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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Netanyahu at AIPAC: We Must Stop Iran**
- **PA: US Tried to Isolate Jerusalem, but Is Now Isolated Itself**
- **At AIPAC, US Leaders Hint Peace Plan is Near**
- **Abbas' Health Deteriorates, with Possible Succession Fight**
- **Schumer: Settlements Not an Obstacle to Peace**
- **PM Tells Coalition to Solve Crisis or Face Elections**
- **Israel Bets Anti-Tunnel Tech Will Secure Gaza Border**
- **Bill Cutting PA Funding over Terror Payouts Clears First Vote**

Commentary:

- **Times of Israel: “Does Israel Seek a Two-State Solution?”**
 - By Raphael Ahren, Analyst, Times of Israel
- **AI Monitor: “Top Officials in Netanyahu's Party Kept in the Dark”**
 - By Mazal Mualem, Columnist, AI Monitor

News Excerpts

March 7, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu at AIPAC: We Must Stop Iran

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was welcomed with a resounding ovation Tuesday morning at AIPAC, where he gave a 30 minute speech on the “good, bad and beautiful” in Israel and the region. The prime minister, showing no outward signs of the impact of his domestic situation, extolled Israel’s contributions to the world and warned about Iranian aggression. “If I have a message today it is simple: We must stop Iran.” Netanyahu also spent a few minutes talking about the Palestinian Authority’s payment of \$350 million a year to terrorists and their families, asking what message this sends to Palestinian children.

Ha’aretz

PA: US Tried to Isolate Jerusalem, but Is Now Isolated Itself

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat ripped into U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday, a day after the American leader met with Netanyahu for their fifth meeting in the last year and second since Trump recognized Jerusalem, infuriating the Palestinians. “Trump wanted to separate and isolate the issue of Jerusalem from the peace process, and ended up isolating the United States,” Erekat said.

Jerusalem Post

At AIPAC, US Leaders Hint Peace Plan is Near

A comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians will require compromise from both sides, leading voices from the Trump administration told AIPAC. Vice President Mike Pence said administration officials were working with determination to prepare Trump’s peace plan. He said the Trump administration still considers Middle East peace a high priority, despite the struggle ahead, and would support a two-state solution if both sides agree to it. Israeli officials declined again on Monday to expressly endorse a two-state solution that doesn’t include fundamental security guarantees for the Jewish state, such as a permanent military presence in the Jordan Valley.

Ha’aretz

Abbas' Health Deteriorates, with Possible Succession Fight

In recent months there has been a deterioration in the health of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who will be 83 at the end of the month. Although the security cooperation between Israel and the PA continues to be managed well, Israel is readying itself for the possibility that a continued worsening of Abbas’ health will intensify the succession wars in the PA and undermine the relative stability that now prevails in the West Bank. Abbas has cut down his work hours over the past year. People around him say he seems to be getting more short-tempered and argumentative with his aides and other senior PA officials. Aside from his health and advancing age, Abbas’ behavior seems to indicate that the PA, and his leadership, are facing a crisis.

Times of Israel

Schumer: Settlements Not an Obstacle to Peace

US Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer on Monday said Israeli settlement building was not an obstacle to peace with the Palestinians, instead blaming the failure to reach a peace accord on the Palestinian refusal to accept the Jewish state. Schumer said that Israel's experience in Gaza, where it uprooted all its settlements in 2005 but was still targeted by Hamas rocket fire from the Strip, proved that Israeli building on land Palestinians claim for a state of their own was not the issue.

See also, [*"Bennett: Palestinians Had Their Chance in Gaza" \(Ha'aretz\)*](#)

Ynet

PM Tells Coalition to Solve Crisis or Face Elections

The Israeli government will either find a solution to the ongoing crisis regarding Haredi demands over IDF conscription legislation that has rattled the stability of the coalition, or elections will be called, a statement issued by Netanyahu's warned on Tuesday evening. The crisis that erupted over the last fortnight was intensified when the United Torah Judaism party (UTJ) threatened last week not to support the 2019 state budget unless an IDF conscription bill, which would solicit state recognition of Torah studies to being equal to military service, is brought for a vote and passed in the Knesset first.

