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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 28, 2018

Times of Israel

State Prosecutor Recommending Bribery Charges for PM

A state prosecutor appointed to oversee and review the corruption allegations against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reportedly recommended charges for bribery in at least one of three cases against him. The head of the State Prosecution's Tax and Finance Department, Liat Ben Ari, believes there is enough evidence to indict both Netanyahu and Yedioth Ahronoth publisher Arnon Mozes for bribery in Case 2000, Channel 10 news reported Tuesday night. Police in February recommended Netanyahu be indicted in both cases.

Ha'aretz

Palestinian Reconciliation at Impasse

Senior officials in the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah movement attacked Hamas leaders on Tuesday, accusing the organization of trying to evade progress in negotiations for reconciliation between the factions. At the same time, Hamas claims that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is only attempting to dictate Hamas' terms of surrender. Russia has invited Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh for a visit to Moscow, at a time when a Fatah delegation is also headed to the Russian capital for talks with senior officials in the Foreign Ministry.

Ynet

PM to Visit Chad 'Soon' to Declare Diplomatic Ties

Netanyahu will travel to Chad "soon" where he is expected to officially announce the renewal of diplomatic ties between Israel and the central African nation, the Prime Minister's Office said Tuesday. On Monday in Jerusalem, Chadian President Idriss Déby said that the purpose of his visit to Israel was to renew relations between the two countries, after the central African nation severed them back in 1972.

Jerusalem Post

AG: Draft Bill Extension Will Fail and Bring Early Elections

Early elections could be forced on the coalition by a Supreme Court decision in a case that Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit told ministers in Sunday's cabinet meeting is doomed to fail. The government asked the Supreme Court for a four-month extension to pass the controversial ultra-Orthodox enlistment bill. The court has asked the government and Yesh Atid, which filed the initial petition against the previous draft bill, to submit their views on the issue by Thursday.

Associated Press

Israeli Envoy Says US Peace Plan Likely in Early 2019

The Trump administration has told Israel's government it expects to release its long-awaited Israeli-Palestinian peace plan in the beginning of 2019, Israel's U.N. ambassador said Tuesday. Danny Danon said that with Israeli elections now likely next May or June, there is "a window of opportunity for the administration to present the peace plan" early next year. If the Trump administration doesn't present the plan soon, Danon said, it should wait until next fall when there is a new Israeli government.

Jerusalem Post

US Amb Demands PA Release Palestinian-American

US Ambassador to Israel David M. Friedman demanded the immediate release of the Palestinian-American citizen who was arrested by the Palestinian Authority security forces for engaging in a real estate transaction with Jews in East Jerusalem. "Akel's incarceration is antithetical to the values of the US & to all who advocate the cause of peaceful coexistence," said Friedman on twitter. Isaam Akel's family notified the US State Department of his arrest, which took place two months ago.

Jerusalem Post

GOP Pushing for Vote on Israel Bills Before Year's End

Congressional Republicans are expected to act on several Israel-related bills before the new year, when Democrats take control of the House of Representatives. The chamber will vote in the next two weeks on legislation, which will pressure Hamas against the use of "human shields" in its conflicts with Israel, and direct the president to prohibit property transactions of individuals deemed responsible. In the Senate, Republican Rand Paul of Kentucky is blocking a vote on legislation that codifies a decade-long Memorandum of Understanding between Israel and the US worth \$38 billion – negotiated by the Obama administration in 2016 – that recommit Washington to Israel's qualitative military edge over regional powers.

Times of Israel

PM: Denying Israel's Right to Exist is Anti-Semitism

Netanyahu said Tuesday that denial of Israel's right to exist is the "ultimate" form of anti-Semitism. Asked in an interview with the CNN to react to a poll from the network indicating over 20 percent of Europeans believe Jews have "too much influence" across the world, Netanyahu accused the extreme left and radical Islam of perpetuating the world's oldest hatred, while refraining from criticizing right-wing leaders accused of using anti-Semitic tropes. "I'm concerned because I think anti-Semitism is an ancient disease that rears its ugly head. It first attacks the Jews, but it never stops with them. It then sweeps entire societies," he said.

