



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, March 13*

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# News Excerpts

March 13, 2018

Times of Israel

## **Coalition Set for Crucial Day that Could End in Elections**

With no agreement on how to solve the ongoing coalition crisis, the government faces a number of key tests Tuesday that could decide whether Israelis will go to the polls within the next few months, a move that politicians and pundits increasingly say appears to be Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's preferred choice. Netanyahu spoke with Yisrael Beytenu head Avigdor Lieberman late Monday night in an attempt to find a solution to the crisis over an ultra-Orthodox conscription bill with, but neither released statements following their discussions nor reported any progress. See also, ["Netanyahu to meet with Lieberman over coalition crisis" \(Ynet News\)](#)

AP

## **Israel's Embattled PM Holds off on Early Elections, For Now**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday threatened to take the country to early elections, but said it was too soon to do so as the scandal-plagued Israeli leader maneuvered to keep his divided coalition intact. Netanyahu's coalition has been feuding over whether to continue granting exemptions from military service to ultra-Orthodox Jewish men. But looming over Netanyahu's speech was a mountain of corruption scandals. "If there are elections, we will contend and win, but we are not there yet. The hour is late, but not too late," Netanyahu told a stormy parliamentary session. "We need to make one last supreme effort to preserve the longevity of this government in its current form."

Times of Israel

## **Netanyahu: We'll Win Early Elections, But We're Not There Yet**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on his coalition partners Monday evening to make a "supreme effort" to save the government from collapse, as a crisis over the military enlistment of ultra-Orthodox men threatened to bring on early elections. "If there are elections, we will face them and we'll win too. But we're not there yet," he said. "The hour is late, but it is not too late." Speaking before the Knesset plenum in a session called by emboldened opposition parties, the premier's chief message was to members of his coalition. He called on the heads of coalition parties to act responsibly and "make a supreme effort to keep this good government in place for the long term." He added, "This effort must be made tonight, here and now, and we will make it." See also, ["Despite Calls for Unity, Netanyahu Sets Sights on June Elections" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

## **Report: Trump's Peace Plan to be Presented 'Soon'**

US President Donald Trump is expected to present his peace plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict soon, The New York Times reported Monday, citing three Trump administration officials. The White House, according to the Times, is still polishing the plan, seeking to find a formula that will ensure the American initiative is not dead on arrival. The Trump administration hopes that when the peace plan is finally put on the table, the pressure on the Palestinians to enter negotiations with Israel will increase. See also, ["Trump's Hopes of Being the 'Neutral Guy' in the Mideast Seem Long Gone" \(New York Times\)](#)

## **WH to Hold Talks on Gaza Crises with Officials From Israel, EU**

The White House will convene officials from the U.S., Israel and European and Arab countries Tuesday to discuss the humanitarian, economic and security crises in the Gaza Strip. A statement released Monday by the Trump administration described the discussion as a "brainstorming session" and said that the United States will be represented by Jared Kushner, U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, and by officials from the National Security Council. As of Monday evening, it seemed unlikely that the Palestinian Authority will be represented at the event. A White House official said that Kushner and the NSC staff "will present specific proposals for consideration to help the people of Gaza." Israel will be represented at the event by Israel Defense Forces Major General Yoav Mordechai, the Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories. See also, ["Kushner and Greenblatt to host session on Gaza crisis" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **High Court: IDF Can Evict 15 Settler Families in Hebron**

Fifteen settler families are once more in danger of a forced IDF eviction from the Beit Hamachpela building in Hebron. On Monday, the High Court of Justice upheld a state decision that the families entered the three-story building illegally last July, and it annulled an injunction that prevented their forced removal. "Justice has finally come to light," said attorney Samer Shihadih, who represents the Abu Rajab family. They claim ownership of the structure located across the park from the Tomb of the Patriarchs in the heart of Hebron's Old City. The Hebron Jewish community claims to have purchased a large portion of the structure from the descendants of the building's original owner. At issue is the legality of the sale, including the power of attorney used and whether the family member involved in the deal had rights to the property, which is registered to the Abu Rajab family. See also, ["High Court rules squatting settlers must evacuate Hebron building" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

