



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, January 10*

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# News Excerpts

January 10, 2019

Ynet

## **Israeli Police Expand Jewish Terror Probe**

Israel Police on Wednesday summoned another 30 students at the Pri Haaretz yeshiva in the West Bank settlement of Rehelim for questioning over the murder of a Palestinian woman last year. Police believe that the death of Aisha al-Rawbi in October 2018 is linked to five members of the yeshiva who are currently in custody. Police have already questioned around 30 other youths who attend the yeshiva on suspicion of throwing stones at the vehicle in which al-Rawbi was driving. The five suspects held by police will remain in custody at least until Thursday.

Ynet

## **IDF Soldiers Arrested for Allegedly Beating Detainees**

The IDF arrested a platoon commander and four combat soldiers from the religious battalion Netzah Yehuda Thursday for allegedly beating two Palestinians who were held in custody. The soldiers were to be brought before a military court Thursday for their remand hearing. About a month ago, two soldiers from the battalion tried to free settlers who were in custody for throwing stones at Palestinians.

Jerusalem Post

## **Ex-IDF Chief Ashkenazi Pursued by Center-Left Parties**

Former IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi continued to play hard to get on Wednesday, pursued by leaders of Yesh Atid, Labor, Hatnua and former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz's party. They all view Ashkenazi as a political game-changer who could advance their respective parties significantly. Channel Ten reported Wednesday night that Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid had met with Ashkenazi on Friday and offered him "decisive influence" over the party's decisions, along with the second slot on the Yesh Atid list and a senior ministerial portfolio. Gantz is reportedly waiting to draft Ashkenazi before delivering his first public address since entering politics.

Times of Israel

## **PM Never Confirmed Request to Confront Witnesses**

A senior source close to the investigation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed back against a claim that the premier was denied a request to confront his accusers in a series of graft cases, Israeli television reported Wednesday. The unnamed source confirmed that Netanyahu twice requested a confrontation, but added that he then said needed to check with his lawyers first. The source said that Netanyahu never got back to them with a final response, even though they told him they could make a confrontation happen.

Ha'aretz

## **PM Raised \$300K in Legal Defense Fees Without Permission**

Netanyahu and his wife received \$300,000 from businessman Nathan Milikowsky to fund their legal defense in pending criminal investigations without getting permission to accept the sum from State Comptroller's Office. The committee is responsible for evaluating any action by a cabinet minister that could pose a conflict of interest. Recently the permits committee rejected a request from Netanyahu to receive funding for his legal defense from two American businessmen — Milikowsky, who is the prime minister's cousin, and Spencer Partrich.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel's Arab Citizens Split Over Leadership of Joint List**

Forty-seven percent of Arabs who hold Israeli citizenship would prefer lawmaker Ahmad Tibi as chair of Join List political party over the current leader in the upcoming election, according to a poll published in Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth. Current party chair, Ayman Odeh, received support by only 20 percent of Arab voters. The poll also found that Tibi's party Ta'al would receive 43 percent of Arab votes if the election was held today, compared with 38 percent who said they'd vote for an alliance of the other Arab parties.

JTA

## **Christian Zionist Lobby Meets With DC Jewish Federation**

Christians United for Israel has become a key player in recent years in Congress' passing of legislation favored by the more hawkish elements of the pro-Israel community. This week, two top officials met with officials of one of the country's most liberal Jewish communities. The trip was tailored toward reassuring liberal Jews that the organization was not an enemy, and it was coordinated by the local Jewish community relations council, although CUFU footed the bill for the short trip. Ron Halber, the executive director of the JCRC of Greater Washington, said diminishing support for Israel in the broader community led him to organize the fly-in.

Ha'aretz

## **On Edge of Jerusalem, Jews and Arabs Shop Together**

The parking lot is open, but the escalators aren't working yet at Atarot Mall, a new, two-floor, \$54 million project built by supermarket king Rami Levy on the seam between Arab and Jewish Jerusalem. About one-third of the 50 planned stores were open on Tuesday in Atarot, the location of a large industrial park in northern Jerusalem, where Palestinian and Jewish neighborhoods brush up against one another, inside the expanded municipal limits where Israel has claimed sovereignty since the 1967 war. Just across from the brand-new mall is the gray concrete expanse of the security barrier that divides Israel from the West Bank (and runs through the neighborhood of Beit Hanina), a stretch of wall that makes for a vivid and potent symbol of the limits of coexistence.

