



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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February 12, 2019

Jerusalem Post

Israel Spying on Iran From Afghanistan -Reports

Israel has sent troops to Afghanistan to collect intelligence on Iranian military movement, Iranian media has reported. According to Iran's Tasnim news agency, Israeli troops are operating out of a United States Air Force base in Shindand in the western Afghanistan province of Herat some 75 kilometers from the Iranian border and were collecting intelligence on Iranian movement around the Persian Gulf region. Russia's Sputnik News stated that the Israelis were operating "under the flags of the United States and the United Arab Emirates. "Sputnik quoted an expert on Israel as saying that the Israeli troops were operating under the framework of American forces stationed there and that the activity was carried out with the knowledge and approval of the Afghan government.

Newsweek

Bolton to Iran Leader: 'Don't think You Have Many Years Left'

President Trump's national security adviser has issued a direct threat to Iran's supreme leader on the 40th anniversary of his country's Islamic Revolution. John Bolton was featured Monday in an ominous video posted to the WH's official Twitter account. The video was posted as a "message to the Ayatollah of Iran," Khamenei, who the United States has targeted with a new social media campaign entitled "#40YearsofFailure". "What a 40 years its been, tyrannizing its own people and terrorizing the world, Iran continues to seek nuclear weapons to intimidate peaceful people all around the globe," Bolton said in the one-minute clip. See also, ["BOLTON CALLS IRAN ANNIVERSARY '40 YEARS OF FAILURE' " \(JPost\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu to Join Arab Leaders at ME Conference in Poland

Prime Minister Netanyahu will fly to Poland Tuesday night to attend a conference on the Middle East co-hosted by Poland and the U.S. State Department. The conference was originally supposed to focus on Iran, but the title was later changed to "Promoting a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East." According to the Polish Foreign Ministry, some 60 countries have confirmed their attendance, including several from the Middle East. Aside from Israel, the Mideast participants include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Tunisia. See also, ["Netanyahu to meet Pence, Pompeo at Polish Middle East summit" \(TOI\)](#)

I24 News

Trump Envoy Denies Reported Completion of US Peace Plan

US Special Representative for international negotiations, Jason Greenblatt, denied the reported completion of President Donald Trump's long-awaited "deal of the century" for Mideast peace. "The plan is done... [the president] is happy with the parameters of the deal," a Monday report from Fox News quotes a senior administration official as saying. The report said the finished proposal is between 175-200 pages long and can be accessed by fewer than five people, according to the report. In a tweet, Greenblatt told the popular US news network that their sources gave them "bad info." "While the plan is close to complete, we aren't there yet & we'll continue to refine it until release. 175 pages is also inaccurate. It's a very detailed political/economic plan but not that long," Trump's envoy said.

Hopeful Labor Members See Lifeline in Young Primary Winners

In 2011, it took Itzik Shmuli and Stav Shaffir just three weeks to turn a small impromptu protest against the high price of living in Tel Aviv into a mass nationwide movement of protesters and tent-cities that eventually culminated in one of the biggest demonstrations the country has ever seen. Seven and a half years later, after winning first and second place in the Labor primary on Monday night, the pair are being looked to to generate the same momentum in the next 60 days for Israel's venerable center-left party as it faces one of its most serious challenges to date. "This is a victory for the party. This is where we turn things around," said Yael Bigman as cheers eventually died down after the primary results came up on the large screen at the front of one of the halls in the Tel Aviv Convention Center. See also, ["To Save Labor From Total Collapse, Some Look to Barak and Livni" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Hundreds of Votes for PM's Rival Sa'ar 'Go Missing' in Primaries

Hundreds of votes disappeared in the Likud party primaries held last week, with a large portion of them cast for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rival Gideon Sa'ar, Channel 12 news reported Monday. The revelation comes after Netanyahu ordered that the results from all polling stations be re-entered in a database following the discovery of voting irregularities. According to the report, a recount could lead to Sa'ar gaining a higher position on the party's slate for the upcoming elections. As examples, Channel 12 reported that in the results counted at the Sha'ar Binyamin locality in the West Bank, Sa'ar received 215 ballots. However the official Likud party results only listed 160 votes for the former minister — a discrepancy of 55 ballots. See also, ["Netanyahu Orders Recount in Likud Primaries" \(Hamodia\)](#)