JTA

## **Honduras & Paraguay 'Ready in Principle' to move to Jerusalem**

Honduras and Paraguay reportedly may join Guatemala in relocating their embassies soon to Jerusalem. The two Latin American nations said they are both ready "in principle" to proceed with the move on the condition that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu makes an official visit to each of their countries, Israel's Army Radio reported, citing a "senior Israeli diplomatic source." Last week, Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales announced during the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C., that his country's embassy would move to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv on May 16, two days after the United States moves its own.

Jerusalem Post

## **Abdullah: Continuing Push for Talks Towards Palestinian State**

Jordanian King Abdullah said his country is continuing its efforts to launch a renewed peace process between Israel and the Palestinians that will lead to the creation of a Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital. Abdullah made the comment during a meeting on Monday with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and several of his closest advisers at Al Husseinia Palace in Amman, the official Jordanian news agency Petra reported. "His highness affirmed that Jordan is continuing to exert efforts to revive the peace process and launch negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis, based on the two-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative."

## **Bibi Netanyahu Echoes Trump on Immigration**

By Bernard Avishai, contributor to the New Yorker

- Benjamin Netanyahu's government anticipated Donald Trump's Administration in many ways—with populist assaults on journalists, judges, investigators, and foreign-policy élites—but it has been laggard on immigrants. That's because, for most of Israel's history, immigration has been restricted to ingathered exiles, those who can prove affiliation to the historic Jewish people either by religious practice or by ethnic descent. That changed some, especially between 2006 and 2008, when Eritreans escaping civil war and forced military service and Sudanese escaping the chaos, starvation, and violence of Darfur made their way across the Sinai desert. "They were in awful shape," an Israeli soldier who had served on the border told me. "We fed them and got them medical care—they knew when they saw an I.D.F. soldier that the worst of their ordeal was over." Few refugees would have disagreed. Last week, a young Eritrean man told an audience in Jerusalem that "we thought we were passing from Hell to Paradise." But, by 2012, a southern border wall had been built, blocking that passage. About twenty thousand of the refugees left Israel, while some thirty-eight thousand, or less than half of one per cent of the population, stayed. Of the total number of African asylum seekers in Israel, seventy per cent are from Eritrea, and about twenty per cent are Sudanese; most are Christian. Another ten per cent of refugees come from other African countries. About five thousand children of African refugees have been born in Israel.
- Another ordeal now awaits the refugees who remain. Aryeh Deri, Netanyahu's Interior Minister, and the head of Shas—an Orthodox party appealing to poorer Middle Eastern, or Mizrahi, Jews—has turned the refugees' presence into a crisis. He is determined, he says, "to ease the suffering of residents in south Tel Aviv and other neighborhoods where the infiltrators reside." In January, his ministry announced that it will begin deporting refugees en masse on April 1st. Deri seems to know his country: whereas nearly three-quarters of Americans are willing to offer citizenship to Dreamers, two-thirds of Israelis support the deportations, and that sentiment is strongest among those who claim to be "religious-traditional," of whom only sixteen per cent are in favor of letting the refugees remain in the country.
- Israelis who support asylum for the Africans—including more than twenty-two hundred families who have agreed to shelter refugees from the police, if necessary—are overwhelmingly secular. They fault an Israeli majority that has failed to absorb the pathos of Jewish history. An even bigger fault, perhaps, is a state apparatus that has failed to absorb the novelty of Israeli nationality.
- The refugees were first sent to the Saharonim Prison, in the Negev Desert, where they signed declarations and were given temporary-residency papers. The nature of the declarations proved an important part of their story. Though few of them knew it, those who insisted on being designated as asylum seekers had legal rights to a judicial hearing under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Israel (unsurprisingly) was one of the original twenty-six signatories; refugees cannot be returned to countries where they may be at risk of persecution. But those who declared only that they were looking for work were issued conditional-release visas, which left them subject to summary deportation, if the Interior Ministry decided, for whatever reason, not to renew the visas. Most refugees report being

handed conditional-release visa applications in Saharonim, which they signed. They were then given bus tickets to south Tel Aviv, where many of them stayed and found work doing mostly menial jobs.

