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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 5, 2018

Ha'aretz

With Netanyahu in D.C., Government in Crisis

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been trying to smooth out mounting tensions among his coalition partners and to reduce concerns that the Knesset will be dissolved and new elections called over a proposed draft bill. The contentious bill in question would shield ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from the mandatory draft into the Israeli military and has inspired sore disagreements between government officials that have even transcended into threats over the budget. Despite Netanyahu's attempts to quell the storm, Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman is digging in, demanding that two separate draft bills be approved along with the budget. Knesset members from Kulanu Party are also refusing to compromise, saying they insist on passing the budget without the draft bills. See also, ["NETANYAHU'S COALITION ON COLLISION COURSE TO EARLY ELECTION" \(JPost\)](#)

AP

Netanyahu is Questioned in 3rd Corruption Case in Israel

Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel was questioned by police Friday as a possible suspect in a third bribery case, the weightiest so far in a string of corruption investigations that are jeopardizing his political future. Officers questioned Netanyahu about a case involving Shaul Elovitch, an Israeli telecommunications tycoon accused of using his popular Hebrew news site to provide positive coverage of Netanyahu and his wife in return for regulatory and financial benefits worth tens of millions of dollars. A large black screen was drawn Friday morning across Balfour Street in Jerusalem. Outside, a small but noisy group of demonstrators beat drums and held placards with slogans against corruption. See also, ["Police said to ban Benjamin, Sara Netanyahu from discussing investigation" \(TOI\)](#)

Ynet News

Despite Probes, PM Hopes to Conduct Business as Usual in US

Officials in the prime minister's close circle say that the investigations involving bribery have no effect on the complex preparations that took place ahead of his trip. "I am leaving tonight for the US for an important visit. There I will meet with US President Donald Trump and I will deliver a speech at the annual AIPAC Conference," he said before boarding the plane. "I will thank him in Israel's name for transferring the American Embassy to Jerusalem in honor of 70 years of the State of Israel. I will discuss with the president first of all Iran, and its nuclear program," he added.

Times of Israel

AIPAC Chief Calls for Palestinian Statehood

While Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu no longer endorses full statehood for the Palestinians, and the Trump administration has grudgingly said it would support a two-state solution if the two sides agreed to it, the head of the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC on Sunday launched an impassioned plea for Palestinian statehood and for holding on to belief in the possibility of peace. [In remarks](#) liable to anger hawkish Israeli politicians and their American supporters, including portions of the AIPAC membership, the lobby's Executive Director Howard Kohr issued an explicit call for "two states for two peoples" and said it was "tragic" that this scenario currently seems so distant.

Gabbay: Israel's Security Depends on Peace with Palestinians

Israel must formally separate from the Palestinians in order to ensure itself long-term security, Avi Gabbay, leader of Israel's Labor Party, said on Sunday. Speaking in Washington before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Labor head repeatedly emphasized Israel's security, linking it to an effort by the Trump administration to jumpstart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks as well as a fraying bipartisan American consensus on Israel policy. "We will never compromise on the security of our country," Gabbay said. "We will not allow Iran to have nuclear capabilities. We will not allow Hezbollah to attack the people of northern Israel, just as we did not allow Hamas to harm the people of southern Israel." But, he added, "We must keep the support for Israel bipartisan. This is a strategic asset for Israel's security." See also, ["New Israeli Opposition Leader Plays It Safe In First Speech To American Jews" \(Forward\)](#)

Palestinians: PM Pressuring Trump to Present Unacceptable Plan

The Palestinian Authority believes the White House will present its peace plan in the coming weeks, after pressure by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A senior Palestinian official who recently met with Western diplomats told Haaretz that information obtained by the Palestinians indicates that Israel is pressuring the Trump administration to publish its plan quickly. Based on what Palestinians have been able to learn about the plan so far, he added, the PA will reject it out of hand, enabling both Netanyahu and the U.S. administration to paint the Palestinians as peace rejectionists. "We know Netanyahu is in distress, and he may call early elections due to Israel's internal crisis. Therefore, it's important that the diplomatic arena, especially relating to the Palestinians, not be on the agenda today, and that the Palestinians and Abu Mazen be depicted as rejectionists who bears the 'no partner' label". See also, ["Trump's Mideast peace plan in limbo as Netanyahu visits" \(AP\)](#)

Guatemala President: We'll Move Embassy to Jerusalem

Guatemala's president told the AIPAC Policy Conference on Sunday night that he will move his country's embassy to Jerusalem in May, and that the relocation will take place two days after the United States moves its embassy to the holy city, to coincide with the 70th anniversary of Israel's founding. "In May of this year, we will celebrate Israel's 70th anniversary, and under my instructions two days after the US will move its embassy, Guatemala will return and permanently move its embassy to Jerusalem," President Jimmy Morales told a crowd of more than 18,000 gathered in the nation's capital for the annual confab. "This decision strongly evidences Guatemala's continued support of Israel."

