



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, December 4

Headlines:

- Israel Launches Operation to Thwart Hezbollah Border Tunnels
- Netanyahu Delivers Warning to Lebanon in Meeting with Pompeo
- Pompeo: Committed to Confronting 'Iranian Regime's Threats'
- PM Rebuffs 'Witch-Hunt' After Police Recommend Indictment
- Palestinian Leadership Has 'No Vision', Greenblatt Charges
- Thousands of Israeli Women to Strike in Protest of Violence
- Mothers From Gaza Area Petition HCJ to Stop Qatari Funds
- 900-year-old Cache of Gold Coins Found in Ancient Caesarea

Commentary:

- **Ha'aretz: "Netanyahu's Meeting with Pompeo Is a Warning to Iran and Lebanon – Before Israel Takes Military Action"**
 - By Amos Harel, military commentator at Ha'aretz
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Netanyahu's Case 4000: Cashbox for Flattery"**
 - By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

News Excerpts

December 4, 2018

Washington Post

Israel Launches Operation to Thwart Hezbollah Border Tunnels

The Israeli military says it has launched an operation meant to “expose and thwart” tunnels built by the Hezbollah militant group and stretching from Lebanon into northern Israel. The military says the tunnels are not operational and that its work to expose them, which began on Tuesday, was taking place in Israeli territory. The military did not disclose how many tunnels snake into Israeli territory from Lebanon or how long the operation would last. Israel views the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and its vast weapons cache as a major threat. The two fought an inconclusive, month-long war in 2006. The Israeli operation comes hours after Netanyahu held a last-minute trip to Brussels to meet Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. See also, [“IDF launches operation on Lebanon border to destroy Hezbollah attack tunnels” \(TOI\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu Delivers Warning to Lebanon in Meeting with Pompeo

Prime Minister Netanyahu is believed to have taken a warning to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Brussels on Monday for him to deliver to Lebanon: Stop Hezbollah’s efforts to get precision guided missiles, or Israel will do so. Before boarding his plane, Netanyahu characterized the meeting as “important,” and alluded to the situation in Lebanon. “We are in continuous contact with our American friends,” Netanyahu said before taking off. “I will discuss with Mike Pompeo a list of developments in our region, and [actions] we are taking together to halt the aggression of Iran and its proxies in the North.” See also, [“Netanyahu-Pompeo Brussels meeting is a warning to Lebanon” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Pompeo: Committed to Confronting ‘Iranian Regime’s Threats’

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday that the US was committed to “confronting the totality of the Iranian regime’s threats through maximum pressure,” during talks in Brussels on joint efforts to curb Iranian aggression in the region, including by reining in Lebanon’s Hezbollah terror group. As well as reiterating the United States’ “commitment to Israel’s security and absolute right to self-defense,” Pompeo also pledged that the US would continue “fighting anti-Israeli bias at the United Nations,” according to a State Department statement released after the meeting.

I24 News

PM Rebuffs 'Witch-Hunt' After Police Recommend Indictment

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed police recommendations that he be indicted for bribery on Sunday, speaking at a Likud party event marking the first night of Hanukkah. The Israeli leader insisted that the claims against him were baseless, calling the recommendations and the case a “transparent, so petty, and contaminated process from the beginning.” Netanyahu argued there was nothing suspicious or illegal with him being in contact with major media outlets owners after police recommended indictment for bribery over allegations that he pushed regulations benefiting Bezeq telecoms in exchange for positive coverage from its Walla news site. Netanyahu accused investigators and the Israeli news outlets for specifically singling him out.