- That destination is also important to their story. South Tel Aviv is predominantly home to a part of Deri's base, Mizrahi immigrant families who arrived in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. The buildings they live in sit on valuable seaside real estate, and landlords have been systematically pushing longtime residents out. Some of them complain that the refugees, crammed in scarce apartments, are bidding up rents. Also, the amalgam of poverty, loneliness, and hostility has resulted in some petty theft, drug dealing, and prostitution among the refugees, though not appreciably more than what was already there. The refugee children, meanwhile, have significantly raised education standards in neighborhood schools, where they are taught in Hebrew. Karen Tal, a former principal of the Bialik-Rogozin School, in south Tel Aviv, told me, "These children are desperate to prove themselves. Average matriculation rates in Israel are at fifty-eight per cent. The rate for these children is close to ninety per cent."
- Nevertheless, the Interior Ministry is now refusing to renew most of the conditional-release visas. In January, it announced that, beginning with young, unmarried males, refugees will be offered a choice of self-deportation to a "third-party country" or indefinite detention, either in Saharonim or in Holot, a ramshackle camp in the Negev. (This week Holot is being shut down, and people held there are to be issued temporary papers prohibiting work or residence in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and most other cities.) What's more, an Interior Ministry panel ruled that refugees cannot claim that they face persecution if they deserted an army or evaded a draft, thereby denying protection to many of the Eritrean men. On February 15th, an appeals court pushed back against the ruling, but the ministry has yet to announce a change of policy. April 1st, the day the deportations are set to begin, is the second day of Passover.
- It is an open secret that the "third-party" countries are Rwanda and Uganda, where conditions often prove fatal. Since at least 2013, the Netanyahu government has had a deal with President Paul Kagame—a deal that Kagame denies but which, according to firsthand reports, has already been applied in some four thousand cases. Israel reportedly gave five thousand dollars to Kagame's government for every refugee accepted, and thirty-five hundred dollars to each deportee—young men who were mostly flown to Kigali. The Rwandan government issued them no work papers or residency visas; gangs were reportedly waiting to relieve them of their cash. Most are assumed to have gone to Uganda. Others have tried their luck in Libya, where a few of them—owing to their Christian origins or their Israeli connection—were murdered by Isis. Since January 1st, when the accelerated deportation plan began, some four hundred and fifty Eritrean and Sudanese nationals have left. Last month, Uzi Dann, a reporter for Haaretz, caught up with an Eritrean deportee from a previous time in Kampala. "It would be better to be in jail in Israel, where at least I would get food," he said, in fluent Hebrew.
- Support for the refugees is building. On February 24th, twenty thousand people attended a rally for them in south Tel Aviv; a few days later, young Eritreans began a hunger strike in Holot. "We who know what it means to be a refugee," thirty-six Holocaust survivors wrote in a letter to Netanyahu, "cannot understand how a Jewish government can expel refugees and asylum seekers to a journey of pain, suffering, and death." Sixty kibbutzim have joined the roster of those offering shelter. But, since 2009, fewer than a dozen asylum seekers—mostly Eritreans—have received refugee status. By comparison, three-quarters of Eritrean asylum seekers who

applied for a refugee status in Canada received it, and the European Union gave asylum to ninety per cent of Eritreans.

