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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, December 31*

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# News Excerpts

December 31, 2018

Times of Israel

## **Report: AG Looking at Charges for PM Breach of Trust**

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit reportedly does not agree with police that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should be tried for bribery in one of the three corruption cases against him, instead leaning toward a breach of trust charge. Police have recommended that Netanyahu face bribery charges in all of the cases against him. But Channel 10 news reported Sunday that Mandelblit had told judicial officials that he is mulling the lesser charge.

Jerusalem Post

## **New Settlement Project Planned Near Bethlehem**

Israel intends to draft plans for new construction — possibly as much as 2,500 homes — on a hill in the Efrat settlement next to Bethlehem. The project has been dubbed E2 by left-wing opponents who hold that it would prevent any further development of Bethlehem, whose growth is already stymied by the Jewish Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Homa. Settlers renewed their campaign for construction on that hilltop in September, after Efrat resident Ari Fuld, 45, was stabbed to death by a Palestinian terrorist.

Times of Israel

## **IDF: West Bank Terror Drops 4th Year in a Row**

Palestinian terror attacks in the West Bank dropped for the fourth consecutive year, the IDF said Monday. In 2018, the army documented 87 “terror events,” 10 fewer than the 97 recorded in 2017. This was a steep decline from the 169 in 2016 and 219 terror attacks in 2015. The IDF also considers attacks on soldiers, not just civilians, to be terror attacks. Sixteen Israelis were killed in West Bank terror attacks in 2018: nine civilians and seven soldiers — a slight decrease from the 20 killed in 2017, 12 of whom were civilians.

Times of Israel

## **Lifting Produce Bans, Israel and PA End Trade War**

Israel and the Palestinian Authority reversed bans on each other’s fruit and vegetable imports, ending a short-lived trade conflict. Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel had ordered authorities not to permit Palestinian fruit and vegetable imports into Israel on December 17 after the PA instructed Palestinian meat-sellers to stop purchasing lamb from the Jewish state. The PA responded to the ban on Palestinian fruit and vegetable imports last Thursday with a decision to bar the entry of Israeli fruit, vegetable and poultry imports into Palestinian markets.

Ynet

## **Bennett, Shaked Party Will Still Unite with Jewish Home**

Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked split on Saturday from their Jewish Home party to form the New Right, but are expected to return to the fold once the elections are over, Israeli media reported Sunday. The New Right intends to draw votes from the secular right-wing, currently the domain of Netanyahu's Likud Party. Meanwhile, Jewish Home will focus on gathering voters from the religious-Zionism population. After the elections, he two will would form a joint faction on the assumption that this plan will exceed their current combined Knesset seats.

Ha'aretz

## **Election Polls: 6-14 Seats for 'New Right,' Labor Crashes**

The new party launched by Bennett and Shaked would receive between six and 14 seats in the Knesset if elections were held today, according to polls released over the weekend. Jewish Home, still leaderless, would fail to cross the electoral threshold of four seats, according to two of the polls. According to one poll, thirty-six percent of respondents said they prefer Netanyahu for prime minister, while 29 percent chose Gantz. The polls further showed that Netanyahu's Likud would win the election were it held today with 27 to 31 seats. Gantz's party would come in second with 14 or 15 seats, two of the polls said, while the third showed Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid finishing second with 16 seats. Zionist Union, which includes Avi Gabbay's Labor, continued to crash in the polls, winning only eight to nine seats.

Times of Israel

## **Ya'alon Rejects Joining a Netanyahu Government**

Former Likud defense minister and IDF chief Moshe Ya'alon on Saturday ruled out serving in a government led by Netanyahu, as he pursues talks with former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz to form a political bloc that could challenge the ruling Likud party. Ya'alon has become an outspoken critic of Netanyahu since resigning in 2016. On Tuesday, Ya'alon announced he would form a new party ahead of early elections in April. Yaalon did not rule out sitting in a government with Likud, however, if his former party were to replace Netanyahu.

