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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, March 8*

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# News Excerpts

March 8, 2018

Times of Israel

## **AG Said to Want Netanyahu to Resign if Indicted**

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit reportedly believes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should resign if he is indicted on corruption charges. Under Israeli law, a prime minister does not have to resign if charged in a criminal case, only if he is convicted. Coalition members have said Netanyahu, under investigation in three graft cases, should not step down if indicted. Mandelblit, who served as Netanyahu's cabinet secretary before becoming attorney general, has been accused by critics of foot-dragging in probes involving his former boss.

See also [\*"Ex-Netanyahu aide will testify against 2 Likud ministers" \(Times of Israel\)\*](#)

Ynet

## **Ministers Flesh out Compromise to Avert Elections**

Coalition ministers have begun drawing up a plan that will be presented Thursday evening to Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman in a bid to resolve the ongoing crisis that has gripped the government regarding IDF conscription. Litzman had made his support for the 2019 state budget dependent on the passage of an amendment that would solicit state recognition of Torah studies to being equal to military service. The compromise is expected to include a quota of 3,800 Haredi conscripts into the military and the civil service which will rise each draft cycle. The sanctions currently being debated for failure to enlist, in the meantime, are strictly economic.

Reuters

## **Palestinian Parliament to Convene for Rare Session**

The Palestinian parliament will convene next month for a rare session and discuss U.S. President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a U.S. policy change that outraged Palestinians. The 700-member body last met in 2009, to replace six of the 18 members of the Executive Committee. Members will reportedly elect representatives to the Executive Committee and the PLO's Central Council to replace several who have died and others, whom President Mahmoud Abbas wants replaced.

Reuters

## **In First, Flights to Israel Allowed Over Saudi Airspace**

Air India has been allowed to operate flights between New Delhi and Tel Aviv over Saudi Arabian airspace, the national airline's spokesman told Reuters on Wednesday, ending a 70-year ban and marking a dramatic diplomatic shift. Saudi Arabia does not recognize Israel and lifting the airspace ban would reflect what appears to be thawing ties between Israel and the kingdom, both U.S. allies with a shared concern over Iranian influence in the region.

The New York Times

## **New US Embassy May Be in Jerusalem, but Not in Israel**

In two months, the United States plans to open a new embassy in Jerusalem, but it may not be fully in Israel. The diplomatic compound that will serve as the American Embassy until a permanent site is found lies partly in a contested zone known as No Man's Land, encompassing the area between the armistice lines from the 1948-49 war. Israel won full control of it in the 1967 war, so the United Nations and much of the world consider it occupied territory. The plan is for the embassy to be housed in what is now the consular services section of the United States Consulate General in Jerusalem while the search is on for a permanent site.

Associated Press

## **Arab FMs Affirm Jerusalem as Future Palestinian Capital**

Arab foreign ministers insisted on Wednesday that Jerusalem must be the capital of a future Palestinian state. A ministerial meeting held in Cairo brought together foreign ministers from the Arab League member-states. In their final statement, the ministers endorsed a peace plan presented by Abbas to the United Nation Security Council in February and his call for an international peace conference by mid-2018 with the key goals of full U.N. membership for the state of Palestine and a timeframe for a two-state solution.

Ha'aretz

## **Palestinian Parties to Run in Israeli Election in Jerusalem**

A Palestinian political party is set to contend in Jerusalem's municipal elections in October. This is the second Palestinian party to announce it will run in the elections, which East Jerusalem's Palestinians, on the whole, have boycotted since 1967. Ramadan Dabash, a social activist from East Jerusalem, announced this week he will head a ticket in the election, in a bid to break the Palestinian taboo on voting. This week Dabash, who has close ties with politicians in local and national government and once even described himself a Likud activist, met Yossi Beilin and other left-wing public figures and asked them to support his move.

Ha'aretz

## **Law Passed Allowing Revocation of Palestinian Residency**

The Knesset passed a law Wednesday allowing the interior minister to revoke the permanent residency status of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem who engage in terror or other anti-Israel activities and any permanent residents involved in such acts. Under the law, the state can deport anyone whose residency status is withdrawn. The government-sponsored law specifies three situations in which the interior minister can revoke permanent residency: If the status was granted under false pretenses, if the resident endangered public safety or security, or if he betrays the State of Israel. Under the law, the interior minister must grant an alternative status to a person whose residency was revoked if the individual cannot be permanently resettled in another country.

