



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 6, 2018

Ha'aretz

Former Aide to Hand Over Recordings of Netanyahu and Wife

Nir Hefetz, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "spin doctor" and confidant, will hand over recordings of Netanyahu and his wife Sara as part of a deal with police to turn state's evidence in the bribery case involving the Bezeq telecom giant and the Walla news site. Netanyahu, currently in the U.S. for AIPAC and a meeting with Trump, received the news at the Blair House, where he is a guest of the White House. In return for testifying against Netanyahu, Hefetz will not stand trial, face prison time or be fined. While he testifies, he will be housed at an isolated installation. See also, ["Aide turns state witness as Israeli PM visits Washington" \(AP\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Yair Netanyahu Hurt Israeli Security, Claims Hefetz

Prime Minister Netanyahu made decisions that harmed the security of Israel because he took the advice of his eldest son, Yair, over that of security authorities, his former spokesman Nir Hefetz told police, according to reports on Monday. Hefetz, who has turned state's witness, told the police that on more than one occasion, the younger Netanyahu's influence led to harmful security decisions being made. Due to the timing of when Hefetz served as a personal spokesman for the Netanyahu family, one incident he possibly was referring to was a decision to install metal detectors at the entrances to mosques on the Temple Mount, which sparked violence. The decision was strongly opposed by the Shin Bet. See also, ["Netanyahu's son to be questioned in telecom corruption graft: report" \(i24 News\)](#)

Reuters

Trump Says He May Travel to Israel for Embassy Move

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Monday he might travel to Israel for the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem as he and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented a united front against Iran in White House talks. Trump's decision for the United States to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the embassy there from Tel Aviv reversed decades of U.S. policy, aggravated Arab allies and has complicated his administration's attempt to revive long-stalled Middle East peace talks. Trump said he was considering making what would be his second visit to Jerusalem as president. "We're looking at coming," Trump said. "If I can, I will."

Ynet News

Netanyahu: I've Not Been Presented with US Peace Plan Yet

PM Netanyahu said Monday that he has yet to see the American peace plan and has not been presented with a timetable for the release of the plan. In a briefing to journalists, the prime minister said the possibility of Israeli annexation of areas in the West Bank did not come up in his meeting with US President Donald Trump. "We cannot have a negotiation with someone who doesn't want to come to the table," Netanyahu added, referring to the Palestinians. He noted the desired situation was for the Palestinians to want to resolve the conflict, but added "Is this the existing situation? I don't know." The prime minister accused the Palestinians of "trying to run away from negotiating table". See also, ["Trump dangles Israel trip for new embassy; mum on peace plan" \(AP\)](#)

Haley: Ending UN Anti-Israel Bias is a Demand for Peace

The Trump administration's insistence on fair treatment for Israel at the UN is "actually a demand for peace," the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley told the AIPAC Policy Conference here on Monday evening, in a speech met with thunderous applause and frequent standing ovations. The UN's bias against Israel, she said, has "long undermined peace by encouraging an illusion that Israel will simply go away." But Israel, she stressed, "is not going away. When the world recognizes that, then peace becomes possible" because all sides will then "be dealing with realities not fantasies" and "reasonable negotiated compromises can prevail over absolutist demands." See also, ["U.N. OBSTRUCTS ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE, US AMBASSADOR HALEY SAYS" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Security Cabinet to Discuss Death Penalty for Terrorists

The security cabinet is scheduled this week to consider a bill that would permit the death penalty for terrorists. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are promoting the bill, though the prime minister is less enthusiastic about it. The legislation is facing sweeping professional objections from the security services, however, making it doubtful that the bill will be passed. Lieberman and his party, Yisrael Beiteinu, have long supported the death penalty for terrorists, particularly in cases in which civilians are murdered. See also, ["Knesset Gives Preliminary Backing to Death Penalty for Terrorists" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Bennett, Shaked work to Resolve Coalition Crisis over Draft Law

Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked have opened an independent mediating channel in the past 24 hours in an effort to bring the latest coalition crisis to an end. The United Torah Judaism party (UTJ) threatened last week not to support the state's 2019 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. Repeated attempts to resolve the issue have so far been unsuccessful. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, currently on a state visit to the United States, spoke to Tourism Ministry Yariv Levin, who has been put in charge of reaching a compromise that would allow the passing of an amendment to the draft law, and to Defense Minister Lieberman, who stated recently that his Yisrael Beytenu party would not allow the bill to pass.