Palestinian Leadership Has ‘No Vision’, Greenblatt Charges

The Trump administration’s envoy to the Middle East peace process lashed out on Monday at Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiator for the Palestinian Authority, accusing him of lacking “vision” in his approach to Israel. Jason Greenblatt, the US special representative for international negotiations, was responding to a tough interview of Erekat conducted by Deutsche Welle’s Tim Sebastian. Throughout the interview, taped before a live audience, the moderator repeatedly challenges Erekat to detail his accomplishments for his people. The interview “exposes many of the deep problems the Palestinians face — not least of which is leadership with no vision for improving their lives,” Greenblatt wrote on Twitter. “Tough, fair questions, no real answers.” See also, [“Saeb Erekat on Conflict Zone” \(DW\)](#)

JTA

Thousands of Israeli Women to Strike in Protest of Violence

Thousands of Israeli women will strike Tuesday to protest government inaction in dealing with violence against women — and they’re getting plenty of support. Hundreds of companies and organizations, major cities and municipalities have vowed to back the campaign. In addition, over 200 institutions announced that they will join the strike, including the Knesset, the Social Security Administration, Civil Service Commission, the Social Workers’ Union, the Histadrut labor federation, the Women’s International Zionist Organization and the Na’amat women’s organization, Haaretz reported. The strike was announced following the murder last week of two girls – Silvana Tsegai, 12, in South Tel Aviv and Yara Ayoub, 16, in Jish. Their killings bring to 24 the number of women and girls murdered in Israel this year, representing a dramatic increase over each of the past two years. See also, [“Women in Israel to launch nationwide strike after death of two girls: ‘This is our time’” \(Independent\)](#)

Ynet News

Mothers From Gaza Area Petition HCJ to Stop Qatari Funds

A group of Israeli mothers from communities located near the Gaza border petitioned Monday the High Court of Justice (HCJ) to halt the second installment of \$15 million in Qatar funds from being delivered to 30,000 Hamas officials in the Gaza Strip. Last month, amid Egyptian mediation aimed at reaching a long-term agreement between Israel and Hamas, three large leather suitcases containing \$15 million in cash entered the coastal enclave in order to pay the salaries of Hamas public servants. Additional funds are expected to be transferred in the coming months. The purpose of the petition—which was submitted through Shurat HaDin, a civil rights non-governmental organization—is for the court to issue an interim injunction ordering the state to either completely stop the transaction or to postpone the transfer of the second installment scheduled for next week.

Ha’aretz

900-year-old Cache of Gold Coins Found in Ancient Caesarea

Israeli archaeologists have unearthed a cache of rare coins and a gold earring that were likely hidden away more than 900 years ago, just before the Crusaders conquered the ancient city of Caesarea and massacred its inhabitants. The earring and hoard of 24 coins, minted by the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Muslim Fatimid Caliphate, were found hidden between two stones in the side of a well that was part of a house dated to the Islamic period, the Israel Antiquities Authority said in a statement Monday. The discovery was made during digging and conservation work that is being conducted in the area.

Netanyahu's Meeting with Pompeo Is a Warning to Iran and Lebanon – Before Israel Takes Military Action