## **Stakes Rise as Battle over Abbas' Successor Heats Up**

By Shlomi Eldar, Analyst, AI Monitor

- The reports surfacing about the impending resignation of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are nothing new. Over the past year, similar rumors emerged repeatedly only to be proven false. Now, however, all indications suggest that the end of the Abbas era is imminent. The PLO and its largest faction Fatah, both headed by Abbas, are preparing for a change of guard. A Palestinian source told the popular London-based Al-Hayat newspaper that when the Palestinian National Council convenes in May, the PLO institutions are expected to name a successor to the president, with Abbas lobbying for his associate Mahmoud al-Aloul. In February 2017, the Fatah Central Committee meeting in Bethlehem chose Aloul as deputy head of the party, a post that had not previously existed. He had served as the commander of Fatah's armed wing, the Tanzim, but was a relatively unknown figure and his appointment surprised many.
- Top Fatah officials claimed that Abbas chose Aloul to head off more popular would-be successors, among them Palestinian senior official Jibril Rajoub, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat and even senior Fatah member Marwan Barghouti, who is serving several life sentences in an Israeli prison. The officials also said Abbas did all he could to prevent the participation of representatives from the Gaza Strip in the Central Committee meeting, fearing they would sway the vote in favor of his bitter enemy from Gaza, former Fatah senior Mohammed Dahlan. A year on, Abbas now appears determined to name his deputy as his successor to lead the Palestinian Authority.
- According to the latest reports, Fatah may not even wait until the Palestinian National Council meeting in May, as previously reported by Al-Hayat, and would announce Aloul's appointment in the coming days or weeks given Abbas' deteriorating health. Al-Akhbar reported March 5 that at a meeting of the Fatah Revolutionary Council last week in Ramallah to discuss the crisis in ties with the United States and the demise of President Donald Trump's promise of an "ultimate deal" for Israeli-Palestinian peace, Abbas told participants that it might be their final meeting. He also sought to change the Fatah bylaws so that Aloul could stand in for him in case he was absent until the movement holds elections. Concern for the 82-year-old leader and the upheaval his departure is expected to generate prompted Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to call Abbas this week and inquire about his health. No other information has been made available about their conversation. Abbas' recent hospitalization in Baltimore strengthened speculation that he is ill with cancer, although his aides insisted the chairman had simply undergone routine tests. Upon his return to Ramallah, he was quick to convene the Revolutionary Council and begin proceedings to change the bylaws concerning the appointment of his successor.
- Aloul's impending appointment is a clear sign that we are nearing the end of the Abbas era and the start of a succession battle. Anyone who thinks Aloul's appointment will find smooth sailing

within Fatah is wrong. A Fatah source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that Abbas will not disappear from the Palestinian political arena “tomorrow morning.” He declined to confirm or deny reports about Abbas’ health, but said, “One thing is clear: It’s important to establish a protocol so that everything goes smoothly once the president decides he wants to step down.” He said senior Fatah officials will support the changes Abbas seeks and will act to forestall chaos in the PA.

- However, a Palestinian source close to Dahlan said on condition of anonymity that the changes could encounter obstacles “if no consideration whatsoever is given to the role or wishes of Dahlan.” This source claimed most Palestinians hate Abbas and will be happy to see a different leadership take over. He pointed to reactions on social networks, saying, “People are expressing joy and saying it’s time for him to go.” Popular social activist Fadi Elsalameen, who in the past exposed corruption scandals within the PA, demanded that Abbas inform his people that he has cancer so that all Palestinian institutions can properly prepare for a change in government and avoid chaos in the West Bank. “People have started buying weapons, and the West Bank will turn into a battleground among Palestinian factions warring for control of the PA,” he warned. According to Dahlan’s associate, “I don’t foresee a war and bloodshed, but there will certainly be tension. People will not be willing to accept a leader picked by Abbas.” He noted that Dahlan will not make any political moves for now and would not do anything to harm his people — certainly not try to take power by undemocratic means. Nonetheless, he once again cautioned that the Palestinian people will not want to see an Abbas loyalist assuming his role at the helm of the PA.
- Abbas has been serving as Palestinian president for 14 years, since the death of PLO leader Yasser Arafat in 2004. He will probably strive to steer the leadership change gently in small, measured steps to preserve the PA’s integrity. However, he will not escape blame for consistently undermining any potential successor who enjoys public support. If the process of succession deteriorates into chaos and even violence, Abbas will be held accountable.

