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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 9, 2019

Ha'aretz

Gantz Closing Gap With Netanyahu in New Election Poll

A three-point difference separates Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former military Chief of Staff Benny Gantz in a poll released Tuesday asking Israelis who they would like to lead the country, three months ahead of the general election. In a head-to-head poll by Channel 10 News, 41 percent of respondents selected Netanyahu as their top choice, while 38 percent chose Gantz, who recently founded the Hosen L'Yisrael party. When the question was changed to pit Netanyahu and Yair Lapid, chairman of the centrist Yesh Atid party, 45 percent of respondents picked Netanyahu, while 29 percent chose Lapid and 26 percent did not know.

Associated Press

Israel Says It Can Foil Foreign Election Meddling Amid Scare

Israel's Shin Bet security service assured the public Wednesday it was well prepared to thwart any foreign intervention in the country's upcoming elections, after its director warned such efforts were being made by a world power. Suspicions immediately fell on Russia. The unusual statement followed a report that Shin Bet chief Nadav Argaman recently told a closed audience that a foreign country was trying to meddle via hackers and cyber technology.

Times of Israel

Gallant and Shasha-Biton Sworn in as Ministers

The Knesset Wednesday approved the appointments of Yifat Shasha-Biton (Kulanu) as housing minister and Yoav Gallant as immigration minister. Gallant resigned last week as housing minister and quit the Kulanu party in order to join Netanyahu's Likud Party. He will be fighting for a position in the February 5 party primaries to determine Likud's slate for the next elections.

Times of Israel

Fatah Official Vows Extreme Moves to Topple Hamas

The Palestinian Authority's withdrawal of its employees from the Rafah crossing constitutes the first of a number of measures it will take to end Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip, Azzam al-Ahmad, a top Palestine Liberation Organization and Fatah official, said late Monday. On Sunday, PA employees pulled out of the Rafah crossing at the border between Egypt and Gaza, putting its regular operation at risk. Egyptian authorities have not said if they will allow the sole crossing between Egypt and Gaza to remain open on a regular basis without PA employees present. On Tuesday, however, they only allowed Palestinians returning to the Strip to use the passageway.

Jerusalem Post

Settler Population Growth at Lowest Point in 23 Years

The growth rate in the settler population has slowed to its lowest point in over 23 years and possibly its lowest point ever, according to data from the Yesha Council and Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. Settler leaders published the data on Tuesday as Netanyahu is in the midst of a heated campaign for the pro-settler vote. In 1995, the settler growth rate in West Bank settlements was 8.5% compared with 2.7% countrywide, according to CBS data. When Netanyahu took office in 2009, that growth had dropped to 5.3%, and it began to drop fairly quickly after that, hitting 3.5% by 2016 and 2017, compared to the 2% national growth rate.

Ha'aretz

Retired Gen. Launches Campaign Despite Investigation

Retired Brig. Gen. Gal Hirsch, a former commander of the Galilee division of the army, is forming a new party that will be running in the April 9 general election. Expressing the need to address social issues, Hirsch said the country needed to be tough on defense issues but also caring and compassionate, "because I'm always thinking about minorities, the elderly and the situation of 'the other.'" The retired 54-year-old army officer, who has faced an investigation over the past three years in connection with suspicions of bribing the defense minister of the Central Asian republic of Georgia, announced last month that he planned to enter politics.

Ha'aretz

Olive Trees Cut Down in Suspected Jewish Hate Crime

Some 15 olive trees were cut down in the southern West Bank Tuesday in a suspected hate crime. On nearby boulders the unknown assailants scrawled "Revenge" and "Death to Arabs." Police has launched an investigation into the incident, which occurred in the Palestinian village of A-Tawani. As reported earlier this week, last year saw a steep rise in "nationalist crimes," violence and property damage by Jews against Palestinians in the West Bank.

The Nation

Gaza's Opioid Problem

In conservative Gaza, drug use is highly stigmatized, but widespread abuse of the synthetic opiate painkiller tramadol is now part of the coastal enclave's many interconnected crises. The highs for those connected to the tramadol business are tantalizing and tough to truly tackle. And the lows are particularly painful in a suffocating society with limited health resources and few safe outlets. A 2017 report by the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime and the World Health Organization found that 1.8 percent of males 15 and above in the West Bank and Gaza are high-risk drug users (with tramadol Gaza's top drug).

