



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, March 9*

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# News Excerpts

March 9, 2018

## Times of Israel

### **Report: Arab States Advising Abbas to Accept Trump Plan**

A number of Arab countries have advised Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to accept whatever US President Donald Trump proposes in the context of his long-awaited Middle East peace plan, according to a Thursday report. The report cited an Arab diplomat in Cairo, who warned that the Palestinians may in the future “regret” not having accepted what they consider today to be too little. One key Arab country relayed a message to Abbas which stated that “a realistic reading of the situation makes it imperative that the Arabs and Palestinians accept whatever is available,” the diplomat told the paper. The paper described the unnamed diplomat as a “prominent” figure.

## Jerusalem Post

### **Shaky Coalition Deal Awaits Netanyahu Approval**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is set to arrive back in Israel on Friday, as his coalition partners attempt to finalize an agreement on haredi conscription that can keep his government intact and avoid an early election. Netanyahu will convene his cabinet and his coalition party leaders on Sunday and reveal whether he intends to seek an election. In an emerging agreement being worked out, the original haredi bill that would restore blanket military service exemptions will receive approval as coalition legislation next week, to be passed sometime in May or June.

See also, [“500 ultra-Orthodox Anti-draft Protesters Block Entrance to Jerusalem” \(Ha’aretz\)](#)

## JTA

### **White House to Convene Gaza ‘Stakeholders’ Summit**

The White House will convene a meeting next week of “stakeholders” to improve life in the Gaza Strip, Trump administration Middle East peace negotiator Jason Greenblatt said Thursday. A spokesman for Greenblatt declined to say who the stakeholders and countries are. However, there are a number of possible players who might balk at participating in the talks should they be public and potential parties whose participation could embarrass the Trump administration.

## Associated Press

### **Israel, US Troops Train Together to Counter Missile Threats**

If war breaks out in the Middle East, U.S. and Israeli forces are preparing to one day fight alongside one another to defend Israel against missile attacks from across the region. Nearly 5,000 Israeli and American troops have been training together in Israel for that very scenario. The “Juniper Cobra” exercise includes field training, computer simulations and live-fire drills of sophisticated missile-defense systems. The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah is now believed to possess well over 100,000 rockets and missiles capable of striking Israel, Gaza’s Hamas rulers have a vast arsenal of rockets, and Iran has developed long-range missiles that can reach Israel.

Times of Israel

## **Islamic Jihad Denounces Palestinian Authority Crackdown**

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) on Thursday accused the Palestinian Authority of targeting members of the terror group in the West Bank because of their “political and social activities.” In recent days, scores of PIJ members were summoned for interrogation or arrested by the PA security forces in Hebron, Ramallah, Tulkarem, Qalqilyeh, Jenin, and Nablus, said Daoud Shehab, spokesperson for Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip. PA security sources said that the crackdown on PIJ was linked to the terror group’s increased activities in the West Bank. The arrests are not linked to the suspects’ political or social activities, the sources clarified, without elaborating.

Ha’aretz

## **The Palestinians Cut Off From Jerusalem by the Wall**

This year marks the 15th anniversary since construction of the 125 mile separation wall began – a project conceived as a security need that was aggrandized into a highly potent political instrument. As proof that the wall is doing its job, Israel notes the dramatic decrease in the number of suicide attacks that have occurred in Israel since the idea was first approved. Critics of the barrier maintain that its underlying purpose is demographic: the de facto annexation to Israel of as much territory as possible, including the fewest possible number of Palestinian inhabitants. The wall’s existence, they argue, will make it even more difficult for the two sides to ever reach an agreement. Only 15 percent of the route coincides with the Green Line, while the other 85 percent cuts into Palestinian areas.

Reuters

## **UNIFIL Says 'No Appetite' For War as Lebanon, Israel Talk**

Lebanon and Israel have been holding talks nearly every day over a border dispute that has raised tensions between the two enemy states, according to the U.N. peacekeeping force on the frontier that is mediating their discussions. “There is a full engagement from all the sides and there have been meetings almost on a daily basis. The dialogue is open. No one has ever walked out from these meetings,” said Andrea Tenenti, spokesman for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Tensions have spiked recently over an Israeli border wall, Lebanese offshore energy exploration, and the growing arsenal of Lebanon’s Iran-backed Hezbollah group, which Israel sees as the biggest threat on its frontier.

