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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, January 8*

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# News Excerpts

January 8, 2019

Ha'aretz

## **PM: I Asked to Face State's Witnesses and Was Refused Twice**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke out on Monday evening in a televised address, saying that he requested to face state's witnesses in the corruption probes against him and was denied twice. In an address billed ahead of time as a "dramatic statement" Netanyahu said: "What are they afraid of? I'm not afraid, I have nothing to lose." He added that he's willing to confront the witnesses on live TV. A confrontation between witnesses serves as a police tool to resolve conflicting testimonies. Police is not obligated to hold a confrontation between the accused and a central witness testifying against him, and police and prosecution make the final call. See also, ["PM: I want face to face with state witnesses" \(Ynet\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Justice Officials Reject Netanyahu Claims Probes Mishandled**

The Justice Ministry and police rejected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's claims Monday that corruption probes against him were not carried out properly. Netanyahu said during a live televised statement that he had sought to confront state's witnesses in a series of graft probes into his dealings and was refused during his interrogation, accusing justice officials of trying to hide the truth. A Justice Ministry spokesperson said in a statement that the investigations were "conducted professionally and thoroughly." "It is inappropriate for law enforcement authorities to relate to the investigative activities and the testimonies in the media, certainly not at this stage," the ministry statement added. See also, ["Netanyahu demands live TV showdown with his accusers" \(Guardian\)](#)

Reuters

## **Egypt's Sisi: There's Close Coordination with Israel in Sinai**

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi offered a rare acknowledgement of his close security cooperation with Israel in the Sinai peninsula during a U.S. television interview with CBS' "60 Minutes" news program broadcast on Sunday. The program said Cairo had asked the network not to air the interview but did not give further details. Under Sisi, Egypt has quietly cooperated with Israel on security in Egypt's Sinai, a desert peninsula demilitarized as part of a U.S.-sponsored 1979 peace treaty between the two countries but where Cairo's forces now operate freely. Acknowledging such cooperation with Israel can be a sensitive topic in Egypt. Asked whether the cooperation was the closest and deepest that he has had with Israel, Sisi responded: "That is correct."

Times of Israel

## **Iraqi Lawmaker Demands Probe into Officials' Visits to Israel**

Visits by Iraqi officials to Israel that were announced by the Jewish state stirred controversy Monday in Iraq, where the deputy parliamentary speaker demanded a probe to identify those who crossed a "red line." Israel's Foreign Ministry said on Twitter on Sunday that three Iraqi delegations visited Israel in 2018, and details were also later released by media. Baghdad does not recognize Israel, and is technically in a state of war with the country. First Deputy Speaker of Parliament Hassan Karim al-Kaabi in a statement called for "an investigation... to identify those who went to the occupied territory, particularly if they are lawmakers." See also, ["Three Iraqi delegations said to make unprecedented Israel visits, meet officials" \(NYT\)](#)

## **Israel Staves Off Palestinian Initiative to Become UN Member**

Israel has succeeded in staving off a Palestinian Authority initiative to upgrade its status from observer state to member state with full voting rights at the United Nations General Assembly. In a bid to pass the draft resolution granting the PA full member status at the UN, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said that he would appeal to the UN Security Council. In addition, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had been expected to arrive at the UN headquarters in New York to promote the move, however, he has decided to dedicate his visit to take part in an event on the sidelines of the UN, rather than to promote the draft resolution. See also, ["Israel says it stopped Palestinian bid for full UN membership" \(Fox\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **Security Forces Arrest Shooter who Killed Two IDF Soldiers**

Security forces arrested the terrorist who shot and killed two IDF soldiers at the Givat Asaf junction last month, the Shin Bet released for publication Tuesday morning. The security forces arrested Aazam Barghouti in the home of one of his aides in Abu Shakidam, located in the Binyamin area of the West Bank. The Shin Bet said that Barghouti was preparing for an additional terrorist attack, which he planned to carry out in the coming days. Forces found and seized a Kalashnikov rifle, large amounts of ammunition and night vision equipment during the arrest. Aazam Barghouti was also involved in the shooting attack at a hitchhiking station in Ofra with his brother Salah Barghouti, who was killed during an attempted arrest by security forces on December 11.