Times of Israel

## **PM to Lower Electoral Threshold to Protect Right-Wing**

Israel's government is reportedly preparing to lower the electoral threshold ahead of the April elections, amid fear that growing divisions within the political right could leave some parties out of the next Knesset. Netanyahu intends to start promoting the lowering of the threshold, which currently requires parties to win at least four seats to enter the 120-seat parliament,. There have been previous unsuccessful efforts to lower the threshold, which in 2014 was raised to 3.25 percent to prevent small Arab and far-right religious parties from being elected.

## **Burned by Old Religious Zionists, Bennett Seeks New Path**

By Raoul Wootliff, Columnist

- Announcing that they would be leaving the Jewish Home party to forge a “true partnership between secular and religious,” Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked on Saturday lamented they had lost their influence over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and claimed they needed a new political platform to have a real impact. Since first taking control of Jewish Home in 2012, Bennett has always pitched himself as the right-wing force keeping a flaky Netanyahu from drifting leftward. “We need a strong Jewish Home to keep the government on the right path,” he argued during both the 2013 and 2015 election campaigns.
- Using their Saturday announcement of the “HaYamin HeHadash” (“The New Right”) party to slam the premier for a series of recent policy decisions they denounced as having “strayed from the path of the right,” Bennett and Shaked appeared for the first time to be making a bid to replace him — or at least to run an election campaign that directly challenges him. Netanyahu’s legal woes seem to be closing in and many legal analysts predict that even if he wins the next election — as current polls show he will — the prime minister could be forced to step down within a year of the April vote. With the rumblings of that potential earthquake already beginning to shake the political scene, Bennett is clearly keen to make the case for himself as the next prime minister.
- The problem for Bennett, as he made clear in his Saturday statement, is the Jewish Home party. While he and Shaked have tried for the past six years to modernize the now-moribund National Religious Party, he realizes that in order to mount a real challenge to the current right-wing hegemony of the Likud, he must reach new voters. Previous attempts by the two to have Jewish Home shed its religious image have been met with only middling success. Bennett and Shaked both began their political careers as senior aides to Netanyahu when he was head of the opposition in 2006, but abruptly left Likud in 2008 amid rumors of disagreements with the Netanyahu family. Their move to Jewish Home, engineered in part by the recently departed Avichai Ronsky, a settler leader and the former chief rabbi of the IDF, was based on the idea that the religious right needed to be reinvigorated and that this must include cooperation with Israelis who are not Orthodox.
- This approach also sidelined the last vestiges of the old National Religious Party in favor of a more energetic version even less beholden to democratic rule and willing to toy publicly with explosive ideas — like backing vast judicial reform and pushing an aggressive plan to annex settlement blocs. They initially succeeded in reaching new audiences, boosting the party from just three seats to an impressive 12 in the 2013 elections. While they were on the path to a similar result in the 2015 elections, however, Netanyahu’s warnings about the dangers of a Zionist Union victory led voters to flock to Likud, leaving the Jewish Home with just eight seats.