Associated Press

## **Christians Emerge as Key Patrons for Jews Moving to Israel**

Israel's founding fathers, who etched a commitment to encouraging Jewish immigration into the declaration of independence, might be surprised to find that, seven decades later, the state is relying on Christians to fulfill that promise. What was once a strictly Jewish-funded mission is increasingly being bankrolled by evangelical Christians. Israel's Christian allies now fund about a third of all immigrants moving to the country.

## **Does Hamas Have the Courage to Admit Failure?**

By Jason Greenblatt, US Special Representative for International Negotiations

- Last month, a spokesman for the terrorist group Hamas dismissed our peace plan as “worthless” — even though he has never seen it — in a vain attempt to preemptively undermine any chance of a political agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. The barb was predictable; after all, such an agreement would terminate Hamas’s *raison d’être*. But after ruling Gaza with an iron fist for a decade, Hamas has a pathetic track record. In response to the burgeoning humanitarian situation in Gaza, key countries and stakeholders are preparing to act: There was a meeting in Cairo on Thursday, and there will be a brainstorming session at the White House next week to find real solutions to the problems that Hamas has caused. Increasing pessimism has led to paralysis on Gaza. Tragically, many seem to believe that Hamas’s rule is intractable and the suffering of the Palestinian people inevitable. The Trump administration, and particularly those of us on the peace team, beg to differ. Past failures do not absolve us of the responsibility to try to help. We are beholden to find a path to a brighter future for the Palestinians of Gaza.
- Hamas, not the United States or Israel, has hijacked vast fortunes and spent it on weapons to terrorize Israelis, instead of spending it on hospitals, water, schools and the many other things so desperately needed in Gaza. Hamas, not Israel, has inflicted ever-greater restrictions on Gaza by repeatedly hiding materials to make weapons in shipments of humanitarian aid and other goods being moved into Gaza. The Palestinians of Gaza have the opportunity to reject the failed policies of Hamas and turn toward a legitimate governing body that invests in them wisely and encourages their prosperity. Of course, it will take time to get there — a great deal of time — but we should start this journey today. It is a journey so critical to all of the children of Israelis, Palestinians (those in Gaza and the West Bank), Egyptians and beyond.
- The humanitarian disaster caused by Hamas’s exploitation of the Palestinians of Gaza demands that we focus immediately on basics such as power, sanitation and drinking water. Gaza is not without resources, however, and has significant opportunities to build prosperous energy sectors in natural gas and solar. Our Gaza conference in Washington will focus on ideas for how to develop, over time, a viable economy in Gaza. Of course, any such initiatives must take into account Egypt’s and Israel’s security concerns. The United States stands ready to support these efforts, along with other countries that are eager to help.
- President Trump understands that improving the lives of the Palestinians of Gaza means building a thriving economy that can become self-sustaining. This would not only serve the interests of the Palestinians (including the Palestinian Authority) and the United States, but it would also very much be in the interests of our allies Israel and Egypt. As we try to build up Gaza, we must remember: Hamas’s utter failure to fulfill any of the most basic functions of governance has brought Gaza to the brink of collapse, which has necessitated the response of

the international community. Bad actors such as Iran project outrage and promote violence abroad, notably by funding Hamas's military training and weapons stockpiles, when they should instead focus their efforts on ailing economies at home.

- Hamas must not be permitted to participate in any future government until it adheres to the conditions of the Middle East Quartet — the United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations — including by explicitly committing to nonviolence, recognizing the state of Israel, and accepting previous agreements and obligations between the parties. It must disarm and commit to peaceful negotiations. Hamas must also address another humanitarian issue and return missing Israel Defense Forces soldiers who were taken by Hamas, as well as Israeli civilians. There is a way out for Gaza, if only Hamas has the courage to admit failure and chart a new course. As most people understand, an essential part of achieving a comprehensive peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West Bank, will be resolving — and rebuilding — Gaza. The president has been clear that he wants a fair and enduring agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians that will enhance Israel's security and give all Palestinians the opportunity for a prosperous future. We are ready to work with any party truly interested in peace to reach this goal. Solving the situation in Gaza is an important step toward resolving the ultimate problem.