PM Rules Out Coalition with Gantz: 'It'll Be a Right-wing Govt'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ruled out forming a government with his main rival in the upcoming general election, former army chief Benny Gantz. Netanyahu's comment on Monday evening came after Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who heads the new right-wing party Hayamin Hehadash, said he believes Netanyahu would reach out to Gantz to join him in a coalition. "I would not form a government with Benny Gantz," Netanyahu told a group of religious reporters. "First off, I will be the one to build the coalition, and it will be a nationalistic Likud government, a right-wing government."

U.S. Lawmaker Apologizes for Anti-Semitic Comments

Democratic lawmaker Ilhan Omar apologized on Monday after party leaders condemned her comments about the pro-Israel lobby in the United States as using anti-Semitic stereotypes. "Anti-Semitism is real and I am grateful for Jewish allies and colleagues who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes," Omar, who was elected for the first time to the U.S. House of Representatives in November, said in a statement. "My intention is never to offend my constituents or Jewish Americans as a whole," she said, adding that she "unequivocally" apologized. Omar was criticized by both Republicans and Democrats for saying on Twitter that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobbying group, was paying U.S. politicians to support Israel. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic House leaders condemned her remarks earlier, calling for an apology and saying anti-Semitism must be confronted and condemned. See also, ["Rep. Omar apologizes after House Democratic leadership condemns her comments as 'anti-Semitic tropes' \(Washington Post\)](#)

Will Labor's Vibrant Primary Be Remembered as Turning Point – or Gala on the Titanic?

By Chemi Shalev, columnist at Ha'aretz

- The Israeli Labor Party indicated on Monday night that reports of its death, as Mark Twain once said, were exaggerated. Labor members came out in droves to participate in the primary for the party's Knesset list, surprising everyone with a demonstration of energy and even exuberance that stood in stark contrast to the party's terrifying free-fall in the polls and the widespread predictions of its imminent demise.
- Labor hopes the jubilant atmosphere that prevailed at Tel Aviv's Fairgrounds, where the party faithful gathered to hear the results and congratulate the winners, will be remembered as a turning point in its fortunes. If their critics are right, however, the festive night will probably end up being compared to a gala ball on the Titanic.
- Labor leader Avi Gabbay was buoyant with what seemed like his party's glitch-free computerized primary, which contrasted with the growing allegations of widespread forgeries in last week's Likud primary - which, by some miracle, all worked against those included in Benjamin Netanyahu's enemies list.
- Likud had touted its decision to stick with old-style voting with a paper slip as the perfect antidote against trendy threat of external hacking, exposing itself to good old stuffing of ballots and manipulations of numbers instead. Labor also chose a Knesset list that in terms of age, gender and ethnic composition was the polar opposite of Likud's, with the differences mirroring, grosso modo, those that differentiate Democrats from Republicans.
- Against the Likud's top five, comprised exclusively of Ashkenazi men, none under forty, Labor is fielding two women – five in its top ten – and three non-Ashkenazi males. Considering Likud's overwhelming dominance in the polls, there is no small irony in the fact that Labor is still perceived as a bastion of the old Ashkenazi establishment, while Likud, despite looking like the spitting image of the GOP contingent on the Senate Judiciary Committee, is thought to be “the true voice of the people.”
- Labor also positioned two up-and-coming politicians under forty – Itzik Shmuli and Stav Shaffir – in the one and two slots, marking, as my colleague Ravit Hecht notes, the main contenders in the future battle to succeed current leader Avi Gabbay. If the party doesn't break out of its tailspin, the skirmishes could start as early as April 10. Like Shmuli and Shaffir, most of Labor's preferred candidates had proven track records as diligent and scrupulous parliamentarians, which is also true of the tragic hero of the night, Eitan Cabel.
- The fiery Cabel was dumped by his party to the currently unrealistic 15th spot in retribution for his brazen and open challenge to Gabbay at a party meeting last month, which included calling him a liar, challenging him to a lie detector test and calling for him to resign before it's too late.
- In this regard, Likud voters showed more backbone: Netanyahu's edict against his rival Gideon Saar was met with overwhelming disobedience, while Laborites preferred to toe Gabbay's line. Perhaps they figured he had enough on his hands as it is.