Gaza on the Brink of Explosion, Hamas Warns

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh warned Monday that the Gaza Strip was on the brink of an "explosion" because of the continued Palestinian power struggle between his group and the Palestinian Authority. Everyone "realizes that the Gaza Strip is sitting on a volcano," Haniyeh cautioned while speaking to reporters in Gaza City. "No one knows what will be the consequences of the explosion or its impact on the region," he said. The Hamas terror group, the de facto ruler in Gaza, and others have warned of an impending humanitarian crisis in the Strip, compounded by sanctions put on the coastal enclave by PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Last year, Abbas announced a series of sanctions on the Gaza Strip with the hope of undermining Hamas's rule over the coastal enclave. The sanctions included, among other things, the suspension of payments for electricity supplied by Israel to the Gaza Strip.

What Will History say About Netanyahu?

By Yoaz Hendel, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- Last month, we marked the anniversary of former Prime Minister Menachem Begin's death. Unlike my friends in the Left, who have only embraced him in recent years, to me Begin was and remains a role model. Not a perfect person, but good enough to have his name placed in front of all the current affairs to provide an example of appropriate behavior.
- Common sense, for example, can explain what happened to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the gifts affair. A public servant can't receive a regular supply of gifts worth NIS 1 million for a decade. A municipality worker can't receive such gifts from a friend who happens to live or build in the city. Neither can a Knesset member. And if we add the conflict of interest, it becomes even more problematic from a legal perspective.
- Compared to the gifts, common sense—at least mine—is having difficulties understanding the communication cases. Explaining what made Netanyahu take risks, cross lines, or get into trouble over media coverage issues. After all, the “media” never succeeded in influencing his voters to cast a different ballot. On the contrary. People like me voted for Netanyahu even when the media was homogenous, and especially now that they are more diverse and include right-wing journalists and media outlets.
- So what made Netanyahu take such a risk? My answer is: The pages of history. Netanyahu is thinking long-term. He understands history isn't written by Likud's number of Knesset seats, or by Miri Regev, David Amsalem and Miki Zohar, but by historians like his late father—the “elites” in the right and in the left. That's what drives him to try to convince them to praise the achievements of his term.
- Here's a story from 2011, when I served as his advisor. One morning, Haaretz published an article by Ari Shavit about Netanyahu's ideology. I thought it was an excellent article. He praised Netanyahu's strategic outlook and attacked his political conservatism and hesitancy. Such an attack is a blessing for the electorate. Netanyahu didn't think it was a good article, despite the bright side. He asked us to write a response, and he put a lot of time into it. The importance he gave one column is the whole story: It's the importance Netanyahu ascribes to words.
- Netanyahu is maneuvering the ship very well—not to the right, but in the center. It's only his words that are right-wing. Those who say nothing will change on the day after Netanyahu are right. The sea will remain the same sea, and the Arabs will remain the same Arabs. Anyone who believes Netanyahu is an obstacle to peace is in for a double disappointment. First of all, peace won't come—there will be no independent Palestinian state, because such a state is an existential threat to Israel. Second, Netanyahu is an “obstacle” strictly to the anger in the Right over the construction restrictions and freeze policy in Judea and Samaria. He has the ability to fool, to say one thing and then the opposite. He creates a valve for the Right to let off steam.
- Netanyahu sees the existing diplomatic limitations correctly, but as far as he's concerned, the statement is more important than the acts: Words are everything. He stands on the shoulders

of giants—the prime ministers who came before him—and politically, he is no different even from the most left-wing ones among them.