PM's Challenges as Defense Minister and Right-Wing Leader

By Nahum Barnea, Senior Columnist

- It is too bad that Russia's President Vladimir Putin has recently given up on his heart-to-heart talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who can teach the Russian leader a few things about how to rule. "I'm only the president, how do you manage to be the prime minister, the foreign affairs minister, the defense minister, the health minister, and the immigrant absorption minister?" Putin would have asked Netanyahu.
- Netanyahu would have thanked Putin for the compliment. "My enemies say Israel is going through a Putinization process. That's nonsense. Russia is going through a Bibization process. Go and learn," the prime minister would have added. Netanyahu approved Wednesday the appointment of Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir as IDF deputy chief of staff. Netanyahu's speech during the General Staff meeting photographed well, with Gaza as the top priority on the agenda, rather than a possible war on the northern front—which only several days ago was described by the prime minister so vividly—you would think it has already begun. I accompanied Zamir during the first months of the Gaza border riots. We've spoken quite a bit. He is a professional, prudent, experienced, and stately IDF officer. Netanyahu harmed him by pushing for his appointment before his time. Zamir's competitor, Maj. Gen. Nitzan Alon, is no less professional, experienced, and stately. Alon is a brilliant man. Unfortunately for him, he served as the GOC Central Command.
- After working to enforce the law in the West Bank, Alon became the settlers' enemy. It is hard to say whether the false propaganda spread by the most radical of settlers tipped the scales against him, or whether Zamir's virtues influenced the final decision. Prime ministers have insisted to hold the defense portfolio even before Netanyahu. They mainly did it to prevent others from assuming the very important post of defense minister to be used as a counterbalance. The classic example for this is Shimon Peres during Yitzhak Rabin's first government. Rabin learned his lesson, and appointed himself as the defense minister during his second government. But this is not Netanyahu's problem at the moment. The defense minister's first task is to stabilize the situation on the Gaza border, and the decisions required to achieve this goal will not be to the liking of the right wing. Netanyahu needs someone to separate between him and the decision-making. After keeping the defense portfolio to himself, during election time, there are two options left: either the required decision will not be taken, or the blame will be placed on the outgoing and incoming chief of staff's shoulders. Outgoing Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot has already been labeled as the nation's enemy. Sooner or later it will happen to incoming chief of staff Aviv Kochavi as well.
- The good news is that both Eisenkot and Kochavi do not owe their appointment to anyone. Netanyahu's selection process was swift and nonbinding. They were appointed on their own merits. I hope Zamir will think that as well. Eisenkot will conclude his tenure on December 31st.

His term as chief of staff was supposed to be extended by a year, but he renounced it willingly, which is another reason to think highly of him. As opposed to outgoing Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh—who waged a desperate campaign to extend his tenure, as well as against his successor—Eisenkot asked to shorten his term rather than to prolong it. I think it is safe to say that Eisenkot prevented three bloody military campaigns during his time as chief of staff—the first one being on the northern front, the second in the West Bank and the third in Gaza. He did it through an extensive and bold special forces' activity across the border and far-reaching reforms in the IDF. It is a shame that citations are not given for war prevention.

Israel is Pushing Palestinians into a Pressure Cooker

By Chemi Shalev, Senior Columnist

- Benjamin Netanyahu's foreign policy has been, by his lights, a resounding success. The United States is in his pocket, at least until Donald Trump presents his "deal of the century." Europe is mostly engaged with itself, Brexit and immigration, and in the meantime Netanyahu is forging a formidable pocket of resistance with the four Visegrad countries, in exchange for an Israeli pardon for past and present anti-Semitism of some of its members. His idyll with Vladimir Putin may have been marred by the downing of a Russian plane over Syria, but the astounding progress in ties with Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries, and even Chad more than makes up for it. Netanyahu must be proud of his achievements, but his pleasure is compounded by the refutation of the dire predictions of his rivals and critics. The diplomatic catastrophe that they envisaged failed to materialize. Instead of the world forcing Netanyahu to change his views, it has embraced them. Whether he is a sagacious prophet or simply lucky beyond his wildest dreams, Netanyahu's stars have aligned perfectly: A U.S. president who thinks, speaks and acts like a ruffian fan of the notorious Beitar Jerusalem football club, an adventurous if not megalomaniac Saudi crown prince and a wave of nationalism, ethnocentrism and barely-disguised anti-Muslimism, in which Netanyahu swims like a fish in the water.
- Pushing Trump and his administration to abandon the Iran nuclear deal is Netanyahu's most prominent accomplishment but his efforts to diminish the Palestinian problem are, from an ideological point of view, far more significant. Netanyahu believes that he has arrested the "reversal of causality" which he pointed to a quarter of a century ago in his book "A Place Among the Nations": He has undercut the clichés instilled in Western public opinion by "Arab propaganda" about the Palestinians being the crux of the Middle East problem and the one that held that only by resolving it will Israel be able to find its place in the region. "Our relations with Arab countries, which are predicated on Israel's strength and worth, are actually stronger and more stable," Netanyahu told the Knesset on Tuesday.
- Isolating the Palestinians and rendering them irrelevant is a central pillar of Netanyahu's campaign to push them into a corner, crush their aspirations, smash their expectations and bring them back, with a thud, to a reality in which they must make do with the status quo for the time being and with an administrative autonomy, at best, as a permanent solution. In order to weaken the Palestinians further, Netanyahu is playing divide and rule between Gaza and the West Bank, even if this requires an accommodation with Hamas that disappoints his right-wing base. The fatal flaw in the Netanyahu doctrine is the assumption that the Palestinians will stick to the script he's written, that they will come to accept the destruction of their dreams and that the pressure cooker into which they have been pushed won't blow up in Israel's face. The relative lack of the violence that was expected to break out in the wake of the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem in May has emboldened Netanyahu to believe that the Palestinians are under control. The fact that both intifadas broke out against a backdrop of frustration and

resentment among Palestinians doesn't faze him. On his watch, the Palestinians will remain docile.

- Everyone is now waiting for the publication of Trump's ultimate peace plan. Even if he won't like it, Netanyahu is banking on his ability to maneuver Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian leadership to reject the plan first. Only then, when it becomes clear that the peace process is irrevocably moribund, we'll be able to ascertain whether Netanyahu has confounded his critics once again or opened up the gates of hell instead. If Netanyahu happens to lose the elections as well, it will be left to his successor to try and clean up the mess.