Washington Post

Israel Bets Anti-Tunnel Tech Will Secure Gaza Border

Advances in anti-tunnel technology have provided the Israeli military with new means of heading off attacks from Palestinian militants based in the Gaza Strip, an Israeli military official said Tuesday. The official, who heads the underground-warfare section of the Israeli military's technological unit, said the new methods for detecting and destroying extensive, often sophisticated, underground spaces had resulted in the elimination of at least three tunnels since October. Israeli leaders have hailed the use of new technology for countering border vulnerabilities, saying it will help keep Israelis who live near the Palestinian enclave safe.

Times of Israel

Bill Cutting PA Funds over Terror Payouts Clears First Vote

A bill that would slash funds to the PA by the amount Ramallah pays out to convicted terrorists and their families cleared its first reading in the Knesset plenum on Monday. The bill would need another two readings to become law. The Defense Ministry has also submitted a softened version of the legislation, which would allow the government to either deduct the funds, which would be irreversible, or "freeze" the payments, leaving the security cabinet with the final say.

Does Israel Seek a Two-State Solution?

By Raphael Ahren, Analyst, Times of Israel

- What exactly is Israel's position on a two-state solution? A plea for Palestinian statehood issued earlier this week by Howard Kohr, the CEO of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, has brought the question into the spotlight once again, with settler leaders and top Likud officials arguing that official government policy opposes Palestinian statehood and angrily demanding the influential pro-Israel lobby chief disavow his remarks.
- But there is no simple answer to this question, as the Israeli government does not have a clearly formulated position on the matter. Between 2009 and 2017, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu routinely declared his acceptance, in principle, of a demilitarized Palestinian state under certain conditions. But since shortly after the election of US President Donald Trump, he has painstakingly avoided explicitly endorsing a two-state solution, while at the same time rejecting a one-state, binational solution and saying he wants the Palestinians to be able to govern themselves. However, many ministers in his cabinet and most senior members of his ruling Likud party vehemently reject a two-state solution. Some hawkish MKs have repeatedly proposed legislation to annex all or portions of the West Bank to Israel — moves apparently designed to thwart the creation of a Palestinian state — but Netanyahu has so far blocked all such efforts.
- “We must all work toward that future: two states for two peoples,” Kohr told 18,000 delegates at AIPAC's annual Policy Conference in Washington on Sunday. “One Jewish with secure and defensible borders, and one Palestinian with its own flag and its own future.” Kohr, who has been at AIPAC's helm since 1996, was roundly criticized by right-leaning Israelis, including Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely and other influential figures in the Likud party. “AIPAC is a big and important friend of Israel, but if it pretends to represent the official position of the State of Israel to elected officials in the United States, it must do so faithfully,” MK Yehudah Glick said. “It is clear to the vast majority of government and coalition ministers that the establishment of a Palestinian state in the heart of the State of Israel means bringing terrorism to the heart of the state,” the US-born freshman lawmaker added. Samaria Regional Council chairman Yossi Dagan said AIPAC's claim that Israel favors two states has “no basis in fact.” In a letter to the heads of pro-Israel lobby, Dagan asserted that the group was inaccurately claiming the two-state solution was the endgame to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that it had support from both Washington and Jerusalem. He argued that neither the official guidelines of Israel's current government nor Trump's National Security Strategy made any mention of the proposal.
- On its website, the pro-Israel lobby states that “Israel and the United States are committed to a two-state solution.” the section of AIPAC's 2017 briefing book on the topic begins by stating, “Israel is committed to a two-state solution — a Jewish state living side-by-side in peace with a demilitarized Palestinian state. The United States must send a clear message that this goal can

be achieved only through direct negotiations between the parties.” Kohr himself, during a speech at last year’s AIPAC Policy Conference, said that “goal we desire” was a “Jewish state of Israel living side-by-side in peace and security with a demilitarized Palestinian state. “I am astounded as to why such a great, meaningful organization as AIPAC... would represent the positions of the state of Israel (and of the United States) so inaccurately before senior government officials, senators and congressmen, and the general pro-Israel public,” Dagan wrote to the AIPAC leadership.