Only a Single Woman Announced to Receive 2018 Israel Prize

Only a single woman thus far was announced to have won the 2018 Israel Prize, out of a total of 11 laureates. With two names yet to be announced, Yehudit Bronicki—who won the Israel Prize for Industry along with her husband Yehuda, it was announced Sunday—is the only woman on the list. "We've received today an acrimonious reminder of why International Women's Day is still relevant," a message by the Israel's Women Network said. "It's impossible that the Israel Prize committee cannot find women worthy of winning such an important prize in 2018. Israel has many women who have made important, unprecedented achievements that should be recognized by winning the Israel Prize."

Five Things to Watch as AIPAC Kicks Off

By Max Greenwood, columnist at The Hill

- Leaders from around Washington are set to gather at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC) annual policy conference starting Sunday amid new questions over the U.S. push for Mideast peace. AIPAC, the nation's most powerful pro-Israel lobbying group, regularly attracts a number of high-profile American and Israeli political figures to its multiday summit, which is aimed at strengthening U.S.-Israeli relations.
- This year's event includes appearances by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Vice President Pence and a host of congressional leaders, and follows President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. But the AIPAC gathering also comes as Trump and Netanyahu both face growing legal investigations in their respective countries, while the president's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner — his point person on a Mideast peace deal — finds himself in a political firestorm. Here are five things to watch at the conference kicks off Sunday:

Trump officials set for hero's welcome over Jerusalem decision

- Trump's move in December to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and announce plans to relocate the U.S. Embassy to the city upended decades of American policy and sent shockwaves through the international community. But the decision was widely hailed by conservatives and hard-liners in both the U.S. and Israel, who cast the move as a recognition of reality, rather than a political play.
- When Trump administration officials, including U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, Pence and U.S. ambassador to Israel David Friedman take the stage at AIPAC in the coming days, they are sure to receive praise for the move. Haley, in particular, has been an ardent defender of Trump's decision, especially in the face of a United Nations General Assembly vote to disavow the move. The State Department also announced last month that the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem will open in May to coincide with Israel's 70th anniversary.
- Taken together, those efforts are likely to receive a warm reception at AIPAC. The event has not always drawn top U.S. and Israeli political figures. Netanyahu skipped the AIPAC conference last year, opting instead to appear via satellite to those gathered, while Trump dispatched Pence to speak to the group.
- Trump appeared at the conference in 2016 and delivered a speech that prompted a rebuke from the pro-Israel lobbying group. An AIPAC official decried "ad hominem attacks" after Trump, then the Republican presidential front-runner, took multiple shots at then-President Obama, including saying he "may be the worst thing that ever happened to Israel."

Kushner faces political firestorm amid Mideast peace efforts

- Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser was dealt a blow last week when his top-secret security clearance was downgraded after months-long delays in his background check. That was followed by the revelation in a Washington Post report that officials in at least four countries, including Israel, have discussed ways to use Kushner's myriad business dealings and lack of foreign policy experience to manipulate him.

- Those revelations add to the complications surrounding Kushner's work on a plan for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, a responsibility he was handed shortly after Trump entered the White House last year. The State Department has said that it fully expects Kushner to continue work on the effort. Still, any potential peace plan is subject to external turmoil. Palestinian leaders rebuked Washington's role in brokering a deal after Trump's announcement on Jerusalem, and the recommendation of corruption charges against Netanyahu have left the Israeli leader's political future uncertain.

Netanyahu arrives stateside amid corruption allegations back home

- Netanyahu has been a heavyweight in Israeli politics for years. But a recommendation by Israeli police last month that he be charged with fraud, bribery and breach of public trust has cast a pall over his political future.
- The accusations touch on Netanyahu's alleged role in two separate cases: one in which he and his wife are accused of taking lavish gifts in exchange for political favors, and another in which he is suspected of backroom dealings to ensure more favorable coverage in an Israeli newspaper. Netanyahu has denied wrongdoing in both cases.
- When Netanyahu travels to Washington this week, he will almost certainly look to rally his supporters in the U.S. and keep the focus away from the allegations he faces back home. The visit, which includes a scheduled meeting with Trump at the White House on Monday, also gives him an opportunity to demonstrate statesmanship with a longtime political ally.
- White House spokesman Raj Shah declined to comment during a press briefing last month on whether Trump believes Netanyahu is innocent or if the bribery charges could affect the peace process, calling it "an internal Israeli matter."

U.S., Israeli officials likely to call for swift action on Iran

- Iran has been a perennial thorn in the side for both Netanyahu and the Trump administration, making it a prime topic for discussion at AIPAC. The Trump administration took its most aggressive step toward undoing the Obama-era deal to curb Iran's nuclear program in October, when Trump declined to certify Tehran's compliance with the terms of the framework. And tensions between Israel and Iran ratcheted up last month after a cross-border confrontation between Israeli, Iranian and Syrian military forces that led to an Israeli fighter jet being shot down.
- U.S. officials, especially Haley and Pence, are likely to use their appearances at AIPAC to underscore the Trump administration's commitment to defending Israel in the face of expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East and to push for a new nuclear deal that Trump says is needed to patch holes in the current framework.

