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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

February 28, 2018

Ha'aretz

Prosecution Links PM to Telecom Bribery Affair

For the first time in the telecom giant case (Case 4000), the State Prosecutor's Office directly linked Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the bribery affair. "This is a very serious affair of giving and receiving bribes," said Yehudit Tirosh, head of securities department at the State Prosecutor's Office. "Favorable coverage is a gentle term." Tirosh added that there "is a real suspicion based on evidence of a disruption of the investigation by the two suspects, Hefetz and Elovitch."

Times of Israel

Trump Peace Plan Could Recognize Palestinian State

The Trump administration's plan for peace may include US and international recognition of a Palestinian state and acceptance of East Jerusalem as its capital, the London-based Saudi newspaper Asharq al-Awsat reported on Wednesday. The plan, the report said, calls for placing the Old City of Jerusalem under "international protection." The report quoted "knowledgeable Arab diplomatic sources" in Paris as saying that the US is planning to present its plan at an international conference, most likely Cairo. However, the sources did not say when the US administration would come out with its plan, the details of which remain under wraps.

Ynet

Dozens of Former Defense Officials Join Labor Party

Thirty-three former senior IDF and defense establishment figures announced Tuesday afternoon they have joined the Labor party as part of the "Turnover for Israel" group headed by Brig.-Gen. (res.) Assaf Agmon. In a conference held in Tel Aviv, the former commanders stood shoulder to shoulder with party chairman Avi Gabbay, and said, "Today we're standing at the ready on Israel's most important front. We're leading commanders and civilians from different sectors in a joint effort to present Israel with inclusive, moral and experienced leadership." Among the commanders who have joined the Labor party are Brig.-Gen. Giora Inbar, former commander of the elite Shaldag Unit, Maj.-Gen. Alik Ron, former commander of the police's northern district, and Dr. Avi Weinreb, one of the developers of the Iron Dome system.

Washington Post

Sacred Jerusalem Church to Reopen After Dispute

Christian leaders in the Holy Land said Tuesday they would reopen the sacred Church of the Holy Sepulchre after Netanyahu stepped in to resolve a dispute with the Jerusalem municipality over the taxation of church property. The church, where Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and later resurrected, draws thousands of pilgrims daily. It had been closed since Sunday, when church leaders said they were protesting attempts by the Jerusalem municipality to tax church properties.

Ha'aretz

Knesset Bill to Muzzle IDF Criticism Moves Forward

A bill aimed at clamping down on organizations critical of the Israel Defense Forces won the backing of the Knesset plenum on Monday, in the first of three votes. Specifically, the draft law would ban activities at schools that are organized by groups that are in favor of legal actions being taken abroad against IDF soldiers. According to the Breaking the Silence NGO, an anti-occupation veterans' group, the law would not apply to it because it does not act to support and promote indictment of IDF soldiers in foreign courts.

Washington Post

Justice Minister Says Trump is Good for Her West Bank Plan

Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked is second-in-command in the ardently Zionist, right-wing Jewish Home party, which draws the bulk of its support from the more than 400,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank. She is an outspoken advocate of annexing parts of the West Bank territory that Palestinians hope to obtain for a future state. Just this week, a government committee she heads approved a bill that aims to extend the jurisdiction of Israel's district courts over a portion of the West Bank she wants Israel to annex.

Times of Israel

Deposed Fatah Strongman Slams 'Corrupt' PA

Mohammad Dahlan, the ousted Gaza leader of the Palestinian Fatah movement, on Monday launched a scathing broadside on the Palestinian Authority leadership, saying it has become an "additional burden" on the people. He denounced the PA government as "corrupt and fascist" for "punishing" the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and called for the formation of a "national salvation leadership." Dahlan, who has been living in exile in the United Arab Emirates since he was expelled from Fatah in 2011, described the Palestinians' political situation as "catastrophic."