## Can Qatar Help Hamas Without Embarrassing Netanyahu?

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist

- It was entirely foreseeable. The heads of Israel's defense establishment believe that Qatar's financial grant to Gaza played a major role in preventing an armed conflict between Israel and Hamas, but now the third installment of that grant is at risk. As of Jan. 8, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has given an order that the money is not to be transferred to the Gaza Strip, and Hamas is once again threatening Israel. Even at the time of the first installment in November 2018, Netanyahu was forced to push back against sharp criticism from members of the coalition and the opposition. They claimed that he had succumbed to Hamas. Minister Naftali Bennett said that Israel was paying "protection money" to a terrorist organization, which endangered Israel. In fact, the Qatari payment was one of the major factors that threatened his government's stability. Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman left the coalition over it, claiming that Israeli policy with regard to Gaza was too "lax." Liberman already understood what Netanyahu was trying to suppress: There is no way to argue that Hamas is a terrorist organization, which invests its resources in digging terror tunnels and improving its military capacities, if you transfer suitcases stuffed with money to it through the Erez crossing.
- Contrary to the first installment, when the second installment was paid Dec. 6, there were no photos of suitcases stuffed with cash. While this was all part of a plan to moderate public disapproval, it still left a crack in the armor of "Mr. Security" and failed to spare Netanyahu from the anticipated criticism. Avi Gabbay, chair of the Zionist Camp, which has since broken up, lashed out at Netanyahu's policies, saying, "Millions of dollars are flowing at the moment via Israel to Hamas — corrupt money [going] into the pockets of terrorists who have been shooting at residents of the south. This corrupt approach can be changed. It has to be changed."
- Things have gotten even more complicated since then. Netanyahu appointed himself as defense minister to replace Liberman, he called an early election and is now battling with all his might to prevent the attorney general from indicting him on criminal charges before the upcoming elections in April. On Jan. 7, Netanyahu promised Israelis a "dramatic announcement," but really seemed rather nervous and scared when he complained about the country's legal system, and demanded that he be allowed to confront the state witnesses who have given testimony against him. Given all this, it seems highly unlikely that he would be willing to come under further criticism for transferring even half a suitcase of cash to the Gaza Strip.
- According to an article in The New Arab Dec. 27, Netanyahu sent a message to Hamas that he wants a long-term cease-fire now, because he advanced the Israeli election. What Hamas wants is Qatari money. Failure to transfer it could lead to an unwanted armed conflict between it and Israel. Then there is the deepening rift between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), which continues to hover in the background. On Jan. 6, President Mahmoud Abbas ordered PA inspectors to leave the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. It was the latest in a

series of steps through which he is trying to disassociate his government from the Gaza Strip, which has not been controlled by the PA for over a decade now. The bottom line is that \$15 million were not transferred to Gaza this month. In response, either Hamas or some group acting on its behalf fired a warning rocket at Israel on the night of Jan. 6-7. The rocket was shot down by the Iron Dome missile defense system. This is Hamas' undiplomatic means of declaring its intent: If there is no money, there will be rockets instead. In response, the Israeli air force bombed "several targets at a Hamas training camp in the northern Gaza Strip." That is Israel's way of warning Hamas to avoid any escalation of violence.

- Over the last few days, Qatari emissary to Gaza Mohammed al-Emadi asked the Hamas leadership to give him and Israel time to come up with creative ways to transfer the money without causing public opinion in Israel to explode in anger. But it is not that simple. What kind of scrutiny will the money transferred to Hamas really be subject to? And how can Netanyahu's fingerprints be wiped clean, since they are all over the money? Off the record, the joke now making the rounds in the Israeli civil administration is that the best way to transfer the money to Gaza is through the tunnels. More seriously, while Israel realizes that this money is essential, the way it actually gets to Gaza is a big problem. In response to criticism, Netanyahu boasted that Israel knows the name of everyone who receives a salary in the Gaza Strip, and that the money would only be used to pay the salaries of people working in the civil service. Qatar even helped out by leaking that \$150,000 in unclaimed money was left over from the last installment. In other words, everything is under strict supervision, and not a single cent was transferred to the Hamas war chest.
- Israel recently looked into the possibility of transferring the suitcases of money into Gaza through the Rafah border crossing, since that would place the onus of responsibility on Egypt. This would be the best solution, at least as far as Netanyahu is concerned. The problem is Egypt. While it has been pushing for an arrangement and mediating between the two opposing sides, it is hostile to the wealthy Gulf emirate, which has been causing Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi all sorts of problems. As such, the Egyptians are absolutely unwilling to allow Qatar into the country, even for this. An Israeli defense official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "The Egyptians couldn't care less if Gaza explodes. All that matters to them is that they have nothing whatsoever to do with the Qataris."
- Israel is also looking into the possibility that the task of transferring the money to Gaza be handed over to the donor nations. The problem is that Qatar is not willing to obscure the money trail. As far as it is concerned, the money is a gift from the Qatari people to the people of Gaza. No credit to Qatar would therefore mean no money for the Gaza Strip. So, what's left? There is the possibility of wiring the sum directly to a bank in Gaza, where a Qatari representative would withdraw it and immediately deposit it in the accounts of everyone owed a salary. The problem with this is that the actual money would still need to be transferred physically to Gaza, so that the newly paid employees can withdraw their salaries. Nevertheless, of all the aforementioned options, this is the one favored by Israel.

- Meanwhile, the failure to transfer the Qatari money to Gaza immediately could expedite an armed conflict with Hamas. As the source explained, “The money is intended for the people of Gaza. Without salaries or the minimum ability to make purchases, Gaza will collapse. This means more demonstrations along the border fence, more incendiary balloons and perhaps even more rockets.” He went on to claim that so far, Hamas has prevented mass demonstrations along the fence, but that economic pressure could cause Gazans to lose hope and to risk another border war simply because they have no choice. How patient is Hamas? That’s a question that only they can really answer, though it looks like their patience is already wearing thin. It will likely be gone in a matter of days at the very most.