### Ynet News

## **Report: Hamas Threatens Israel Unless Fatah Backs Off**

Hamas sent a strong message to Israel on Monday: If Fatah doesn't back off, we'll be "'forced" to act against Israel, according to information shared by Israeli online forums. Hamas sent the message to the Jewish state via Egypt and the United Nations that Israel should convince Fatah to ease up on Hamas or else the terrorist group will be forced to attack. Egypt announced Monday that it would close the Rafah border crossing to Palestinians. On Sunday, in a surprise move, the Palestinian Authority announced that it has decided to pull out all its employees from the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Palestinian Authority official Azzam al-Ahmad compared Hamas to a terrorist who hijacked a plane and called on the terrorist organization to relinquish Gaza and return it to the PA's control.

### Ha'aretz

## **Tense Debate Erupts in New US Congress Over anti-BDS Bills**

Less than a week after the new U.S. Congress began its work, a tense debate has erupted on Capitol Hill over legislation against political boycotts of Israel and of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. A number of Democratic lawmakers have come out against the proposed legislation, warning that it will harm free speech. Republicans are now trying to use the Democrats' opposition to the legislation in order to accuse them of supporting the boycott, divestment and sanctions, or BDS, movement. The fight over the anti-boycott legislation is a continuation of a similar struggle that started while the previous Congress was in session. Sources on both sides of the aisle were surprised, however, at how quickly the issue returned to the headlines, just days after the current Congress was sworn in.

## **Netanyahu, Feeling Heat, Grabs Spotlight to Assail ‘Witch Hunt’ Investigation**

By David M. Halbfinger, Jerusalem bureau chief of The New York Times

- The announcement set Israel abuzz with suspense late Monday afternoon: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had a “dramatic statement” to deliver at 8 p.m., at the start of the most heavily watched news hour. Would it be about Iran? Hezbollah? Hamas? The Trump peace plan? The subject, it turned out, was an existential threat not to Israel, but to Mr. Netanyahu’s career.
- For 20 minutes on live television — enormously valuable exposure with elections only three months away — Mr. Netanyahu railed against a corruption investigation into his dealings with several Israeli media tycoons that is widely expected to culminate soon in an indictment on bribery and other criminal charges.
- The investigation was “biased,” Mr. Netanyahu complained. He demanded an opportunity to confront the state’s witnesses, on television, before any potential trial, so all Israelis “will know the whole truth.” He scoffed at the idea that one of the main accusations against him — buying positive news coverage, in exchange for government benefits worth hundreds of millions of dollars — could amount to bribery: “A joke,” he said. “An absurdity!” And then he suggested one of his chief rivals in the April elections, the centrist candidate Yair Lapid, was guilty of the same thing; called himself and his family victims of a “terrible witch hunt” orchestrated by the political left; and claimed that those leftist adversaries wanted him to sacrifice Israel’s security, but that he would “never do such a thing.”
- Others carried the full performance, which was indeed dramatic if not quite in the way Mr. Netanyahu intended. The announcement, a chorus of political rivals and analysts quickly concluded, was the drama of a hunted animal sensing that the hunters were closing off his escape routes.
- “Bibi is a-f-r-a-i-d,” Ehud Barak, the former prime minister who defeated Mr. Netanyahu in 1999 and is angling for another run, wrote on Twitter. Chemi Shalev, a columnist for the newspaper Haaretz, wrote that Mr. Netanyahu’s belief “that his procedural demand to confront states’ witnesses is worthy of a dramatic prime-time address to the nation is A. Disturbing B. A sign of his escalating hysteria.” It was also an exploitation of his position to commandeer a prime-time audience for purely selfish political purposes, his detractors charged. “Simply embarrassing to see,” said Itzik Shmuli, a member of Parliament from the Labor Party, who called the prime minister’s speech “a curtain of smoke meant to get the public to forget one simple fact: He is drowning in severe accusations. He is neck deep.”
- From Mr. Netanyahu’s camp there was largely silence: Miri Regev, the culture minister, declared, “I believe in the prime minister’s innocence,” according to the newspaper Maariv, but hers was the loudest immediate expression of solidarity. For months as the inquiries proceeded, Mr. Netanyahu reassured his supporters with a steady and constant refrain: “There will be nothing, because there is nothing.” But his tactics belied his unperturbed pose: He attacked the press who reported the allegations, the police who investigated them, and finally the prosecutors who oversaw the cases.

