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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 2, 2019

Ha'aretz

Report: AG Decision on Indictment Likely Pre-Election

Former senior members of the legal system have told Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit he must announce his decision regarding Netanyahu's cases before the election, the Israel Television News Company reported on Tuesday. The retired jurists reportedly convened last week during an annual conference held in a hotel near Jerusalem. According to the report, Mandelblit told those present that announcing his decision to indict Netanyahu, subject to a hearing, before the election was an "obligation to the public."

Times of Israel

Yachimovich is Opposition Leader After Gabbay-Livni Split

Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay appointed MK Shelly Yachimovich as opposition leader on Tuesday, after publicly firing Tzipi Livni on live television. Yachimovich said Gabbay dismissing Livni was "an act of leadership," and that Livni "refused to accept [Gabbay's] leadership." In the latest development to shake up Israel's political scene ahead of April's election, Gabbay announced earlier Tuesday that he was dissolving his partnership with Livni, and he was disbanding the Labor-Hatnua partnership that constituted the Zionist Union.

Ha'aretz

Behind the Zionist Union Implosion

Gabbay reportedly kept the breakup of Zionist Union a secret to embarrass Livni, and made the announcement past the deadline for splitting up Knesset factions to prevent Labor MKs from joining Livni in a more attractive slate at Labor's expense. Hatnua claims that Gabbay acted out of "pure evil." Labor party sources say that Gabbay had been formulating his plan for a while, after she had convened a public press conference to extort the opposition chairmanship for herself and conducted negotiations with center-left parties behind his back.

Ha'aretz

Ya'alon Now Unlikely to Join Gantz

Chances are fading that former army chiefs Benny Gantz and Moshe Ya'alon will run on a joint ticket in the election, because Naftali Bennett's establishment of a new party has erased the right-leaning Ya'alon's luster as a candidate, people in Gantz's new party say. Gantz and his advisers believed at first that Ya'alon would be an attractive alternative for right-wing voters disappointed with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Jerusalem Post

Lieberman Said to Have Told PA of Trump Plan Details

Avigdor Liberman, during his tenure as Israel's defense minister, told Palestinian Authority officials that President Trump's peace plan would include a Palestinian state in Gaza, Area A, and parts of Areas B and C in the West Bank, according to a report in the London-based Al Hayat newspaper. The plan reportedly also would give Israel control over a large parts of east Jerusalem. Liberman told PA officials that money would be transferred to them from several countries to establish various infrastructures, such as an airport, seaport and various border crossings. The issues of borders, security arrangements, water and the Jordan Valley were also discussed according to the report.

Associated Press

Settlement Activity Appears to Surge in Trump Era

With little resistance from a friendly White House, Israel has launched a new settlement push in the West Bank, laying the groundwork for what could be the largest construction binge in years. The figures, gathered from official government sources by the anti-settlement monitoring group Peace Now, show an increase in building in 2018 and a sharp spike in planning for future construction. The data compiled by Peace Now showed a drop in construction starts during Trump's first year in office, but the data for the first nine months of 2018 indicate the beginning of a Trump effect, with construction starts 20 percent higher than the same period a year earlier.

Times of Israel

Israel's Gaza Sea Barrier Nears Completion

Israeli engineers are nearing completion of a smart sea barrier meant to prevent attacks from the Gaza Strip, Channel 10 news reported Monday. Construction of the 200-meter-long barrier took seven months and was carried out by the Defense Ministry off the beach of Zikim, on Gaza's northernmost border. On land, Israel has an above-ground fence and is constructing a complex system of underground barriers and detectors to prevent Hamas from tunneling into Israeli territory. At sea, the Israel Navy maintains a permanent presence that is able to detect attempts to infiltrate Israeli waters.

Times of Israel

Pompeo to PM: US Stands with Israel Despite Syria Pullout

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday assured Netanyahu that the planned withdrawal of US ground forces from Syria will not alter the US commitment to countering Iranian aggression and maintaining Israel's security. Pompeo met Netanyahu in Brazil where both men attended the inauguration of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. Israeli officials are concerned that the planned US withdrawal will allow Iran to increase its foothold in the country.