Jerusalem Post

Israeli, Palestinian Students Reach Elusive Peace Deal

Students at the Eastern Mediterranean International Boarding School have achieved what senior global diplomats have repeatedly failed to accomplish: a peace agreement to end the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. More than 70 Israeli and Palestinian 11th graders, together with students from 17 countries at EMIS, reached the peace agreement last week in a 24-hour simulation of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. The peace-talks simulation was the culmination of a course in peace mediation and conflict resolution that the students have taken over the past few months.

Why a Two-State Solution is Closer Than You Think

By Ami Ayalon, Gilead Sher, and Orni Petruschka, Blue White Future

- As President Trump welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House next week, opinions have never been more dour about the possibility of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The Trump administration says it is working on a plan, but its intended transfer of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and its open criticism of Palestinians' quest for statehood have driven the Arabs from the bargaining table. Meanwhile, support for a two-state solution has slipped to 46 percent among Israelis and Palestinians, and each population votes for politicians who oppose a deal. Likud, the party leading Israel, says it is uninterested in negotiating. (Indeed, many of its members and their coalition partners say they prefer various schemes to annex substantial parts of the West Bank.) Netanyahu is facing corruption allegations that could remove him from office, but a successor would probably commit to the same positions.
- Yet things are not as hopeless as they seem. A survey last month by Tel Aviv University's Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, suggests that the Trump administration could devise a plan both publics could support. For those committed to Israel's security and character as a Jewish and democratic state, the survey's finding that "both sides prefer the two-state solution to all other conflict resolution options" gives several reasons for optimism.
- The poll identifies concrete policy incentives that, if added to the basic terms of plans put forward over the past 18 years, would dramatically increase support for a new proposal. For example, 44 percent of Israeli Jews who oppose a two-state solution would change their minds if the Palestinian government commits to maintaining Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, including sharing intelligence with Israeli security forces, preventing attacks and arresting terrorism suspects. Adding this element to a peace plan would increase Israeli support from 46 to 59 percent.
- Among Palestinians who are opposed, 39 percent would change their minds and support an agreement if Israel recognized the "Nakba," the exodus of Palestinians who fled or were expelled from their homes in 1948 during what Israel calls its War of Independence, as well as the suffering of these refugees, and if Israel provides compensation to them. (This does not require Israel to grant the refugees a right of return to Israel, a justifiable dealbreaker for Israelis.) Including this provision in a plan would boost Palestinian backing to 62 percent.
- Some incentives appeal to both sides. The most noteworthy ones, which would also advance U.S. interests, involve a regional approach. Making the Israeli-Palestinian agreement part of the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative would change the minds of 37 percent of Israelis and 24 percent of Palestinians who originally opposed an agreement. And including formal guarantees

by the United States, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which would create a joint commission to ensure proper implementation by both sides, would induce 39 percent of Israeli Jews who initially opposed the agreement to support it and 27 percent of Palestinians to do likewise. A third component that appeals to both sides: ensuring that Palestine would be a democracy. This would change the minds of 40 percent of Israeli Jews and 37 percent of Palestinians to support an agreement.

- In a Catch-22 finding, the most significant reason people oppose a two-state solution is their perception that it is not feasible. So, if the Trump administration's plan is demonstrably realistic and feasible, Palestinians and Israelis will support it. These findings demonstrate that flexibility and open attitudes still exist on both sides and that the right policies can reverse rejection of a two-state package by Israelis and Palestinians. Both sides have shown a complete absence of political courage for a decade, and if the Trump administration hopes to surmount this cowardice, it will need proposals that allow the leaders to attract popular support while still making hard choices. Still, progress is unlikely until the White House rehabilitates relations with the Palestinian leadership and repairs the damage caused by the Jerusalem declaration. That requires a fair and balanced plan, including terms referring to the Jerusalem area as hosting capitals of both states with a special regime over the Old City.
- If Trump's team uses the survey's findings to carefully craft a plan that will garner the support of a majority of people on both sides, and regionally, the administration may well find that the people will drag their recalcitrant, spineless leaders into a process gradually leading to two states for two peoples. Even if it does not result in an ultimate, final-status deal, that would still be a historic achievement.