- **Jobs are hardly the problem. Israel currently opens its borders to about a hundred and eighty thousand foreign laborers, from Thailand, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka—not to mention the Palestinian territories. The Central Bureau of Statistics reported that, in January, there were more than a hundred thousand job openings, mostly for unskilled labor in services and construction, in areas near where the refugees live. But, Irwin Cotler, the former Canadian Justice Minister and an international human-rights attorney, who lives part of the year in Jerusalem, told me that “government visas, which increasingly deny the right to work, make the refugee employment situation unstable and often precarious, even as many are working in restaurants, construction, and cleaning positions that are helpful for the Israeli economy.”**
- **The journalist Tamar Kaplansky reported in Yediot Ahronot, Israel’s largest-circulation tabloid, that, according to data supplied by the government’s Population and Immigration Authority, there are seventy-four thousand people, mainly from Eastern Europe, who live and work in Israel’s gray economy, on expired tourist visas. They are not the targets of expulsion, she wrote, “Perhaps because the color of their skin is more pleasing to Israeli eyes.” Nor do they face the dangers that the African refugees face. Aliza Olmert, the wife of the former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and a refugee activist, told me that, in 2012, Israel expelled a thousand Sudanese asylum seekers to South Sudan, including four hundred children. Many died, and the country has since deteriorated into civil war.**
- **In many ways, the response of the majority in Israel is not unlike the anti-immigrant attitudes found today in European countries like Italy, whose recent election seems to have been warped by them. But at the heart of the problem is something that I have written about before: the absence in Israeli law of an inclusively democratic conception of citizenship, let alone democratic criteria for immigration. Canada, like Italy, for that matter, presumes immigrants may be “naturalized” to the national identity over a specific number of years, as a precursor for earning citizenship. No law stipulating a process for naturalization exists in Israel. The governing immigration law, the 1950 Law of Return, confers immediate citizenship only on Jews. The Interior Ministry may, in rare cases, confer permanent residency—and, in rarer cases, citizenship—on non-Jews. The Olmert government granted citizenship to about a thousand Israeli-educated refugee children during 2007 and 2008. But Netanyahu’s ministers openly presume that their job is to protect a “Jewish majority.” And the definition of “Jew” has become more stringently Orthodox since the nineteen-seventies, owing to a series of Likud compromises with theocratic parties and to rulings by Supreme Court justices who feel themselves bound to uphold the “status quo” agreement concluded between Labor Zionists and the Orthodox rabbinate when the state was founded.**
- **None of this means that an inclusive Israeli identity does not exist: the Hebrew language, a tradition of civil rights shadowed by persecution, national festivals from the religious calendar, affiliation with historic Jewish civilizations—in short, the new Jewish identity that Labor Zionists grasped as their modernizing project. Yet, while immigrants (and Israeli Arabs, for that matter) are commonly assimilated to Israeli identity de facto, the state does not recognize “Israeli” as a distinct nationality de jure. You are a Jew, or an Arab, or a Druze, or one of other recognized “nationalities” that were in the country when the state was founded, or else secured residency**

atypically. Israeli Basic Laws claim that the state is “Jewish and democratic.” The refugees, inadvertently, challenge the vagueness with which most Israelis grasp that term.

- Karen Tal, who now runs a management network working with schools in underserved communities across Israel, told me that the immigrant children in her care urgently need Israeli identity. “Without a sense of home, they cannot develop a sense of trust in the world,” she said. She had one student, a boy born in Israel about twenty years ago to a mother from the Philippines and a father from Nigeria. The father was deported, took ill, and died. The son told her that “if he were forced to leave Israel, he would rather not live,” she said. “Finally, finally, he managed to get a residency permit during Olmert’s time. He went on to the Air Force. So hasn’t he earned Israeli identity, and won’t all our children benefit from such diversity? Isn’t this all the asylum seekers are asking for?”

**SUMMARY:** In many ways, the response of the majority in Israel is not unlike the anti-immigrant attitudes found today in European countries like Italy, whose recent election seems to have been warped by them. But at the heart of the problem is something that I have written about before: the absence in Israeli law of an inclusively democratic conception of citizenship, let alone democratic criteria for immigration. Canada, like Italy, for that matter, presumes immigrants may be “naturalized” to the national identity over a specific number of years, as a precursor for earning citizenship. No law stipulating a process for naturalization exists in Israel. The governing immigration law, the 1950 Law of Return, confers immediate citizenship only on Jews. The Interior Ministry may, in rare cases, confer permanent residency—and, in rarer cases, citizenship—on non-Jews. The Olmert government granted citizenship to about a thousand Israeli-educated refugee children during 2007 and 2008. But Netanyahu’s ministers openly presume that their job is to protect a “Jewish majority.” And the definition of “Jew” has become more stringently Orthodox since the nineteen-seventies, owing to a series of Likud compromises with theocratic parties and to rulings by Supreme Court justices who feel themselves bound to uphold the “status quo” agreement concluded between Labor Zionists and the Orthodox rabbinate when the state was founded.