What Happens if Netanyahu is Indicted?

By Yonah Jeremy Bob, Senior Columnist

- Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit is expected to announce an intent to file an indictment against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sometime in February – pre-election. What does that mean and what might happen next?
- 1. Intent to indict: The announcement of an intent to indict is not a final indictment. The prime minister will have an opportunity to make his case before Mandelblit to change his mind and drop the case. Some top public officials have changed other attorney-general's minds in the past from their original announcement.
- 2. Pre-indictment hearing: If nothing unusual happens, Mandelblit will hold a pre-indictment hearing with Netanyahu's lawyers sometime between May and August. However, in rare cases some public officials in the past have asked for their pre-indictment hearing to be expedited or waived their right to a pre-indictment hearing to move to a final indictment and an expedited trial to remove the cloud of criminal charges. Netanyahu is not expected to do this because it could cut short his term as prime minister, but you never know.
- 3. Final indictment: If nothing unusual happens, then about 3-6 months after the pre-indictment hearing, Mandelblit will close the case or file a final indictment. Probably at latest this would be in February 2020, but as discussed, it could be a good bit earlier. This is the key moment because every minister in recent decades who was indicted was forced to resign by Supreme Court precedent – including ministers like Avigdor Liberman in 2012, who had promised they would never resign until convicted.
- 4. When might a PM be forced to resign: The law has never been finally determined as to whether the prime minister must resign following an indictment like other ministers or whether he can wait until an unappealable final conviction. But the Jerusalem Post has learned that Mandelblit believes, that for a severe bribery charge like in Case 4000, the Bezeq-Walla! Affair, there is a strong chance that the Supreme Court would order the prime minister to resign if he did not go quietly.
- 5. Trial: Depending on whether Netanyahu wants to expedite or slow-walk the trial, whether he is still prime minister, whether there are plea bargain talks and whether he is charged in two of the cases, which the Post can confirm to a near certainty, versus all three of the cases (Case 2000 the Yisrael Hayom-Yediot Ahronot Affair is still up in the air,) the trial could start within a couple of months of the final indictment decision or up to a year later.
- 6. Conviction/Jail: Any conviction or jail sentence would likely be years later. The first indictment against former prime minister Ehud Olmert was filed in 2009, but that trial went until 2012 and

the first major conviction against him did not come until 2014 with him not going to prison until 2016. Olmert's maximum sentence for bribery could have been 7 years. In the end, he received around 2.5 years. It is too early to predict for Netanyahu, but if convicted of bribery in Case 4000, he could face a similar situation to Olmert.

Israeli Politicians Cower Before Jewish Terror

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Analyst

- About 15 years ago, Idith Zertal and my fellow AI-Monitor columnist Akiva Eldar wrote “Lords of the Land.” In their in-depth book they investigated the settlement enterprise and showed how the settlers receive preferential treatment over the rest of the nation, delineating the perks and privileges they enjoy. Today the situation is even worse. The prime minister and political leaders are simply afraid of the settlers. There were two dramatic events this past week: another evacuation of the Amona outpost in the West Bank (evacuated by court order in February 2017) and the arrest of Jewish teenagers on suspicion of terrorism. These events and their fallout show that the State of Israel has become the land of the settlers, and its elected leaders their servants.
- In the 1999 elections, in which Benjamin Netanyahu lost to Ehud Barak, Netanyahu created the slogan “They are afraid,” a contemptuous reference to Israeli media outlets and his critics. Now he himself is so afraid to lose the far-right settler votes that to appease them over Amona, he was willing to humiliate his military secretary, Brig. Gen. Avi Blot. The small Amona outpost, north of Ramallah, has become notorious in Israel even though it was populated by a mere 40 families. In the years between its establishment and its 2017 evacuation and even after, right-wing Knesset members behaved like the Amona settlers' servants. They paid visits to the outpost to encourage the residents and went out of their way to compensate them for their “distress and anguish” in the forced evacuation.
- The original Amona was built on private Palestinian land and after endless petitions, extensions and appeals, it was evacuated about two years ago. Following the evacuation, the government authorized a generous compensation package to the settlers to the tune of dozen of millions of shekels and decided to found a permanent, alternate locality named Amichai. Amichai was founded, but last month, a group of settlers returned to Amona in reaction to the shooting terror attacks near the Ofra settlement. When the Frontier Guard and police forcibly evacuated Amona once again Jan. 3, Netanyahu grew concerned for right-wing criticism and worried that the settlers might take revenge in the upcoming April 2019 elections. And so, Netanyahu blamed Blot (himself a resident of a settlement), accusing him of failing to relay the prime minister’s instruction to suspend the eviction in time. As a result, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot officially reprimanded Blot.
- This is not the end of the groveling before the Lords of the Land. In the course of the evacuation, 23 policemen were injured, including a police officer who was stabbed in the hand with a sharp instrument. Some were sent to the hospital for treatment. Seven settlers were detained but immediately freed. None of them were brought before a judge for attacking and wounding policemen. As far as is known at this time, none of them have been indicted. Recall the young Palestinian girl Ahed Tamimi, who was arrested, investigated, tried and sentenced to

