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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, March 2*

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# News Excerpts

March 2, 2018

Ynet

## **Police Question Netanyahu for 5 Hours on Case 4000**

Police investigators questioned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu under caution for five hours on Friday in the Bezeq affair, also known as Case 4000. While the prime minister was questioned at the official residence in Jerusalem, his wife Sara Netanyahu gave testimony at the offices of the police's investigations unit Lahav 433 in Lod. Her testimony then became a questioning under caution. Bezeq majority shareholder Shaul Elovitch and former Netanyahu adviser Nir Hefetz were also brought in for questioning Friday morning.

Reuters

## **EU Working to Confront Iran While Saving Nuclear Deal**

European powers and Iran have started talks over Tehran's role in the Middle East and will meet again this month in Italy as part of efforts to prove to President Donald Trump that they are meeting his concerns over the 2015 nuclear deal. With Trump warning of a last chance for "the worst deal ever negotiated", Britain, France and Germany have been working with U.S. officials to draw up a strategy to improve the Iran nuclear deal in return for Trump keeping the pact alive by renewing U.S. sanctions relief on May 12.

Times of Israel

## **Hamas and Dahlan Discuss Forming Joint Gaza Government**

Hamas is not ruling out the possibility of forming a "national salvation" government with deposed Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan, who is an archenemy of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, a Hamas official was quoted on Thursday as saying. A senior Hamas delegation headed by Ismail Haniyeh met in Cairo recently with representatives of Dahlan and discussed possible collaboration efforts. It was unclear whether the Hamas officials had also met with the Egyptian-backed Dahlan personally. The delegation, which also held intensive discussions with Egyptian government officials in the past three weeks, returned to the Gaza Strip on Wednesday.

The New York Times

## **Prince William Will Go to Israel, in First Royal Visit**

Israel will for the first time host an official visit by a member of the British royal family when Prince William travels there this summer, it was announced on Thursday. The lack of a formal visit has long been a sore point for many Israelis. Last year, when Israel and Britain marked the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, an assurance of British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," the Palestinians reacted with fury and demanded an apology from the British government. None has been forthcoming.

JTA

## **Americans in Israel Warned to 'Keep Low Profile'**

The US diplomatic mission in Israel urged Americans there to “keep a low profile” following last week’s announcement that the US Embassy in Jerusalem will open in May. American diplomats in Israel were prohibited from official travel in the West Bank starting Wednesday. The Consulate General also is prohibiting employees and their family members from personal travel in the West Bank. The mission issued a warning to American citizens to avoid anticipated demonstrations and anti-American protests over the embassy announcement last Friday by the State Department, and to “exercise caution if unexpectedly in the vicinity of large gatherings or protests.” A plethora of Palestinian groups have called for demonstrations to protest the embassy decision.

Ha'aretz

## **Settlers Leave Illegal Outpost in Jordan Valley After a Week**

The Israelis who squatted in an abandoned military base in the northern Jordan Valley on February 21 left it Thursday afternoon, the mayor of a nearby Palestinian village reported. Sami Sadeq of Aqaba said that the settlers took with them their herd of cows, a water tanker truck and personal possessions. In response to a complaint from Sadeq, last week Israel’s Civil Administration promised to evict the squatters, but did not give a date. Residents of two nearby outposts, using force and sometimes with the aid of the army, have prevented shepherds from grazing their flocks on pasture the Palestinians have used for decades.

Ha'aretz

## **Why These Palestinians Are Desperate to Be 'Clean'**

Starting at 6 A.M. on February 13, hundreds of Palestinian men aged 20 to 65 gathered at the Tarqumiya checkpoint behind the bars of the security-check facility for people entering Israel. Four armed soldiers were posted at the edge of the facility to prevent them from entering. Officially, it was an operation to reconsider the status of those previously denied entry into Israel for security reasons. “You’re clean,” soldiers of the Civil Administration or Shin Bet security service personnel tell people if the computer screen doesn’t produce reasons for denying them an exit permit. Someone who’s been declared “clean” is then entitled to embark on the arduous bureaucratic path of submitting a request for a permit to work in Israel or for a merchant’s exit permit.