## **Visibly Shaken Netanyahu Blows Live TV Address**

By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist

- Even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's sworn followers are beginning to wonder if he has begun to lose it. Netanyahu's people promised a "dramatic announcement" on primetime TV, but his appearance on the evening of Jan. 7 was far from it and very far from what he usually delivers. Netanyahu is one of the best orators in the history of Israeli politics who knows how to steal the show with magnetic and impressive performances. On Monday evening he did just the opposite: This was a pale, unconvincing, frightened Netanyahu who looked like a trapped animal surrounded by hunters. Still, it is possible that it was precisely the impression that Netanyahu wanted to make. He knows how to manipulate his constituents' emotions and motivate them to try to save him; as he did on the eve of the last elections in March 2015.
- "It was the appearance of someone who finally put two and two together, who suddenly understood that he lost control over his situation and his fate," said a senior Israeli political figure who was loyal to Netanyahu for a long time, adding to AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "Evidently he understood that the attorney general is really going to indict him and announce his decision even before elections." Netanyahu made a number of mistakes on the way to the appearance. They began at five p.m., when his office spread the word that the prime minister would deliver "a dramatic announcement" at eight p.m. In Israel, that kind of buildup can cause panic and sweep an entire country with crazy rumors. This is exactly what happened on Monday afternoon. As the clock ticked closer to eight, Netanyahu's people understood the terrible mistake they had made and tried to lighten the atmosphere. It's nothing so dramatic, Netanyahu's associates began to leak to the media, calm down. But it was too little, too late.
- One minute after Netanyahu began to talk, it was clear that all the drama had been unwarranted. He did not announce peace, declare war or reveal a new existential threat. He presented no achievement in the battle against Iranian nuclearization. Instead, he faced the camera to complain about the way he was treated in the investigations and to demand the right to confront the men who turned state's witness against him. He even suggested that the face-to-face meetings be broadcast live. "He lost touch with reality," one of Netanyahu's ministers told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity after the broadcast. "He thinks this is a reality show and that he is the director."
- The state recruited three witnesses from Netanyahu's sworn confidants: Ari Harow, a former top aide and chief of staff; Shlomo Filber, former media adviser and Communications Ministry director; and Nir Hefetz, former adviser and spin artist of the Netanyahu family. Netanyahu ignored the fact that confrontations between accusers and accused are a tool used at the prerogative of investigators and not a right of the person under investigation. He appeared before a million viewers, a very high number for Israel, and again tried to subvert the investigations. As usual, Netanyahu presented himself as a martyr, an eternal underdog who is

persecuted by mysterious forces who want to destroy the State of Israel. This time, it seems, he was not successful. The polls taken after Netanyahu's appearance revealed that a significant majority of the general public does not believe his version of events or his claims that the proceedings against him are unfair. On the other hand, Netanyahu reaped success among Likud voters, his base, and got them to close ranks. A large majority of them believes him and swallows his version as absolute truth. Still, this limited achievement might not be sufficient for his political survival.

- According to one of Netanyahu's associates who spoke on condition of anonymity, the prime minister's watershed moment in understanding the depth of his predicament was when Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit convened a meeting with his predecessors and with former state attorneys. The meeting took place in the Cramin hotel in Kiryat Anavim, where Mandelblit asked the attendees for their opinions regarding publicizing a decision to put Netanyahu on trial before the elections. Attendants included legal icons like Aharon Barak and Meir Shamgar, two former Supreme Court justices, and former legal advisers Elyakim Rubinstein, Dorit Beinisch, Meni Mazuz and Asher Grunis. Their consensus was decisive and clear: The legal decision must not be delayed. Should the attorney general reach a decision before the elections, he must disseminate it immediately.
- Netanyahu suddenly understood that he stands to lose the race he started just two weeks ago, when he brought the election date forward, between Mandelblit's announcement and the election. Netanyahu examined surveys that probed the influence of an indictment before the elections and concluded its political impact could be lethal. We're not talking only about the election results — Netanyahu knows that even if he wins the elections after such an announcement, he would have a hard time assembling a coalition. He would need a miracle that would heighten the power of the far-right and ultra-Orthodox parties to give him a majority, with partners willing to serve under a prime minister who is struggling to prove his innocence in court. It is unclear whether other potential partners would enter a coalition under such circumstances. Even for Netanyahu, that miracle is likely unattainable. He also understands that he is fighting not only for his political life, but for his freedom. This insight is what made him look the way he did on Monday night.
- Two days later, a new survey was published and, for the first time, it seems that Netanyahu actually has a real political rival: When asked who is most appropriate to serve as the next premier, 41% of respondents said Netanyahu and 38% said former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz. The numbers are almost a statistical tie, and Netanyahu has not experienced anything like it in the last decade. Despite all the above and the unprecedented drama, we must remember an important point: Netanyahu still enjoys a large lead in the polls. Even now, when his situation seems hopeless, it is too early to eulogize the man.