## **Why Some Jews in Russia Don't think Putin's Comment About Them was Anti-Semitic**

By Cnaan Liphshiz, columnist at JTA

- When Boruch Gorin, a well-known rabbi in Moscow, traveled for the first time from Russia to the United States, a U.S. Customs officer asked him whether he was Russian. “I said, ‘No, I’m not Russian — I’m Jewish,’” Gorin recalled Monday, 27 years after the exchange at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.
- The semantics behind the exchange, Gorin said, are the reason that local Jewish groups remained largely indifferent to a remark about Jews aired Sunday by Russian President Vladimir Putin that to foreign ears sounded anti-Semitic. In the interview with NBC News, Putin said that Russians who allegedly interfered with the 2016 U.S. presidential election perhaps are “not even Russians,” adding “Maybe they’re Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, just with Russian citizenship. Even that needs to be checked. Maybe they have dual citizenship. Or maybe a green card. Maybe it was the Americans who paid them for this work. How do you know? I don’t know.”
- The American Jewish Committee on Twitter said his remark was “eerily reminiscent of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion,’” calling on Putin to “clarify his comments at the earliest opportunity.” Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt said that Putin “bizarrely has resorted to the blame game by pointing the finger at Jews and other minorities in his country.” With his words, Putin is “giving new life to classic anti-Semitic stereotypes,” said Greenblatt, who also referenced “the Protocols” – an anti-Semitic forgery that was created in Russia in 1903.
- Putin was slammed as well for allegedly suggesting that Russian Jews are not really Russians at all. Why single out ethnic minorities, some asked on Twitter, unless to suggest that minorities, just like Ukrainians, aren’t Russian? The Russian Jewish Congress and the Euro-AsJewish Congress did not immediately reply to JTA’s request for comment on Putin’s remark. Neither group has criticized the Russian leader for what he said. According to Gorin, “What Putin said seems to have been lost in translation — twice.”
- The first time, Gorin suggested, was when the NBC interpreter used the term “Russki” in posing NBC’s question to Putin about Russians who special counsel Robert Mueller has accused of manipulating the election. That’s significant because in Russian, Russki does not mean a citizen of Russia (the word for that is “Rossianin”) but a person of Russian ethnicity. And since Jewishness is widely recognized in Russia as an ethnicity as opposed to just a religion, Russian Jews are not really considered as ethnic Russians, though they are certainly accepted as Russian citizens.
- Russian Jews by and large do not self-identify as ethnic Russians, traditionally followers of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Indeed, doing so for many Russian Jews would be akin to American Jews declaring themselves White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. But the adjective “Russian” in English does not have this distinction — that’s why Gorin had to be asked three of four times about his connection to Russia before he understood the subject was not about his ethnicity (a perfectly common and politically correct question in Russia) but his citizenship. “Putin was asked about the Russian ethnicity, so he replied about that,” Gorin said. “I

understand it can appear shocking. I think what he meant to say also is that the people who interfered in the elections were maybe part of the diaspora of former Russian citizens. That's why he named a few of the largest groups, including Jews." Ultimately, Putin was trying to distance Russia from the intervention in U.S. elections — not blame Jews for it, Gorin suggested.