Ha'aretz

## **Soldiers Assaulted Journalists to Prevent Media Coverage**

Israeli soldiers beat Palestinian journalists with batons and arrested them, on their commanders’ orders, with the declared intention of disrupting their coverage of a weekly demonstration in Kafr Qaddum in August 2012. This was due to a policy change in handling what the army termed “serial” demonstrations, according to the case file of a Military Police investigation obtained recently by Haaretz. During this assault, one soldier broke the hand of an Agence France-Presse photographer.

## A New Government Will Bring New National Priorities

By Amb. Arthur Koll, former Deputy Director-General, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs

- True democracy is based on a changeover of governments, in which parties alternate between the opposition and government within reasonable periods of time. This ensures that different sectors in society receive expression via the government. If the changeover fails to occur, and the political system stagnates, the balance between segments in society becomes undone, and groups that support the government receive a disproportionate preference from the ruling elite. This has already occurred in the State of Israel. From the founding year of 1948 to 1977, the Labor Movement dominated governments throughout the entire period. And again, from 1977 to the present day, there has been a near full continuum of right-wing governments. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will soon become the longest serving prime minister in Israeli history.
- Much like the Labor Party of pre - 1977, today's Likud party believes that to govern is almost a right bestowed upon them by the heavens and that no one else is up to the task. It believes that no other set of ideals has any validity, and worse, that it enjoys immunity from having to pay the price of wrongdoing. The end of the Labor-dominated founding years was stained by corruption and political and strategic miscalculations that cost the country dearly. The same can be said today about the Likud-dominated government. It is marred by large-scale corruption and strategic shortsightedness.
- Power corrupts, and parties that stay in power for too long magnetically attract corruption. The feeling of invincibility numbs the senses and fades the line that separates right from wrong. This phenomenon has severely plagued the State of Israel in recent years, where a prime minister and senior ministers have served time in prison following corruption convictions. One must hope that the country does not witness yet another prime minister convicted of corruption charges. But it is not just about Netanyahu. The premier's innermost circle of advisors, ministers, and leading Knesset Members are under police investigation, and the suspicions against them are severe.
- Under the current government, an escalating attack on the country's democratic 'gatekeepers' has been gaining momentum. Those targeted include the High Court of Justice, the free press, and law enforcement. Some of the hostility towards the 'gatekeepers' stems from an ideology that seeks to limit the independence of the legal branch. Some comes from a desire by corrupt elements to harm the 'gatekeepers' abilities to do their jobs. If these assaults do not stop, all checks and balances—so essential to safeguarding democracy—will crumble.
- The current ruling coalition has also overseen an accelerated process that has harmed the delicate balance between religion and state. It has also harmed the balance once in place between the secular and the national religious, and the secular and the ultra-Orthodox camps. A status quo was once guarded carefully. It served as a stabilizing domestic anchor, despite many

secular Israelis viewing it as a less-than-ideal situation. It allowed profoundly different segments of society to coexist in a reasonable manner. Yet today, 70 years after the founding of the state, a crude attempt is underway to change the status quo to the detriment of the secular or non-observant population. Some commentators in Israel are increasingly concerned that the state is moving toward adopting religious law, at the expense of the Western liberal principles upon which the country was founded. In a related development, the current government has overseen a severe deterioration in Israel's relationship with the majority of the American Jewish community, 85% of which is non-Orthodox. While most Israeli citizens do not lose sleep over this issue, that is only because they are not aware of the historic importance that American Jews have had, and will continue to have, in maintaining Israel's strength.