- Labor's list of top notch parliamentarians is mostly identified with social and economic issues, which could allow the party to differentiate itself from Benny Gantz's security-focused list; Gabbay believes that Gantz's failure to balance out his decidedly right wing list with sufficient leftists will soon send Labor voters back home anyway.
- On the other hand, Labor's list lacks national security gravitas, with the exception of Peretz, whose brief sojourn as defense minister during the 2006 Lebanon War garnered mixed reviews. Gabbay is allowed to make a personal appointment to the party's number two spot, right behind him, which he might use to fill the national-security void at Labor's top. He could kill two birds with one stone, affirmative action style, if his appointee happens to be an Ashkenazi man.
- Gabbay's uninspiring speech on Monday night did not rise to the unique occasion of Labor tapping unknown reserves of vim and vigor, but his position has been immeasurably strengthened following the primary. His perceived triumph could stifle calls, which Gabbay opposes, for Labor to merge with Meretz to its left in order to save both from extinction.
- Gabbay may presume not only that his tide will soon turn but that when they compare Labor's list to the one they are scheduled to select on Wednesday, Meretz voters could be enticed by Labor's younger and hipper list to cross the lines to Labor.
- But the luster of Labor's successful primary will soon fade, leaving Gabbay facing the same unpleasant realities as before. He can cannibalize Meretz and gain a few seats at its expense, perhaps, but has yet to find an antidote to the center-left's yearning for an end to Netanyahu's rule - and its willingness to vote for anyone who stands the best chance of achieving that goal.
- Gabbay, who has repeatedly pronounced himself Netanyahu's certain successor, even when the claim turned absurd, seemed to be coming down off his high horse on Wednesday. He promised his flock that Netanyahu would be defeated in the polls but refrained from following up with his customary self-anointment as successor.
- Perhaps that is a wise course for the leader of a party that started out as founding father and everlasting ruler, which finds itself fighting for its very life. Despite Monday's hoopla most Labor members are well aware that their best-case scenario is making it into double digits and the worst is oblivion.

SUMMARY: Against the Likud's top five, comprised exclusively of Ashkenazi men, none under forty, Labor is fielding two women – five in its top ten – and three non-Ashkenazi males. Considering Likud's overwhelming dominance in the polls, there is no small irony in the fact that Labor is still perceived as a bastion of the old Ashkenazi establishment, while Likud, despite looking like the spitting image of the GOP contingent on the Senate Judiciary Committee, is thought to be “the true voice of the people.” Labor also positioned two up-and-coming politicians under forty – Itzik Shmuli and Stav Shaffir – in the one and two slots, marking, as my colleague Ravit Hecht notes, the main contenders in the future battle to succeed current leader Avi Gabbay. If the party doesn't break out of its tailspin, the skirmishes could start as early as April 10. Like Shmuli and Shaffir, most of Labor's preferred candidates had proven track records as diligent and scrupulous parliamentarians, which is also true of the tragic hero of the night, Eitan Cabel.