- Ahead of the last Knesset elections, Likud did not publish a program, thus avoiding having to take a formal stand on Palestinian statehood. Other parties in the coalition have varying views on the matter: the religious-nationalist Jewish Home list principally rejects a two-state solution, while the hardline-secular Yisrael Beytenu party calls for a Palestinian state in borders reflecting Jewish-Arab demographics. The Haredi lists and the centrist Kulanu party have not taken a vehement stance on the issue. Netanyahu, in an interview days before the polls opened in March 2015, said that no Palestinian state would come into being under his watch, though he later backtracked and recommitted himself to the idea of two states for two peoples.
- In mid-December, Netanyahu was asked by European foreign ministers in Brussels whether he accepts the two-state solution. He replied by asking what kind of state the second one would be: “Would it be Costa Rica or Yemen?” The former is a stable democracy in Central America, while the latter is in a state of war-blighted anarchy. It’s time that we reassess whether the model that we have of sovereignty and unfettered sovereignty is applicable everywhere A few days later, the Likud Central Committee, the party’s top decision-making body, unanimously passed a resolution calling for the annexation of parts of the West Bank and unlimited construction in the settlements, a position that appears to be in blatant contradiction to a two-state solution.
- In recent interviews, Netanyahu has sought to explain his position, indicating that the best the Palestinian can hope for is some sort of “state-minus.” This entity would not fully meet the criteria of statehood but would allow the Palestinians some measure of autonomy. “I think it’s time that we reassess whether the model that we have of sovereignty and unfettered sovereignty is applicable everywhere around the earth, the globe,” he said last November at the Chatham House, a London think tank. “I don’t want to govern the Arabs in the West Bank. I don’t want to govern the Arabs in Gaza either, but I want to make sure that that territory is not used against Israel, and therefore, for us, the critical thing is to have the overriding security responsibility,” he added. “When we talk about demilitarizing the West Bank, it will be demilitarized by us.”
- On Monday evening, hours after talks with US President Donald Trump, Netanyahu told reporters that “the Palestinians should have the power of government, except the power to threaten us.” Asked by The Times of Israel if he told Trump that he supported, at least in principle, the establishment of a Palestinian state, Netanyahu merely said he told the president that Israel did not want to rule over Palestinians. “I said that we have no desire to govern the Palestinians, but we have every desire to protect ourselves,” he said. “The main thing is that the

security control west of the Jordan River remains in our hands, and we cannot see anyone else assuming that responsibility.”

Top Officials in Netanyahu's Party Kept in the Dark

By Mazal Mualem, Columnist, AI Monitor

- “Netanyahu is like a wounded bull in the ring. We have to watch out for his horns because he is very dangerous now. In his downward spiral, he could bring everyone down with him. He could lead us to new elections. He is unpredictable.” This was the analysis of one senior Likud official on March 5. The official spoke with AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity about an hour after it was first learned that Netanyahu’s former adviser Nir Hefetz was recruited as a state witness in the criminal case against the prime minister. This analysis reflects the mood of uncertainty pervading the ruling party. Headlines on all of the news sites said Hefetz claimed Netanyahu’s son Yair and his wife, Sara, pressured Netanyahu into making decisions harmful to state security. At the same time, Likud Knesset members and ministers were trying to figure out where all of this was leading. Most importantly, they wanted to know whether the emergence of a third state witness against Netanyahu made it even more likely that elections would be moved up to June.
- Until just a few days ago, this very real possibility wasn’t even a consideration. It was first tossed out March 3, apparently by Netanyahu’s inner circle, moments before he set off for his official visit to Washington. Ostensibly, the crisis resulted from an ultimatum by the ultra-Orthodox parties, who threatened to topple the government if their enlistment law (exempting ultra-Orthodox young people from the draft) was not approved before the 2019 budget. Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon is vehemently opposed to that. Netanyahu doesn’t seem to be making any effort to resolve the crisis, and that would be putting it mildly. While he did not instigate the crisis, he did recognize how beneficial it could be to him. Holding a flash election in three months, when his status in the polls is excellent and before it is decided whether to indict him for the various scandals, could send him back to the Knesset as a winner for the fifth time. It would also give him a chance to prove to Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit that despite all the investigations, the public still supports him.
- The possibility of moving the election up came as a complete surprise to senior Likud officials. These days, very few of them talk directly with Netanyahu. Tourism Minister Yariv Levin may be the only one who advises him. Everyone else is excluded to various degrees. In the past, Netanyahu made a point of calling them, consulting with them or asking them to give an interview for him. This allowed them to feel his pulse and make an educated guess about what he was planning. But that hasn’t happened in the Likud for a very long time now. Netanyahu is described as being in the grip of paranoia now that his advisers have crossed the lines and provided police interrogators with material that could incriminate him. The way Netanyahu sees it, they all have personal interests now. Even the few who still defend him in the media are regarded by him with suspicion. On March 5, Likud Knesset members roamed the Knesset’s halls trying to collect information from members of the other parties, including the ultra-Orthodox, HaBayit HaYehudi and Kulanu. Is some resolution to the crisis with the