- From a social-economic perspective, an intolerable gap has developed in Israel between rich and poor, between the haves and the have-nots. Despite some national economic success, much of the population has been left behind. According to every international standard, particularly visible in surveys conducted by the OECD, Israel is in an unenviable leading spot in the West when it comes to the inequality gap. Additionally, long-term budgetary preferences for the ultra-Orthodox and national religious camps, as well as for West Bank settlements, have harmed the national economy by channeling funds unfairly. The country's treasury is limited, and this allocation agenda has prioritized some segments of society over others. The time has come to rearrange these priorities, and obtain state budgets for geographical and social peripheries. No less important, a center-left government can be an opportunity to invest more in education, on behalf of all sections of the public. Contrary to popular perception, Israeli junior and high-school students score dismally in international education rankings.
- Most importantly, Israel needs a new government to prevent the annexation of the West Bank, and safeguard the Zionist vision of a democratic state with a Jewish majority. The current government is continuing to invest massively in settlement construction and expansion, including outside of the major blocs. The national religious party openly calls for the annexation of the West Bank. Last month, the Likud Party, for the first time, officially adopted a similar position. Gradually, this is creating a reality that could disrupt any future solution that does not involve Israel having full control of the West Bank. For anyone who considers the Jewish character of the state sacrosanct, this process should be a huge source of concern. This discussion is at the center of an ongoing ideological dispute in the heart of Israeli society.
- Tragically, at present, there is no serious Palestinian partner today with whom Israel can discuss a final or even a long-term interim peace arrangement, to permanently define Israel's eastern borders, and who could be entrusted to set up a Palestinian state next to Israel. Still, Israel must not allow the demographic reality in the West Bank to change in a manner that will permanently prevent a future separation from the Palestinians. History has proven that, over time, states containing nations that differ drastically in their identity, religion and narrative, do not hold up, and break apart in violence and bloodshed. The bloody, brutal collapse of Yugoslavia is just one painful case in point. Israel must avoid such a scenario at all costs. Preserving Israel's Jewish-majority and democratic nature is a critical Zionist objective, and can

only be made possible, ultimately, by a separation from the Palestinians. A center-left government will promote these national interests.

## **Why the Interrogation Today is the PM's Most Important**

By Yonah Jeremy Bob, Columnist, Jerusalem Post

- It may be six months, a year or more before the attorney-general lets us know his decision regarding the five probes linked to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But looking back from whatever that decision is, Friday will be viewed as the decisive day. With one of his former top aides, Shlomo Filber, directly accusing him of criminality, the prime minister's back is finally against the wall. Filber has said that Netanyahu masterminded a scheme of pushing policies favoring Bezeq in exchange for positive media coverage by the Walla news site, and directed him to carry it out as director-general of the Communications Ministry.
- Netanyahu had already taken many blows with Arnon Milchan's secretary turning against him, his former top aide Ari Harow turning state's witness, the police recommending indicting him for bribery in two separate cases, half-a-dozen of his top aides under pressure to turn on him and other shots to the abdomen. But in none of these cases had a top aide actually directly accused him of a crime and a crime about which they had personal knowledge.
- Until now, he could claim a variety of policy reasons and alibis to explain his allegedly corrupt behavior, and all of them had a decent chance of poking a hole in the beyond a reasonable doubt standard one needs to meet to prove a crime. He can't do that on Friday. On Friday, he will need to call Filber a liar and explain, plausibly, why Filber would accuse him of a crime. He will face detailed accounts of his conversations with Filber and with others that police could not ask him about until Filber spilled the beans. Whatever he says will be locked in on him forever.
- It was this similar point when former prime minister Ehud Olmert made mistakes responding to aides and partners who had inside information on him, which the judges who dealt with him eventually found untruthful and led to the courts preferring the prosecution's narrative over his. These detailed insider accounts are the hardest for a person to talk their way out of coherently. The police know the high stakes. So important is this interrogation to their case that they are pulling out all of the stops. They demanded Netanyahu get interrogated before his upcoming US trip, have extended former aide Nir Hefetz's detention primarily to prevent the two from coordinating, and may even interrogate the prime minister at the same time as Sara Netanyahu, separately, to avoid their coordinating answers.
- The second that Filber pointed the finger at Netanyahu, the tone emanating from Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit's office changed, and the resistance to jumping to conclusions about Netanyahu's fate became much more limited. It is now understood that unless Netanyahu somehow pulls a rabbit out of a hat and manages a triple Axel jump against a top aide – a feat defendants rarely manage to land – the decision of whom to believe between Netanyahu and Filber will need to go to a judge. In that case, the prime minister may end up not just with his back to the wall, but facing prison time.