## **A History Lesson For Chuck Schumer On Israel**

By Peter Beinart, Senior Columnist, Forward

- Chuck Schumer is worried about young people. In his speech on Monday at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference, he warned that “too many of the younger Americans don’t know the history” of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “and as a result they tend to say, well, both sides are to blame.” And so — after a joke about a Mrs. Goldfarb who is sentenced to one night in jail for each of the four peaches she stole, and whose husband yells to the judge, “She stole a can of peas, too” (relevance: unclear) — the Senate Minority leader offered a history lesson to America’s youth. He began with the settlements. “There are some who argue, the settlements are the reason there’s not peace,” Schumer declared. “But we all know what happened in Gaza. Israel voluntarily got rid of the settlements there. The soldiers, Israeli soldiers dragged the settlers out of Netzarim and three weeks later the Palestinians threw rockets into Sderot. It’s sure not the settlements that are the blockage to peace.” Take that Israel-queasy millennials.
- The implication of Schumer’s tale is that because Palestinians kept fighting Israel even after Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza, Palestinians don’t really care about settlements. Their real beef is with Israel’s very existence. But there are problems with this logic. First, in the same year it withdrew its roughly 8,000 settlers from Gaza, Israel increased its settler population overall. In fact, some of the Jewish settlers evacuated from Gaza joined the far-larger settler population in the West Bank. And since the Palestine Liberation Organization’s stated goal was not a Palestinian state in Gaza alone, but a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, the settlements, from a Palestinian perspective, very much remained a “blockage to peace.”
- Schumer’s narrative also ignores the fact that even after Israel withdrew its settlers, it remained Gaza’s occupying power according to both the United Nations and the United States. Even before the 2006 election that Hamas won, Israel controlled entry and exit into Gaza by air, land and sea (in conjunction with Egypt, which controlled the Rafah checkpoint in Gaza’s south). Israel controlled Gaza’s population registry. And it maintained a security barrier inside the Gaza Strip. After Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, Israel and the United States — rather than supporting a coalition government that would have left Mahmoud Abbas as the Palestinian Authority’s president, as Hamas proposed — urged Abbas’s allies to overturn the election results by force. When that gambit failed, and Hamas solidified its control in Gaza, Israel dramatically restricted the movement of goods and people in and out of the Strip, which wrecked Gaza’s economy. None of this justifies Palestinian rocket fire into Israel. But it gravely undermines Schumer’s claim that, once Israel withdrew its Gaza settlers, it removed any legitimate reason for Palestinian discontent.
- Finally, even if Schumer were entirely correct about the events in Gaza, it still wouldn’t prove that settlements are not a “blockage to peace.” In his speech, Schumer declared himself a

supporter of the two-state solution. He just believes that the central obstacle to that solution is Palestinian unwillingness to accept Israel's existence. Let's assume he's right, and there's nothing for Israel to do but wait until the Palestinians stop trying to destroy the Jewish state. Even if that were true, settlement growth would still be a problem since it eats away at the territorial viability of a Palestinian state. Thus, by the time Palestinians come to their senses, settlement growth may have killed the two-state solution that Schumer claims to support.

- In his AIPAC speech, Schumer's other history lesson concerned peace negotiations. "Some say it's the borders" that are the reason Israel and the Palestinians haven't made peace, he declared. "Oh Israel wants different borders. But they forget: During the negotiations in 2000 Ehud Barak was making huge territorial concessions that most Israelis didn't like. It was [Yasser] Arafat who rejected the settlement. It's not the borders either."
- For a guy who tells others they're ignorant of history, Schumer is a little rusty himself. At the Camp David summit in the summer of 2000, Barak reportedly (the details are contested because he conveyed his offer verbally, through American interlocutors) offered the Palestinians a state on 91 percent of the West Bank, with one percent of land inside Israel proper as compensation. He also demanded that Israel retain troops in the Jordan Valley — roughly 25 percent of the West Bank — for a dozen years. And he offered the Palestinians a capital in some, but not all, of the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. For many Israeli Jews, that did indeed constitute "huge territorial concessions." But from the Palestinian perspective, a nine percent annexation — which would have included the settlement of Ariel, which stretches nearly halfway across the West Bank — would have virtually cut their nascent state in half. Which is why Shlomo Ben Ami, who later became Barak's foreign minister, declared that, "If I were a Palestinian I would have rejected Camp David as well."
- According to two other Barak advisers, Gilad Sher and Menachem Klein, Arafat offered his own proposal at Camp David. Instead of a nine percent Israeli annexation with a one percent compensation from Israel proper, Arafat proposed an equal 2.5 percent land swap. He also demanded Palestinian sovereignty over all the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem as well as the Temple Mount. Of course, there were other issues that divided the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators at Camp David, and continued to divide them after President Bill Clinton outlined his own parameters for a deal that December. The most important of these was Palestinian refugees. Some Israeli negotiators believed that if Arafat got what he wanted on Jerusalem, he would accept less than a full right of return. But he still wanted Israel to accept many more refugees than Barak would allow.
- None of this makes Arafat blameless in the failure of the 2000-2001 negotiations, and the second intifada that followed. But when Schumer tells the kinderlach that borders don't matter because Barak offered the Palestinians as large a state as they could have possibly wanted, and they still said no, he's displaying his own ignorance. As yet another former Barak aide, Tal Zilberstein has put it, "There are still people who say, 'We gave them everything at Camp David and got nothing.' That is a flagrant lie." The phenomenon Schumer is highlighting is real. Young

Americans, including young American Jews, are more critical of Israel than their elders. But it's not because they're ignorant of history. It's because they're less enthralled to myth.

- Because America's Palestinian population has grown, young Americans are more likely to know people whose families have suffered from Israeli policy. If they take classes on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they're likely to read Israeli "new historians" like Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim who — using archival evidence that was not public when Schumer attended college — challenge traditional Zionist accounts of Israel's founding. On campus, they're more likely to actually know students — including Jewish students — who support the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. And thus, they're more likely to recognize that it's a gross simplification to declare, as Schumer did at AIPAC, that BDS is an "anti-Semitic movement." The real problem confronting Schumer isn't that young Americans are ignorant. It's that more and more of them are knowledgeable enough to realize that Israeli policy in both the West Bank and Gaza massively violates Palestinian human rights. And to wonder why a Democrat like Chuck Schumer is supporting policies so antithetical to the progressive principles he claims to hold dear.