By Amos Harel, military commentator at Ha'aretz

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's unusual trip to Brussels – the announcement in the morning and the flight in the afternoon to meet with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – is an Israeli attempt to quickly utilize this diplomatic channel to deal with the increasing security problem in Lebanon. If this had been a meeting to coordinate positions before a military move, one assumes Netanyahu would have sent one of the security professionals (the Mossad chief, or the head of Military Intelligence) to speak with his American counterparts, and the meeting would not have been publicized. But the prime minister has started the diplomatic clock. His trip, and this morning's operation on the border signals to Iran, Lebanon and Hezbollah, through the Americans (and perhaps also the French), that there's an urgent need to deal with the problem before Israel considers using military means in Lebanon.
- For two years Israel has been warning about the construction of Iranian weapons factories in Lebanon. In September, in his address to the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu revealed the location of three such sites, in which Iran and Hezbollah are allegedly improving the precision of the Lebanese organization's missile and rocket arsenal. It certainly may be that Israel is worried about other possible developments, such as Hezbollah moving its focus from Syria, where the civil war is waning, back to a confrontation with Israel in southern Lebanon.
- The changes in Lebanon, and to some extent the increasing Iranian activity in Iraq, are the result of developments in Syria. Russia is seeking to stabilize the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and has exploited the accidental downing of its reconnaissance aircraft by Syrian air defenses on September 17 to restrain both Iran and Israel. Moscow is pressuring the Iranians to stop smuggling weapons to Lebanon through Syria, and at the same time is warning Israel against continuing its broad attacks against the smuggling convoys and Iranian bases in Syria.
- These new circumstances forced Iran to change its method of operations. But Gen. Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, is pushing the envelope. The repeated reports of Iranian planes unloading precise weaponry in Beirut are posing a new challenge to Israel.
- The Israeli dilemma is familiar. During Syria's civil war, the Israel Air Force operated almost freely in Syrian skies. After the fact, it emerged that there had been over 200 attacks on targets across the border just from the start of 2017 until this past September. But Israel now has less room to maneuver in Syria, and Lebanon is a whole different kind of problem.
- Hezbollah has already warned several times that it would view any offensive action in Lebanon as a casus belli. This past weekend the organization posted a propaganda video on social networks in which it warned that it had the ability to launch precise attacks on Israeli infrastructure sites and military bases if the Israel Defense Forces attacked in Lebanon. The question before the cabinet and the security cabinet is, as in the past, whether to take a short-term risk (an attack that could provoke a response) to deal with a long-term danger (such as a weapons project).

- The increased tension in the north is coming on the backdrop of other regional developments: the American effort to exert additional economic pressure on Iran; the U.S. support, albeit delayed, for Saudi Arabia following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul; the somewhat tense relations between the United States and Russia in the region; and the American decision to reinforce the special forces helping the Kurds in northeastern Syria. In Lebanon itself, tensions between Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Hezbollah are intensifying the political crisis there.
- Israel approaches this new battle with a rather significant advantage: the uncontested support of the Trump government, at least until now. U.S. President Donald Trump coordinates with Israel and is taking a tough stance against the Iranians. And since it's difficult to predict what Trump might do, Tehran and Beirut must also consider the possibility that Washington will back Jerusalem even if Netanyahu – in contrast to his recent caution – decides to initiate a military action while risking confrontation.

SUMMARY: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's unusual trip to Brussels – the announcement in the morning and the flight in the afternoon to meet with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – is an Israeli attempt to quickly utilize this diplomatic channel to deal with the increasing security problem in Lebanon. If this had been a meeting to coordinate positions before a military move, one assumes Netanyahu would have sent one of the security professionals (the Mossad chief, or the head of Military Intelligence) to speak with his American counterparts, and the meeting would not have been publicized. But the prime minister has started the diplomatic clock. His trip, and this morning's operation on the border signals to Iran, Lebanon and Hezbollah, through the Americans (and perhaps also the French), that there's an urgent need to deal with the problem before Israel considers using military means in Lebanon.