PM's Settler Allies Force Annexation into Campaign Agenda

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist

- For now, the public debate surrounding Israel's April 2019 election is focusing on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's criminal cases. The Israeli media as well as politicians from the coalition and opposition have been spending quite a bit of time on the question of when it would be appropriate for Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit to release his decision on whether to indict Netanyahu. Should he do it now, or wait until the election is over? Can Netanyahu serve as prime minister if he is indicted? But the question that will really determine Israel's fate is whether Israel should annex the territories, and that issue is being pushed off to the side.
- During the Netanyahu government's last term, the leaders of HaBayit HaYehudi made no secret of what they considered to be an appropriate diplomatic solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. It involved the annexation of Area C, which was home to 413,000 Jews as of last year and about 300,000 Palestinians. In fact, the party's chairman, Education Minister Naftali Bennett, had submitted his own annexation plan in 2012. Back then, he sounded delusional. Adopting the idea meant abandoning a diplomatic solution with the Palestinians and replacing it with the idea of a binational state. The issues never received public support or even came up for public debate. But now, during Netanyahu's fourth term, Israelis are desperate. It may be Netanyahu's fault, but they have given up on reaching a diplomatic solution with a "non-partner" like Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. As such, the right's annexation plan has taken the lead over a two-state solution.
- Netanyahu is fully aware of how volatile the idea of annexation is and takes care not to explicitly or publicly support it. Nevertheless, words are one thing and actions are another. The fact is that he has taken steps to advance a policy of annexation. Outwardly, in diplomatic meetings with world leaders, Netanyahu continues to say that he supports a two-state solution. He even says it to his good friend in the White House, President Donald Trump. And in a speech to the Knesset in 2016, Netanyahu spoke out clearly against annexation: "My worldview hasn't changed. I am not interested in a binational state. I do not want to turn a million and a half Palestinians into Israeli citizens." On the other hand, Netanyahu has taken steps to kill any possibility of a two-state solution, particularly during his last two terms. He scared the Israeli public into believing that the West Bank would become a terror base. He claimed that Abbas has been inciting people to engage in terrorism and is not a real partner, even though senior defense officials believe that he is a partner for dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians on matters of defense. These officials rely on steady security coordination with the Palestinian Authority and the joint war against terror.
- Nevertheless, in its most recent term, for example, the Netanyahu government took steps to legalize construction in the territories. In February 2017, for instance, the Knesset approved the Regularization Law in its third reading. It was intended to legalize construction in settlements

built on privately owned Palestinian land. On Dec. 16, shortly before the current Knesset was dissolved, the Ministerial Committee on Legislation approved a similar law proposed by Knesset member Betzalel Smotrich (HaBayit HaYehudi) and intended to formalize the status of outposts in the territories and remove obstacles that would hinder future annexation. While the attorney general claimed that he could not defend this law's constitutionality, it made no difference to the current government. Netanyahu seems to have locked away his past declarations about preserving the chance to reach a diplomatic solution and was dragged by HaBayit HaYehudi into passing laws that effectively mean annexation. By now, he no longer dares to dismiss calls for annexation by Bennett, Smotrich and their fellow lawmakers.

- The outgoing Netanyahu government did not prioritize the strengthening of existing settlements but rather enabled the establishment of new outposts. It did not grant construction permits to meet the needs of “natural growth” but with the goal of significantly increasing the number of West Bank settlers. Now, in the shadow of the Regularization Law, new outposts pop out of nowhere, like the one established last August next to the settlement of Eli or another established last year east of Ramallah. These outposts will certainly receive government support and eventually become full-fledged settlements. Netanyahu is not likely to change his spots if he is elected for another term. At a meeting of the Likud Knesset faction on Dec. 24, he said, “For me, the current coalition is the core of the next coalition.”
- Meanwhile, HaBayit HaYehudi split Dec. 29. Bennett and Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked announced that night the formation of a new right-wing party: The New Right. Obviously, neither this new party nor HaBayit HaYehudi are expected to give up on the annexation plan. On the contrary. These two right-wing parties will battle over the far-right electorate, each claiming to be at the root of the annexation idea. Netanyahu will be forced to take that into account when attempting to compose a new coalition (if he wins the elections). Without these parties, Netanyahu will have a hard time putting together a government. And this means that he will not be able to ignore the Area C annexation plan.
- As a reminder, in the 2015 election campaign, the chairman of Kulanu, Moshe Kahlon, announced that he would be the next finance minister, while Avigdor Liberman boasted that he would be defense minister. Both eventually got the jobs that they wanted. Now it is not clear whether Liberman will return to the Defense Ministry after the election, not only because he resigned from it, but because Bennett has been eyeing the position for himself. HaBayit HaYehudi set as a goal in the last elections to change the composition of the Supreme Court, which the party believes was hindering the settlement enterprise. And Shaked indeed succeeded in changing Israel's court system. Now, Bennett and Shaked well know how to force the next coalition's hand with declarations on security and annexation.
- Israel will elect the 21st Knesset in less than 100 days. While retired generals are creating new parties and the Israeli left is splintering, the right — whether united or split — already has a fully formulated ideology. Now, the Israeli right has put annexation openly on the table. This crazy idea is becoming a reality, and Netanyahu will not be able to ignore it anymore. He will,