Iran Is Trying to Avoid a Clash But May Surprise Israel

By Ephraim Kam, Institute for National Security Studies

- The latest confrontation between Israel and Iran on the northern front was predictable. We can assume that neither side wanted the clash, but with Tehran having sent substantial Iranian and Shi'ite combat forces to Syria while arming Hezbollah with advanced weapons, and with Israel determined to check the danger, a clash was almost inevitable. On top of that is the consensus among Israel's leaders that Iran presents the most serious threat to Israel. This perception is based on a number of elements: Hezbollah and its huge missile system, Iran's large and improved missile system, and Tehran's policy of encircling Israel with radical Shi'ites, marked by the anti-Israel front in Syria and Lebanon.
- Clearly if Iran goes nuclear some day this threat will increase to an unprecedented level. But the balance of powers is more complex. The main tool used by the Israel Defense Forces in Syria is the air force, and Iran has no answer to it; its own air force is based on planes 30 to 40 years old and clearly can't cope with its Israeli rival. In addition, Iran has to operate forces hundreds of kilometers from its borders without any real defense when they're subject to Israeli attacks and provocations by Sunni groups in Syria. Weapons convoys to Hezbollah and arms plants in Syria are exposed to attacks.
- The United States also poses a threat to Iran. The Trump administration has defined Iran as a threat of the highest order to the United States and its allies due to its use of terror, intervention in other countries, construction of a large missile system, and above all its attempt to produce nuclear weapons. The U.S. administration hasn't yet taken any practical steps to stop the threat, and it's not clear whether it will, but Iran isn't certain it won't, and the last thing Tehran wants is a confrontation with the United States. Meanwhile, the declaration by Washington that it will leave a military force in northern Syria for an indefinite period to check Iranian influence should worry Tehran.
- Although Russia – currently the most influential player in Syria – stands alongside Iran and recognizes Iran's right to maintain forces in Syria, there are differences of opinion, conflicts of interest and suspicions between Tehran and Moscow. As a result, Iran fears that if an overall agreement in Syria is achieved, Russia won't insist on leaving Bashar Assad's regime in place if it receives a promise that it can continue to use its air base and naval base there. If the Assad regime is ousted in the context of an agreement, Iran's influence in Syria will suffer a serious blow. Iran thus hasn't yet responded with fire to attacks against weapons convoys and factories in Syria.
- Even when Iran challenged Israel in the most recent clash, it did so with a drone, not by opening fire. Since early 2015, Hezbollah has also refrained from responding to what could be perceived as Israeli provocations. This reluctance to respond apparently stems from a recognition of

Israel's significant military advantage in the north. The Iranians are also likely to fear that a confrontation with Israel would give Israel a chance to attack the nuclear weapons sites in Iran. Moreover, Iran apparently doesn't seek a confrontation because its top priority is to stabilize the Assad regime and exploit its standing in Syria to strengthen its influence in Iraq and Lebanon. An entanglement with Israel could block these goals.

- Iran's supreme regional goal is to entrench itself in Syria and its neighbors for the long term. It has already paid a high price for this in blood and money, and there's no reason to assume that it will give this up. Israel, meanwhile, must prevent Iran from leaving its forces and the Shi'ite militias in Syria – including Hezbollah – for the long term. This basic conflict could lead to a confrontation again – and there's no evidence yet of a responsible adult among the great powers to ease the conflict of interests. The bottom line is that Iran is trying to avoid a confrontation with Israel, but will find it hard to remain silent for long if Israel strikes Iranian targets. Thus we must take into account that at some stage Iran will take a military action to deter Israel. Iran will want to surprise Israel – with the timing, weapons or method. For that purpose it will prefer to activate Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias so as not to get involved itself.
- Iran may instruct Hezbollah to use its missile system, despite the risks involved both to it and its emissaries. Iran would probably try to exploit an opportunity when Israel is preoccupied with another crisis – the main candidate is a conflict with Hamas in Gaza. And of course there's also the possibility of a mistake in judgment that would get Iran embroiled in a conflict with Israel.