- Woven into Bennett's statement Saturday night was an indictment of the religious Zionist community for failing to give him its full support, instead repeatedly turning back to Netanyahu when he demanded. Lamenting that the party had "lost its great influence" over Netanyahu, Bennett appeared not so much to accuse the prime minister of turning leftward, as to blame his own voters for not allowing him to pressure the premier. In the most recent example of this behavior, Bennett said his November ultimatum to Netanyahu to be made defense minister following Avigdor Liberman's resignation was made hollow when he lost the support of religious Zionist leaders.
- At the time, Bennett's demand appeared to be a bold statement that without more influence and clout over Netanyahu, he simply could no longer continue to lend his support to a premier who had, of late, betrayed the right with a slew of decisions that he believed had weakened Israel's security. "It's either the Defense Ministry or we are out. This is our ultimatum to stay in the government," party officials said then. But after days of belligerent statements promising to "make Israel win again," Bennett was forced to humiliatingly walk back his threat. Religious leaders who form the backbone of Jewish Home had proven receptive to Netanyahu's argument that due to Israel's sensitive security situation it would be irresponsible to go to early elections. Netanyahu, Bennett said Saturday, sent his emissaries to the heads of religious Zionism to bring that message home. "He did everything to persuade the religious Zionist community, this good community... And they stood silent. We were forced to fold." Bennett said. And yet five weeks later, Netanyahu reversed his position, and early elections were called. "The prime minister understood that the religious Zionists are in his pocket," Bennett claimed.
- Bennett and Shaked now say they are seeking to build a party which would achieve what Jewish Home couldn't — "true partnership between secular and religious [Israelis]." To make an impact, they will certainly need to find new voters, those previously unreachable due to their view of Jewish Home as representative of old religious Zionist sectarianism. But to really challenge Netanyahu, Bennett and Shaked appear to believe they also need to shed old voters who have held them back.

## **Eyeing End of Netanyahu Era, Bennett Ditches the Settlers**

By Yossi Verter, Senior Columnist

- Even before Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked kept their promise to jointly lead their New Right (Hayamin Hehadash) party, they proved they can successfully sing a duet. They didn't let the lone heckler in the audience that came to hear them announce their divorce from Habayit Hayehudi disturb them; each sang their part, like gifted middle-schoolers. They are stage partners, not just political partners. Six years after conquering Habayit Hayehudi virtually unopposed and asserting "something new begins," they're again rebooting themselves and their political careers. One hundred days before the election, they are throwing two monkeys off their collective backs: the archaic institutions that Habayit Hayehudi inherited from its predecessor, the National Religious Party, and the ultra-Orthodox Zionists who forced them to ally with extremist, messianic, racist, benighted homophobes like MKs Bezalel Smotrich and Moti Yogev, and to a lesser extent Eli Ben-Dahan and Nissan Slomiansky.
- At their press conference Saturday night, Bennett took his revenge on the religious Zionist community that twice betrayed him by voting for Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party. "The prime minister understood that the wonderful religious Zionists are in his pocket; however much he abuses them, they'll stick with him," Bennett said. Wonderful, but stupid and easily manipulated, according to Bennett. He blamed those "wonderful" people from the West Bank hilltops for the fact that almost two months ago he and Shaked had to withdraw their threat to resign from the cabinet after Netanyahu's "prelude to war" speech. They may well have decided to leave that very night, when rabbis and settler activists pleaded with them not to quit, because war would soon break out. In effect, Bennett told the settlers Saturday night: "It's not us, it's you." Shaked and Bennett aspire to conquer the top portfolios — defense, finance and/or foreign affairs — and then ascend to the summit. They concluded, logically enough, that the embarrassments caused by Smotrich and Yogev would condemn them to be a niche party forever.
- It's a brave but very dangerous gamble for the entire pot. With Habayit Hayehudi, they had at least seven or eight guaranteed Knesset seats, and 12 or 13 in the polls. That power base got them two senior portfolios, education and justice, last time. Nobody can promise they'll do as well this time. Their working assumption is correct: Only with an all-Israel party could they fulfill their aspirations. Such a party could merge with Likud in the post-Netanyahu era. Today, that option is closed, due to the primeval hatred Netanyahu and his wife bear them.
- Bennett and Shaked understand, as many people do, that the Netanyahu era is nearing its end. Netanyahu may be re-elected, but his fate will be decided by the attorney general or the High Court of Justice. They want to be ready for a merger, nimble and free of excess baggage. In the upcoming election, six parties will vie for the right's votes: Likud; Habayit Hayehudi, which will apparently fall into Smotrich's hands; Orli Levi-Abekasis' new Geshet party; Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu; Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu and the New Right. In the 100 days remaining,

can the latter consolidate serious political power among right-wing voters and attack the other parties from behind? That's what Bennett and Shaked are counting on. Once again, something new begins.