- Sometimes, I try to imagine what would have happened had Mapai adopted the Greater Land of Israel vision. The answer is there would have been 2 million Israelis living in Judea and Samaria today, not just half a million. When Mapai wanted to, it even succeeded in building huge neighborhoods in east Jerusalem.
- Some will say Netanyahu built in Judea and Samaria less than any other prime minister (his emissary to the peace talks always showed up with charts showing that Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert and Ariel Sharon built more). He does an excellent job of political maneuvering, but has trouble maneuvering his actions and their results to match the image.
- His entire advantage is in his conservatism. I find it sufficient, but those who write the history books don't. It doesn't pass the "Begin test." That's the reason Netanyahu is looking for ways to influence what is written and to influence the writers. That's precisely why he wants to convince those who don't and won't vote for him.
- Journalists have a place of honor in the history of Zionism. Theodor Herzl and Ze'ev Jabotinsky were journalists. Netanyahu, unlike his representatives on social media and his written responses, values journalists and values words. And that's where the absurdity lies: More than his weakness for gifts, his weakness for history may cost him the way he is remembered by history.

SUMMARY: Sometimes, I try to imagine what would have happened had Mapai adopted the Greater Land of Israel vision. The answer is there would have been 2 million Israelis living in Judea and Samaria today, not just half a million. When Mapai wanted to, it even succeeded in building huge neighborhoods in east Jerusalem. Some will say Netanyahu built in Judea and Samaria less than any other prime minister (his emissary to the peace talks always showed up with charts showing that Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert and Ariel Sharon built more). He does an excellent job of political maneuvering, but has trouble maneuvering his actions and their results to match the image.

Netanyahu came to Washington for a few of his favorite things. Then reality struck

By Noa Landau, columnist at Ha'aretz

- It took a little while, but in the end the winds of reality finally knocked on the doors of the White House. For the first time since U.S. President Donald Trump's "ultimate peace deal" burst into our lives, even the dealmaker from Washington sounded very skeptical about its chances.
- "The Palestinians, I think, are wanting to come back to the table very badly. If they don't, you don't have peace," he said, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sat alongside him, grinning with visible pleasure. But the words thrown out into the room, like "peace," "Palestinians" and "Iran," concealed the real purpose of the event: Netanyahu had come to Washington to receive the gift-wrapped embassy in Jerusalem from his American friend and to convey that it was business as usual.
- The two came to their fifth meeting battered and investigated. Although only a year has passed since their first festive meeting soon after Trump was sworn in, it was a year full of storm and scandal. From Netanyahu's perspective, the visit was meant to be a refreshing breeze. In the words of Julie Andrews, he came to America for a few of his favorite things – a meeting with Trump, a speech to the masses at the flattering AIPAC convention, meetings on Capitol Hill and at UN headquarters. His playground. Perfect escapism.
- But this week isn't exactly playing out as Netanyahu had wanted, and the dissonance between the warm welcome in Washington and what awaits him in Israel has never been more dramatic. As the Netanyahus were awakening in their room at Blair House, the White House's official guest house, only a few hours before the prime minister's meeting with Trump, they learned that his close aide of many years, Nir Hefetz, was turning state's evidence. Immediately after the meeting with Trump had ended, the headlines arose about the allegations from Hefetz's questioning – of Hefetz reportedly saying that their son, Yair, "influenced decisions to the point of national irresponsibility" – and they hastened to formulate a response, instead of focusing on the post-meeting briefings that are customary.
- On the host's side, the meeting took place in the midst of a family crisis, starring the man meant to lead the struggling peace process, Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who recently lost his security clearance but attended the expanded meeting. Ironically, Netanyahu used a related argument in response to the reports about his associate, Hefetz: "For seven years, Nir Hefetz has been totally excluded from intelligence, diplomatic or security information."
- The rapid death of the peace deal even before its birth was also reflected in Netanyahu's briefing after the meeting. The prime minister said the Palestinian issue took up "maybe a quarter of an hour" of the meetings, while the Iranian issue was the main topic ("Iran, Iran, Iran – that was the main issue"). He made it clear that "we didn't see a draft of their peace plan and I can't say in their name what there is or isn't. They'll decide when and what to release." He added that he wasn't given any timetable. When pressed on whether the issue of settlements came up, his answer wasn't clear, but he did say there had been no demand to evacuate anything.

- It seems that only the actual manager of the imaginary project, Jason Greenblatt, didn't get the memo. He tweeted enthusiastically, "Serious, substantive meetings with Israeli PM @Netanyahu at the White House today—the PM and @POTUS [Trump] share a vision of a peaceful, prosperous Middle East!"

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