eight months in prison for slapping and kicking an Israeli soldier. Her lawyer's requests for early release were refused on the grounds that Tamimi maintains an "extremist ideology."

- On Jan. 6, it was released for publication that five teens from the Pri Ha'Aretz yeshiva in Rechelim are under suspicion of causing the death of Aisha Rabi, a Palestinian resident of Biddya and mother of a large family in October 2018. Rabi was killed near Rechelim as a result of stone-throwing at the family car being driven by her husband. Only 24 hours after the incident, four prominent right-wing activists from the Yizhar settlement drove — violating the Sabbath — to Rechelim to prepare the yeshiva students to be cross-examined by members of the Shin Bet's Jewish Department. It took the Shin Bet almost three months to arrest the perpetrators.
- When the settler youths were first arrested, they were denied the opportunity to meet with a lawyer, just like Palestinian security detainees. In reaction, a whole campaign was orchestrated on their behalf. Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, for example, spoke on the phone to the mother of one of the arrested teens who asked that her son be allowed to meet with a lawyer. Shaked told her that she talked to State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan twice, saying, "I relayed to him your cry and made the point clear to him." She added that she would do everything she could to help them. On Jan. 7 it was reported that Shaked also met in person with the parents.
- True, the teens' culpability has not yet been proven, but the protests over the conditions of their arrest on suspicion of terrorism, complete with harsh verbal attacks on the Shin Bet, are unprecedented. "Every day stones are thrown at vehicles in Judea and Samaria and if you are wondering why you don't hear about it, it's because it is Palestinians stoning Jews," tweeted Likud Knesset member Nava Boker. "But when Jewish youths are suspected of throwing stones, suddenly they experience KGB investigation methods. It would be better if the Shin Bet spent its time trying to prevent murderous Palestinian terror and not torturing Jewish boys." Last week, they were brought before the Magistrate Court in Rishon Lezion and the Central District Court in Lod to discuss the case. Right-wing activists protested nearby and clashed with police. A demonstration in support of the detainees was held in Jerusalem with the participation of rabbis and senior members of the religious Zionist stream. Rabbi Ephraim Meir, a professor from Bar Ilan University, said at the demonstration, "Our wonderful hilltop youths, continue following your paths. You are the pioneers of the generation. We are not terrorists."
- Simultaneously, important Zionist figure Rabbi Haim Druckman published a video in which he argues to Netanyahu that the youths "are not terrorists" and that they should be investigated like anyone else in Israel, not interrogated by the Shin Bet. Did Netanyahu back up the Shin Bet for its work in arresting Jewish perpetrators of terror? Has anyone among pro-settler HaBayit HaYehudi, the New Right party or the Likud supported the Shin Bet? So far, no, not even after the intelligence agency shared documentation of some of the youths destroying the Israeli flag. This is the way things go when the prime minister and his ministers are servants instead of masters.