ultra-Orthodox in sight? How involved is Netanyahu in trying to resolve it? They tried to get into Netanyahu's head and anticipate his next moves.

- Speaking with Al-Monitor, one Likud Knesset member offered his assessment that once Netanyahu returns from Washington he will take steps to advance the elections. Another Knesset member suggested that it would not be wise for Netanyahu to risk what he already has in hand and that elections always come with a huge element of uncertainty. A third admitted that ever since the last election in 2015 Netanyahu has become isolated, unpredictable and uninhibited, so there is no way of knowing what he will do next. Another senior official expressed his amazement that the prime minister could still manage to keep such a high-profile political agenda, including a meeting with US President Donald Trump, while the ground is slipping out from under his feet. One thing is clear: The fate of other Likud members is tied up with that of Netanyahu, but their ability to impact the situation is severely limited.
- In some strange way, the uncertainty surrounding Netanyahu's moves and the realization that he is acting on borrowed time has not resulted in any new alliances within the Likud. In the past, various Likud members organized to oppose Netanyahu. Just before the last election, there was even an effort to remove him. What is particularly conspicuous about the current situation is that all the senior Likud members are proceeding with extreme caution. It is every man for himself now. Everyone has their own ideas about what to do. Should Netanyahu find out about any meeting or consultation, he could immediately interpret it as a conspiracy against him. Netanyahu is still a powerful prime minister, among the public in general and among Likud supporters in particular. There is still a possibility that he will be re-elected, and then their fate lies in his hands.
- Netanyahu created this balance of terror over the years. He made sure to block any Likud minister who began to garner the type of popularity that Netanyahu considered a threat. Even former Minister Gideon Saar, who is frequently mentioned along with Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz as a potential successor to Netanyahu, does not dare to break ranks. Saar may now be a political outsider who does not rely on Netanyahu. On the other hand, he also knows the prime minister is still powerful enough to be re-elected and could deliver a deathblow to Saar's comeback should he try to return to the political game. That is why even if it appears that Netanyahu is nearing the end of his political career, the war of succession has yet to begin. In that sense, even Katz is acting wisely, maintaining industrial silence. On occasion, he will even support the prime minister in the media. In other words, he is not manufacturing opposition to Netanyahu.
- All the top Likud officials who spoke with Al-Monitor said that if the elections are moved up because of the enlistment law crisis, then they will need to align themselves with Netanyahu because this crisis has seemingly created a valid reason for early elections. On the other hand, if Netanyahu drags them into primaries because of some personal whim, they will revolt against him. Still, some of them are trying to find something good in the current situation. They say that if Netanyahu leads the Likud to good results in the next election, it will allow them to remain in

power — even if he is forced to resign later on. What is happening now is unlike anything that we have seen over the past few weeks. The realization is spreading deep within the Likud that the man who chaired their party for years probably will not be able to extricate himself from his entanglement in criminal activities. If that is indeed the case, the current political situation is about to undergo significant changes.