## **Naftali Bennett: ‘I Intend to Be the Prime Minister of Israel’**

By Susan Glasser, Chief International Columnist, Politico

- No one knows precisely when or how yet, but the long era of Benjamin Netanyahu may finally be coming to an end in Israel. Netanyahu, Israel’s longest-serving prime minister since founding father David Ben-Gurion, has already expended 13 of his political nine lives, as the veteran American peace negotiator Aaron David Miller likes to say. But Netanyahu now faces three different investigations and a recommendation by the police to indict him; many believe this time really might be different. The embattled prime minister came to Washington this week, seeking solace in international statesmanship—and the warm embrace of President Trump. And indeed, the picture Netanyahu secured in the White House on Monday was a memorable one: two politically divisive leaders, each convinced he is the subject of a “witch hunt” by overzealous prosecutors in their own party, smiling and grinning as they promised to remake the Middle East together.
- But it might have been a temporary distraction. Even as Netanyahu took off for his Washington trip, reports emerged in Israel that his former spokesman, a longtime close adviser, had turned state’s evidence. Many believe that if Netanyahu is indicted, he will have to call early elections, or even step aside. And here in Washington, the warm applause for Netanyahu at the annual meeting of the pro-Israel American Israel Public Affairs Committee on Tuesday did not obscure the fact that in the corridors and hallways were numerous would-be successors to Netanyahu—and endless conversations about how and when that succession might actually happen.
- We spoke with one of those who hopes to follow Netanyahu, the hard-line young Cabinet minister Naftali Bennett, for a special episode of The Global Politico. Bennett, a former protégé of Netanyahu’s who served as his chief of staff before breaking with him a few years back to enter politics on his own, told me in the interview he won’t directly challenge Netanyahu—but he’s ready to run and win after him—and he was sharply critical of the prime minister’s alleged gift-taking, pointedly saying he would want to run and win as a better “leader by example” for Israel. “After the era of Netanyahu, I intend to be the prime minister of Israel,” said Bennett, a brash 45-year-old former military officer and high-tech entrepreneur who is now the education minister.
- Bennett, whose conservative, largely religious party, Jewish Home, is currently a member of Netanyahu’s governing coalition, has often prodded and pushed the prime minister to the right. (“Bennett has Bibi hostage,” a veteran Israel observer told me recently, “and he is basically running the country.”) A longtime skeptic that there is a two-state solution to be had with the Palestinians, Bennett favors annexing the West Bank to the state of Israel (it’s not annexing, he insisted in our conversation, since he contends the land seized in the 1967 war already rightfully belongs to Israel). And he is clearly dubious about the Trump administration’s current promise to

unveil a grand new peace proposal that will somehow bring the two parties back to the negotiating table.

- Indeed, Bennett told me Trump's controversial recent decision to unilaterally recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital was more or less exactly what Palestinians fear: tantamount to the United States admitting that Jerusalem and all its holy religious sites in the historic Old City will be a part of Israel. This is an issue of great contention, given that Palestinians see East Jerusalem as the future capital of an independent Palestinian state and its official status—along with that of the Old City—has been internationally disputed since the 1967 war gave Israel control over the territory. “It does mean a united Jerusalem under the state of Israel,” Bennett said, even if “everyone's sort of evading that definition.” The divisive remarks underscore why Bennett would have a hard time vaulting directly to Israel's top elected office; overwhelming majorities of Israelis still support a two-state solution and even Netanyahu, though he rarely mentions it in public, has not officially changed that policy.
- Bennett acknowledged as much in our conversation, noting that he'd need to broaden his party's appeal, to “revamp” it and “open it up” well beyond its current base of hard-line pro-settlement Orthodox supporters before he could become a national leader. And in another interview this week, he said he'd be open to remaining in a Netanyahu Cabinet, albeit with the more prestigious and powerful Defense Ministry portfolio. But, however the politics shake out, Bennett clearly belongs to part of the post-Bibi future, to a conservative and confident new class of Israeli leaders who have grown up in the long shadow of a Netanyahu era defined by rising prosperity at home and fading hopes for a permanent peace.