- He has tried to project calm, but has also displayed an erratic side as the legal pressure mounted: After insisting in November that for national security reasons, Israel should wait to hold elections until the fall, Mr. Netanyahu reversed himself a month later. He called elections for April 9, in what appeared to be an attempt to notch a wide re-election margin before the attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, could render his decision on an indictment.
- Mr. Netanyahu then began arguing that, since he was entitled to a hearing after Mr. Mandelblit announces his decision and before an indictment is issued, and since there might not be time for that process to play out before voters go to the polls, Mr. Mandelblit owed it to the people to delay announcing his decision until after the vote. That one did not fly: Mr. Mandelblit instead let it be known that he was speeding up his timetable accordingly.
- Now, with Mr. Mandelblit reportedly only weeks away from rendering his decision, Mr. Netanyahu appears to have calculated that there will be an indictment after all — that there is, at last, something — and he has shifted tactics to try to pre-emptively discredit it by impugning the motives of those responsible. Mr. Netanyahu’s coalition chief, David Amsalem, recently suggested that the prime minister was being framed and that “millions of people won’t accept this.” The Ministry of Justice put out a terse statement defending the inquiry into Mr. Netanyahu after his speech on Monday, saying: “All parts of the investigation into the prime minister’s cases were conducted professionally and thoroughly.”
- Nahum Barnea, a veteran columnist for Yediot Ahronot, said Mr. Netanyahu’s goal was to alarm his core political base, which has repeatedly rallied to his side over the years when he has portrayed himself as a victim, into thinking that the prosecution was nothing more than an attempted coup. “It’s like Trump,” Mr. Barnea said, alluding to the American president’s similar claims of a witch hunt against him. “He focuses on the base and what I call the tribe: not only Likud voters but the other right-wing parties. He’s trying to put some fear into them, to get them to put their personal loyalty to him over their faith in the legal system.”
- Yet to watch Mr. Netanyahu, 69, wearing a tie on Monday in exactly the same hue as the Israeli flags that flanked him, was to see someone other than the smooth, self-assured leader whose swagger has carried him through one scandal or challenge after another in his decade in office. He looked down repeatedly at his notes, blinked frequently through what appeared to be watery eyes, and showed little of the smirking scornfulness with which he has dismissed the allegations against him in the past. “Today, the makeup covered it up,” said Mr. Barnea, “but under the makeup, the guy sweats.”

**SUMMARY:** The investigation was “biased,” Mr. Netanyahu complained. He demanded an opportunity to confront the state’s witnesses, on television, before any potential trial, so all Israelis “will know the whole truth.” He scoffed at the idea that one of the main accusations against him — buying positive news coverage, in exchange for government benefits worth hundreds of millions of dollars — could amount to bribery: “A joke,” he said. “An absurdity!” And then he suggested one of his chief rivals in the April elections, the centrist candidate Yair Lapid, was guilty of the same thing; called himself and his family victims of a “terrible witch hunt” orchestrated by the political left; and claimed that those leftist adversaries wanted him to sacrifice Israel’s security, but that he would “never do such a thing.”