Poland's Holocaust speech law could come under fire

- The U.S. and Israel have been united in their condemnation of a recently passed law in Poland making it a crime to accuse the Polish nation of atrocities committed by Nazi Germany, arguing that the measure curbs free speech and attempts to whitewash history.
- While Poland's president has signed that measure into law, officials in Warsaw have said that no charges will be brought under the law until the country's constitutional court rules on it. Still, the measure has drawn the ire of the U.S. and Israel, putting Polish officials in the position

of doing damage control. For example, Poland sent a delegation to Jerusalem this week to meet with Israeli officials and historians in an effort to assuage concerns in the country.

- At the same time, Poland's Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Marek Magierowski traveled to Washington this week to meet with U.S. officials, Jewish groups and lawmakers, including Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) and Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), both of whom are slated to speak at AIPAC.

SUMMARY: This year's event includes appearances by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Vice President Pence and a host of congressional leaders, and follows President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. But the AIPAC gathering also comes as Trump and Netanyahu both face growing legal investigations in their respective countries, while the president's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner — his point person on a Mideast peace deal — finds himself in a political firestorm. Here are five things to watch at the conference kicks off Sunday: *Trump officials set for hero's welcome over Jerusalem decision. Kushner faces political firestorm amid Mideast peace efforts, Netanyahu arrives stateside amid corruption allegations back home, U.S., Israeli officials likely to call for swift action on Iran, and Poland's Holocaust speech law could come under fire.*

The Only One Who Gains from Elections

By Sima Kadmon, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- There is only one person in whose interest it is to hold elections now, at least based on the poll reported yesterday on Channel Ten News. And that man is Netanyahu, since if elections were held today, he would be the next prime minister. Unbelievably, the man who is immersed up to the roots of his hair in corruption affairs, when not a day goes by when we do not learn of more suspicions whose severity cannot be overstated, who during an entire term never stopped inciting entire groups against each other, whose behavior and the behavior of his family is outrageous and more appropriate for Third World countries than for the strongest democracy in the Middle East—this man continues to trap the Israeli public in jaws of steel.
- The advantages of elections for Netanyahu can be counted on more than one hand: they would take place before an indictment from the attorney general, the Likud is on an upward trend in the number of seats, the Zionist Union is on a crash trend, Lapid is not at his best even if he is stable, the opposition is fractured, and the top Likud ministers seem to have submissively and silently accepted Netanyahu's running again.
- And we can't not mention the uplifting events that will take place soon for Netanyahu: a meeting with Trump, the state's 70th anniversary events, the US embassy and Guatemalan embassy move to Jerusalem. These are all events worth gold for someone contending for the position of prime minister.
- The best proof of Netanyahu's situation is that in contrast to him, the entire political establishment will go into these elections against their will. Nobody, neither in the coalition nor in the opposition, will gain by elections now. And that's why their behavior, their continuing to ride this rollercoaster without trying to press the brakes, is incomprehensible. Unless some of them are looking out for Netanyahu's interests, who wants elections without seeming to be the one pushing for them.
- Litzman, for example. Is Deputy Minister Litzman, who is insisting on passing the Haredi draft bill even before the budget, doing Netanyahu's bidding? Is he upsetting the coalition's stability in order to reach the point of elections in coordination with the prime minister?
- And Kahlon. The man who could resolve the crisis if he would only agree to postpone the vote on the budget, scheduled for two weeks from now. Why has this date become holy? After all, nothing will happen if the vote is postponed and the parties agree on the wording of the draft bill. But to this moment, Kahlon is showing no signs of breaking under pressure from the Haredim. Did Netanyahu promise him that he could continue as finance minister even after the elections?
- And Lieberman, who cannot afford to compromise on the matter of the Haredi draft bill, but is likely to lose the defense portfolio [after elections]. After all, for him, that would be like losing a winning lottery ticket before collecting the money. Nobody is promising him that he will return to the Defense Ministry in whatever constellation is created.
- And Deri. It goes without saying how elections would be bad for Shas, which is taking a dive in seats and who is shackled by his inability to be less extreme than the other Haredi parties.

- There are too many questions in this story, and it is too early to say whether we are headed to elections or if whether, at this moment, Zeev Elkin and Yariv Levin are working out the solution to the crisis.
- Netanyahu has shown more than once that when he wants something—he gets it. The cost is immaterial. The question is, what does he want? He too knows, perhaps better than everyone else, that today's polls are not necessarily Election Day results. He too knows that three, four months are an eternity and that perhaps, with his own hands, by calling early elections, he would be sealing his political fate. On the other hand, perhaps, despite everything, he too realizes that he has nothing to lose.

SUMMARY: There is only one person in whose interest it is to hold elections now, at least based on the poll reported yesterday on Channel Ten News. And that man is Netanyahu, since if elections were held today, he would be the next prime minister. Unbelievably, the man who is immersed up to the roots of his hair in corruption affairs, when not a day goes by when we do not learn of more suspicions whose severity cannot be overstated, who during an entire term never stopped inciting entire groups against each other, whose behavior and the behavior of his family is outrageous and more appropriate for Third World countries than for the strongest democracy in the Middle East—this man continues to trap the Israeli public in jaws of steel.