Netanyahu's Case 4000: Cashbox for Flattery

By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- The fourth and current government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was established on May 14, 2015. During the coalition negotiation process, the prime minister made far-reaching concessions to Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon (Kulanu), Education Minister Naftali Bennett (Bayit Yehudi) and to the ultra-Orthodox parties. In return, he insisted on one thing: to serve as communications minister as well as prime minister.
- In addition, the coalition will commit, in advance, to supporting any decision he makes as the minister of communications. Netanyahu did not insist on the coalition's commitment to other issues like the Greater Israel, national security, the preservation of democratic values or the sanctification of the Jewish nation.
- Netanyahu was only interested in the media. He was obsessed, according to people who participated in the negotiation process. He behaved like a child who had access to all the toys in the store, but he wanted just one toy—the one he was not allowed to touch.
- The Ministry of Communications was born out of the Ministry of Postal Services: a modest, essentially technical, regulatory work, which experts committees recommended closing down repeatedly in order to establish a clerk-run authority instead. Since during the negotiation process there is always someone who is left without a portfolio of any kind—the ministry wasn't shut down. It became an office for losers.
- The prime minister wanted to be in command of the Ministry of Communications not because he wanted to run it, but because he wanted to even the score. The enemy is the media. The key is to conquer it by force. What Sheldon Adelson did to the print media, would be done to websites and television channels. Shaul Elovitch, the chairman and main shareholder of Bezeq will be the first: his news site will take order from the prime minister's residence on Balfour Street. If he behaves, he will benefit from the ministry's regulatory powers. Then others will follow. Let every tycoon and oligarch know—those who behave—enjoy the pleasures of government.
- In his fourth term, Netanyahu chose to be a vigilante—the poor man's Charles Bronson (American actor who was often cast as a vigilante in films with revenge-oriented plot lines—ed.), if you will. The opposite happened to Ariel Sharon: Sharon was at peace when he took office. He wanted to charm his opponents, not to break them. Netanyahu took office in a rage—obsessive and seeking revenge.
- At the time, I wrote that Netanyahu's insistence on taking on the communications portfolio must end with a State Comptroller investigation, if not with a police investigation. The writing was on the wall: government regulation overpowered by personal agendas; the dismissal of a professional CEO in favor of a political trustee who lacked skills; the appointment of lawyers—the prime minister's cousins—who specialize in communications; and a controlling shareholder of a large communications company that suddenly becomes—along with his wife—a close friend.

- I never met Elovitch. People who worked with him in the past claim he's not unpleasant, but rather a positive individual who bit off far more than he could chew. Then came Netanyahu and promised to approve all of his requests, and give him a gift that would make him the richest man in the country. It was an offer that could not be refused.
- Yes, the timing of the police recommendations' publication was a bit off. "How can you do such a thing on the eve of the holiday," Minister of Social Equality Gila Gamliel (Likud) exclaimed Sunday. Hanukkah, which is considered a minor holiday in our tradition, suddenly became the most sacred Jewish holiday. "When you will have prepared the slaughter for the blaspheming foe," Netanyahu's Likud followers chanted.
- Yes, the outgoing Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh gave an unsuccessful interview to Ilana Dayan, as far as he's concerned. The claim that the prime minister had police investigators followed hasn't been proven. However, One mustn't forget what Netanyahu did to Alsheikh: he appointed him, at first, and then, upon realizing that Alsheikh was faithful to his job, and not to Netanyahu, he launched an insult-driven campaign to humiliate the police commissioner. Alsheikh did not take office to incriminate the premier. Netanyahu brought this upon himself.
- Yes, police investigators' involvement in the relationship between news sources and media is extremely problematic, to say the least. The media in a democratic country cannot operate properly without having access to sources. There is an element of give and take in this relationship; we mustn't let it become a criminal offense.
- All these reservations melt away when placed against the serious findings of the joint Tax Authority and police investigation. Elovitch was not a media person and Netanyahu was not his source. If the police are right, they made a profitable deal—cashbox for flattery—NIS 1 billion for positive news coverage. The deal felt so natural that it did not even occur to them that it was bribery. Nevertheless, the police recommendations are not the end of the story. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit and the State Prosecutor's Office, who were deeply involved in the investigation, will not be able to escape its conclusions. The police have set a high standard for Mandelblit, but how he will deal with it remains to be seen.

SUMMARY: All these reservations melt away when placed against the serious findings of the joint Tax Authority and police investigation. Elovitch was not a media person and Netanyahu was not his source. If the police are right, they made a profitable deal—cashbox for flattery—NIS 1 billion for positive news coverage. The deal felt so natural that it did not even occur to them that it was bribery. Nevertheless, the police recommendations are not the end of the story. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit and the State Prosecutor's Office, who were deeply involved in the investigation, will not be able to escape its conclusions. The police have set a high standard for Mandelblit, but how he will deal with it remains to be seen.