## **Zionist Camp Split Reveals Ethnic Divide Among Israeli Left**

By Danny Zaken, journalist at Israeli public radio station

- Labor chair Avi Gabbay unexpectedly announced his political divorce from his Zionist Camp partner, Hatnua head Tzipi Livni, on Jan. 1. The announcement, which broke the Zionist Camp into its original components, was followed by a rapid deterioration in the party's standing in the polls to single-digit numbers, accompanied by mounting voices calling for Gabbay to be fired. The move testifies to Gabbay's failure to improve the image of the party that ruled all of Israel from the establishment of the state until 1977.
- Beyond the political reasons behind the decision, Gabbay's description of his childhood years points to another, no less significant factor: discrimination against a Mizrahi who grew up in a slum, in favor of the comparatively well-off and arrogant Ashkenazis represented by Livni. In a hostile speech in which he explained his decision to break with Livni and her party, Gabbay spoke about growing up in a Jerusalem slum in the 1950s, in a family that came from Morocco. This slum and others served originally as transit camps for new immigrants and became poor neighborhoods over the years.
- Gabbay said, "We grew up in asbestos shacks surrounded by new buildings that were populated by more educated families on a higher economic level. Some of the children from those buildings were our good friends. Others looked down their noses at us, the kids from the slums. From a young age, I chose not to give power to the conceited ones. Not to give power to anyone who tells me that I don't have a chance."
- As is well known, Gabbay came a long way from the slums to a successful career at the height of which he served as CEO of Bezeq, Israel's largest telecommunication company. Gabbay retired from Bezeq with a fortune of around 50 million shekels (\$13.5 million). He then segued from the business sector to politics, first in Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu and then serving as environmental protection minister until he resigned in 2016.
- Gabbay, who grew up in a Likud-oriented home, only joined Labor about two years ago. Almost immediately he won the internal elections for chairman after he bragged that he would harvest 30 Knesset mandates for the party and bring Likud voters to Labor. But the opposite happened. Though Gabbay tried to appeal to Likud supporters, he didn't understand that Labor and Likud voters do not speak the same language.
- Gabbay's attempt to return the traditional-religious crowd to Labor was a total failure. In a lecture to college students in the Israeli southern city of Beersheba in November 2017, Gabbay talked about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's well-known statement to Rabbi Kadouri in 1997: "The left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish." Gabbay's answer to a student who raised the issue was, "It's not true. We are Jews and we need to talk about our Jewish values." He added, "We're Jews, we live in a Jewish state. I think one of the problems of the Labor Party is that it has distanced itself from this." Like Netanyahu's original statement to the rabbi, Gabbay's statement touched a very sensitive spot and aroused sharp criticism from the left. Even when Gabbay tried to wink at the right from the leftist platform that Labor has adopted in recent years,

he was fiercely criticized. As a result, he was forced to retract his October 2017 statement that in the event of a peace arrangement, the settlements may not need to be evacuated.

- Criticism of Gabbay has risen in recent months and as election day nears. One of Labor's Knesset members told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "We chose someone we thought could bring us back to being an alternative. We gambled on Gabbay and lost everything. It's not that he is changing the party's DNA, he is dismantling it."
- Last week, on the background of the Gabbay crisis and the miserable polls, several Zionist Camp members reportedly made preparations to quit the faction. Ironically, it was Livni who averted the move before she knew that Gabbay intended to dismantle the partnership. On Jan. 3, the revolt became public when Labor Knesset member Eitan Cabel demanded Gabbay's dismissal, saying in an interview with Army Radio that if politics were the business world, Gabbay would have long since returned his keys. Polls published a day earlier showed a Labor under Gabbay without Livni would win only seven or eight mandates, down from 24 Zionist Camp seats in the outgoing Knesset. The party began to reach out to its members to sign a petition to hold a "dismissal convention," though it is not clear whether such a thing is feasible.
- But Gabbay isn't giving in. In a Jan. 3 interview with Yedioth Ahronoth, Gabbay said that he has no intention of allowing another candidate to lead Labor or the faction in the upcoming elections. He is certain that he will succeed in convincing the public that he is the most appropriate and worthy candidate to lead a process of change.
- In the interview, Gabbay denied that his firing of Livni during a live broadcast was an act of chauvinism. When asked why he didn't tell Livni about his intentions beforehand and privately, he said, "I grew up in the hood. In the hood, I learned that if someone hits you, you hit back rather than rush to make peace." His answer confirms that he did take offense and wanted to get back at the one who offended him. There are some who view his words as another wink toward the right, if they are interpreted in the diplomatic sphere as concerning the Palestinians.
- Even if Gabbay survives the attempts to topple him, Labor's expected failure at the voting booths will lead to the recognition that Gabbay has not succeeded in transforming the party, which for a generation of immigrants to Israel from Arab states continues to represent discrimination against the Mizrahi Jews.

**SUMMARY:** Beyond the political reasons behind the decision, Gabbay's description of his childhood years points to another, no less significant factor: discrimination against a Mizrahi who grew up in a slum, in favor of the comparatively well-off and arrogant Ashkenazis represented by Livni. In a hostile speech in which he explained his decision to break with Livni and her party, Gabbay spoke about growing up in a Jerusalem slum in the 1950s, in a family that came from Morocco. This slum and others served originally as transit camps for new immigrants and became poor neighborhoods over the years.