- Across Eastern Europe, this linguistic distinction has plagued how officials' statements are perceived abroad — not least in Poland. Amid rising diplomatic tensions with Israel over rhetoric on the Holocaust, the Polish attorney general, Zbigniew Ziobro, said in January that "after Nazi Germany attacked, millions of people were murdered in occupied Poland, including 3 million Poles." That seemed to be in reference to the 3 million non-Jewish Poles killed during World War II, suggesting he didn't consider the 3 million Polish Jews who were exterminated as Poles. But in reality, the word "Jews" in Polish is used to reference primarily ethnicity, not nationality.
- Putin's answer in the NBC interview was translated into English without the nuance crucial to understanding it, said Gorin, who is a senior aide to Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar, the head of the Chabad movement in Russia.
- Lazar and his Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia are often accused of supporting Putin unconditionally in exchange for his regime's seal of approval for Chabad, which has helped the group become the dominant Jewish force in Russia. In reality, Lazar's group speaks out in harsh terms against expressions of anti-Semitism, including by Putin's party and officials. Gorin recently called the ousting of a Chabad rabbi from Russia on vague security-related allegations a "dark day in the history of the Jews in Russia." And he likened a Russian court's blacklisting of a rabbi's book to Holocaust distortion in Lithuania. Gorin also criticized as "patently false" Putin's assertion that Jews dominated the first communist government — a statement with serious consequences in a country with bitter memories of Soviet oppression.
- Gorin's benign view of Putin's remark is shared by the chief rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt. He does not belong to Chabad and in the past has clashed with representatives of the Hasidic group in Russia. Goldschmidt, too, said the outcry abroad over Putin's remark came down to linguistics. "The question posed to Putin was most probably whether Russians [meaning Russian nationals] meddled in the elections and it was translated as 'Russkis' [ethnic Russians] meddled in the elections," Goldschmidt said. "To which he answered, 'It could have been ethnic Jews, Ukrainians, Tatars with Russian nationality.' I think this is exactly what happened." Whereas other minorities, including homosexuals and some Muslims, have seen their rights significantly curtailed under Putin, Jewish spiritual life is experiencing a renaissance.
- The Russian judiciary cracked down on anti-Semitic intimidation that had gone unchallenged under his predecessors. Local authorities have given back dozens of synagogues and buildings that have been confiscated from Jewish communities. And Putin himself urged support for Moscow's \$50 million Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, which opened in 2012. And next month, Chabad will open Russia's first Jewish university in Moscow.
- Many observers have linked Putin's favorable policy to the deep impact that Jews have had on Putin from his early childhood in St. Petersburg. In the building where he grew up, he was cared for as a boy by an elderly Jewish couple who lived next door from the future KGB agent and Russian president's hard-working parents. After his mentor and judo coach, Anatoly Rakhlin, died in 2013, a visibly grief-stricken Putin attended the funeral and ditched his security detail to pensively walk a lonely mile around the corner. Putin even bought his late German teacher, Mina

Yuditskaya, an apartment in Tel Aviv. But Gorin isn't buying it, he said. "A lot has been said of the special love that Putin supposedly has toward Jews. I never believed it," the rabbi said. "Putin is a politician, and the Jewish ethnic minority is just that."

- Russia's long history of anti-Semitism is evidently behind the indignation by some Jewish Americans over Putin's remark. But some insist the current reality is more complicated. "Russia's history of anti-Semitism goes back centuries," the Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry said in its measured statement about Putin's words. "It is unfortunate that President Putin, who has gone out of his way to support the Russian Jewish community, resorted in this interview to promoting old and offensive stereotypes."

**SUMMARY:** Lazar and his Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia are often accused of supporting Putin unconditionally in exchange for his regime's seal of approval for Chabad, which has helped the group become the dominant Jewish force in Russia. In reality, Lazar's group speaks out in harsh terms against expressions of anti-Semitism, including by Putin's party and officials. Gorin recently called the ousting of a Chabad rabbi from Russia on vague security-related allegations a "dark day in the history of the Jews in Russia." And he likened a Russian court's blacklisting of a rabbi's book to Holocaust distortion in Lithuania. Gorin also criticized as "patently false" Putin's assertion that Jews dominated the first communist government — a statement with serious consequences in a country with bitter memories of Soviet oppression.