therefore, stay true to form and abandon the idea of a two-state solution, solely for the sake of his personal and political survival. Israeli voters will not be voting on Netanyahu's criminal file, on the war with Syria and Hezbollah, on the flow of Qatari money to the Gaza Strip or on plans for an arrangement with Hamas. This time, Israelis will be voting on whether they want a binational state and whether to annex Area C.

Gabbay Hit Against Livni May Cost Him Dearly

By Yossi Verter, Senior Columnist

- Avi Gabbay humiliated Tzipi Livni on Tuesday. Those present at the Zionist Union faction meeting had a tough time dealing with what they were seeing. They averted their eyes and some of them even blurted out words of protest. Immediately afterward they went back to their daily routines. This cruel humiliation, unprecedented in contemporary politics, is liable to cost Gabbay dearly among women voters. Livni hastened to capitalize on this mood and at the press conference she held later, stressed how touched she was by the admiring and supportive responses she'd already received from women. It's likely she'll play this card down the road; she doesn't have too many aces up her sleeve.
- The hookup between Hatnuah headed by Livni – a concept with which we will have to reacquaint ourselves for now – and Labor led by Gabbay didn't work from the get-go. There was no chemistry there. Livni had a hard time hiding her lack of regard for the man who succeeded Isaac Herzog. But forget the sympathy: There were no additional Knesset seats in the offing from this union; on the contrary, seats were being lost. Her appointment as opposition chairwoman, which she forced upon Gabbay when she threatened to bolt from Zionist Union, didn't improve their relationship or the situation of their Knesset faction. Instead, tensions continued to mount on all fronts.
- Gabbay interpreted her energetic efforts to forge “connections” in the center-left camp as an attempt at a putsch, aimed at removing him from the Labor leadership to which he had been duly elected. He wasn't mistaken. He saw her close ties with Ehud Barak as an act of treachery. Her mantra about “setting egos aside” drove him crazy. He kept taking it and taking it, until he finally decided to adopt part of the mantra – and set Livni herself aside. He didn't even look at her when he wished her luck – that's how upset she had made him. He sent her off with a “recommendation” that painted her as subversive, condescending and lacking in integrity and collegiality. The message to any future partners of hers was: You've been warned. The last straw for Gabbay was on Monday last week when a new election was declared. He convened a press conference in the Knesset and announced that Zionist Union would not sit in a government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu and that the upcoming election amounted to a choice between the current prime minister and himself. That night Livni gave a speech somewhere and again called for setting egos aside.
- Gabbay decided to bide his time for eight days, until the legal deadline had passed for any group of MKs to split off and take any of Zionist Union's party funding with them. That deadline was Sunday night at midnight. He did not commission a poll to examine the ramifications of this extreme step – even though Livni has public standing, and among the left-wing “base” is considered more of a leader than he. Getting rid of her might give him some personal satisfaction but won't necessarily bring him victory. From his perspective, Gabbay was taking a

calculated risk. If we had continued this way until the election, he told close associates Tuesday, a collapse was certain. This won't hurt us, it will make us sharper, he said. It won't halt any moves, it will accelerate them. Livni, he believes, was a barrier to rejuvenation, not a catalyst. He was thus tossing a broad hint to Benny Gantz, who, according to various reports, has already nixed teaming up with Livni because he thinks she's too left wing.