Netanyahu.
- From everything that has been revealed so far, this isn’t just another bribery affair. This isn’t a case of rigging road-building bids; it concerns the holy of holies—the State of Israel’s security. If Netanyahu's name is actually linked to the submarine affair, whether through a testimony or—God forbid—a criminal investigation, he is expected to suffer huge political damage.
- Even if Netanyahu's legal line of defense (“I didn’t know”) is accepted, he may suffer heavy public damage if the affair leads to police recommendations and even indictments. How is it possible that his close associates allegedly made a profit from what appears to be Israel’s most important security purchase in recent years, a purchase he was personally and closely in charge of, and he is the only one who didn’t know about it? Or as Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid told the Knesset recently, “I have known Netanyahu for 20 years. something like this wouldn’t have slipped under his radar in the past.”
- In addition to his big troubles, Netanyahu has small troubles too. In a recording leaked last week, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein is heard criticizing Netanyahu in not so stately words. Edelstein, of course, would rather keep what he thinks about the prime minister to himself, but the recording revealed the battle which is already taking place behind the scenes between Likud faction members over who will replace Netanyahu without elections if he is suddenly forced to step down.
- The political system remembers very well what happened to Ehud Olmert. No one thought he could be prime minister before Ariel Sharon collapsed, but several months later people said: “Well, he’s actually doing an excellent job.”
- The silent battle between Edelstein and Netanyahu, which actually turned noisy last week, has to do with Israel’s upcoming 70th Independence Day as well and with Culture Minister Miri Regev’s suggestion that the prime minister would deliver a speech at the torch-lighting ceremony, although the highest-ranking speaker at the ceremony is traditionally the Knesset speaker.
- The tensions at the top have been reflected in recent weeks in the dissolution of an old Knesset custom. Over the years, before every official event held at the Knesset, the prime minister, the president, the opposition leader, the Knesset speaker and their partners would meet at the speaker’s bureau and go up to the Knesset plenum together. But as there is no love lost between

this trio—Netanyahu, Edelstein and Reuven Rivlin—this old, dignified custom has been ignored in all official events held at the Israeli parliament recently.

- A long-standing tradition has been broken because of terrible relations. It happened during the Knesset's opening session, during US Vice President Mike Pence's official visit and during the Knesset's 69th birthday celebrations last week. Rivlin may have been on an official visit to Greece on the last occasion, but Edelstein and Netanyahu have been regularly avoiding this custom for a long time now.
- These tensions are beginning to resemble Netanyahu's battle several years ago against a different Knesset speaker from the Likud, Reuven Rivlin, which cost Rivlin his job as Knesset speaker in favor of Edelstein. Judging from this chain of events, Edelstein may go on to replace Rivlin in his current position as well.

SUMMARY: The submarine affair is the most dangerous affair concerning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While all other affairs are considered by Netanyahu's political base as insignificant ("a government isn't toppled over cigars and champagne"), recent reports that the prime minister will be asked to give a testimony in the affair, and may even be questioned under caution, as journalist Amnon Abramovich reported, could deeply stain Netanyahu. From everything that has been revealed so far, this isn't just another bribery affair. This isn't a case of rigging road-building bids; it concerns the holy of holies—the State of Israel's security. If Netanyahu's name is actually linked to the submarine affair, whether through a testimony or—God forbid—a criminal investigation, he is expected to suffer huge political damage. Even if Netanyahu's legal line of defense ("I didn't know") is accepted, he may suffer heavy public damage if the affair leads to police recommendations and even indictments.

This Has to be Investigated

By Ben Dror Yemini, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- In the debate between the prime minister and the police commissioner—Netanyahu is right. This does not make him righteous. It does not dismiss the suspicions against him. But if the police commissioner insinuates that “powerful figures” sent private investigators after senior police officials—then there is need for an investigation.
- Until Ilana Dayan’s interview with Roni Alsheich, there were only rumors about private investigators who might be gathering material against senior police officials involved in Netanyahu’s investigation. Now these are allegations being voiced by the police commissioner himself. If these allegations are true, there is a suspicion that serious offenses were committed. This is how the mafia works. It threatens the law enforcement agencies and tries to silence them. When Alsheich speaks about “powerful figures,” no one is being misled. We are talking about Netanyahu. He is the one at whom such a serious allegation is being leveled. Such an allegation cannot be left hanging in the air. Such a weighty allegation cannot be made without any investigation.
- As of now it is not clear whether there is any truth to Alsheich’s allegation. What is clear is that there are two possibilities, and both are grave: one is that Netanyahu or someone acting on his behalf indeed sent private investigators to threaten senior police officials. If this is true—it is an earthquake. The other possibility is that Alsheich—he too—is basing his statements on a groundless rumor. Who knows, perhaps some journalist posed a troubling question to one of the detectives investigating Netanyahu, and the question evolved into private investigators trying to intimidate police officials. Such things have happened in the past.
- The thing is that Alsheich’s explicit statement about “powerful figures” connects up with other information, about a detective in the unit who wrote a post calling to demonstrate against Netanyahu and about Ritman’s wife, Michal Ritman, a former detective in the same unit, who also posted things that leave no doubt as to her very unflattering opinion of Netanyahu. She is permitted, she is a private citizen. But it leaves an uncomfortable feeling, to say the least. When we add to the matter the questionable protection given by Alsheich to Roni Ritman on the matter of the sexual harassment complaint, the entire story become far more problematic.
- Police officers, attorneys and judges are human beings. They have political views. They face a difficult test in which they are required not to turn their opinions into motivations. We can and should presume that this is generally the case. It is also difficult to accuse Alsheich, a former settler and religious Zionist, of political motivation. After all, he is an appointment made by Netanyahu. One might almost say, a political appointment.
- It should be admitted that Netanyahu may be demanding the investigation in order to prove that he is being persecuted. It could be that he wants to divert the public spotlight in the direction of the police. Still, Netanyahu is right on this point. It does not make him righteous. And contrary to his statement, even if the allegation made by Alsheich is false, it does not render the evidence already gathered against Netanyahu false evidence.

- **What is already known demonstrates very clearly that even if there was no criminal corruption—and that will be clarified—it is clear that there was public corruption. But Alsheich tossed into the public discourse a suspicion about “powerful figures” who tried to influence the investigation. Such a suspicion casts a weighty criminal cloud on Netanyahu. This suspicion has to be verified or disproved. That is what Netanyahu demands, and he is right. Very much so.**

SUMMARY: Until Ilana Dayan’s interview with Roni Alsheich, there were only rumors about private investigators who might be gathering material against senior police officials involved in Netanyahu’s investigation. Now these are allegations being voiced by the police commissioner himself. If these allegations are true, there is a suspicion that serious offenses were committed. This is how the mafia works. It threatens the law enforcement agencies and tries to silence them. When Alsheich speaks about “powerful figures,” no one is being misled. We are talking about Netanyahu. He is the one at whom such a serious allegation is being leveled. Such an allegation cannot be left hanging in the air. Such a weighty allegation cannot be made without any investigation.