Why Abbas Risks an Economic Collapse of the PA

By Shkomi Eldar, columnist at AI Monitor

- The Knesset passed the "pay-to-slay" law in July 2018, which enables the government to withhold tax money from the Palestinian Authority (PA) as long as it continues to pay stipends to Palestinian assailants in Israeli prisons and to their families. Although the Knesset passed the law seven months ago, the Israeli government continued to transfer taxpayer money it collects for the PA to the Palestinian authorities as usual. Not one shekel has been deducted from it. The defense establishment hoped that no one in Israel would notice. They were concerned that any attempt to deduct those costs would lead to an escalation of violence, a threat that was exacerbated when Congress passed the Taylor Force Act in March 2018, cutting American financial aid to the PA
- On Feb. 1, senior PLO officials Saeb Erekat and Hanan Ashrawi exchanged angry and provocative tweets with President Donald Trump's envoy to the Middle East, Jason Greenblatt. In their own ways and using their own particular styles, both officials reminded him that Jerusalem is not for sale and the Palestinians have no interest in appearing before American courts, which can require them to pay compensation for American citizens killed by Palestinian terrorists. Greenblatt already has a miserable relationship with Erekat, so his response should come as no surprise: "So let me get this clear: You want only benefits and no responsibilities?"
- The 1994 Paris Protocol signed between the Israelis and Palestinians put some order into the various economic issues between the two parties. It included the provision that Israel would collect various taxes for the PA and transfer the money to it after necessary deductions such as import taxes on goods destined for the PA. The problem is that over the years, Israel exploited this agreement to apply pressure to the PA and manipulate it.
- The first Israeli leader to do this was former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. In January 2006, he decided to freeze the transfer of funds in reaction to the Hamas victory in the Palestinian parliamentary election. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took the same approach, stopping the transfer of money whenever the right pressured him to impose sanctions on Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Over time, many Israelis came to be under the false impression that the money being held back was a grant. In fact, the Paris Protocol reflected the interest of the Israeli government at the time, which wanted to avoid an economic border between the State of Israel and the PA. Such an economic frontier would have been perceived as a sign of Palestinian sovereignty.
- Both morally and as a matter of principle, Israel is opposed to paying compensation to any Palestinian who commits an act of terror against Israelis. It rightfully sees this as a way of incentivizing desperate young Palestinians to commit acts of terrorism in order to improve their families' financial situations (as they know that their families will receive stipends after they are caught or hurt). Having said that, from the Palestinian perspective, the assailants are not terrorists but legitimate freedom fighters operating under occupation.

- When the Palestinians realized that Israel intends on leveraging the Paris Protocol to apply pressure on them, they launched a campaign designed to expose this unjustified link from their point of view. That is why on Feb. 7, Palestinian Minister of Civil Affairs Hussein al-Sheikh transferred a clear message to Israel: The PA would refuse to accept any of the taxpayer money that Israel collects on its behalf if Israel links the Paris Protocol to the stipends paid by the PA to the families of Palestinian prisoners and "shahids" (martyrs). In other words, the PA rejects Israel's intention of deducting these amounts from the due tax revues.
- The fact that this Palestinian appeal was leaked to the media instead of being made behind the scenes indicates that the crisis was planned in advance in an attempt to reshuffle the deck and release the Palestinians from the Oslo Accords (by which Israel collects tax money for the Palestinians), no matter what the outcome. It is as if they are saying, "Let's see you Israelis and Americans deal with the collapse of the PA and the utter elimination of any security collaboration."
- Just one day after the Palestinian threat became public, on Feb. 8 a young Israeli girl named Ori Ansbacher was brutally raped and killed in Jerusalem. In an impressive joint operation, the Shin Bet and the Yamam Counter-Terrorism Unit caught Arafat Irfaiya, from Hebron, less than 24 hours later. He admitted committing the rape and murder during his interrogation and even re-created the crimes for his investigators. Although the Israeli security forces did not offer many details about the rapid operation to capture the terrorist, it is doubtful that such a speedy intelligence and arrest operation without any Palestinian casualties could have taken place without security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian security forces.
- After the murder, New Right head Naftali Bennett criticized Netanyahu's government for not implementing the law. In response to the criticism, Netanyahu used the Feb. 10 Cabinet meeting to commit to the quick implementation of the law to offset terrorist salaries. Of course, after making this commitment, Netanyahu will have a hard time walking it back. Public opinion in Israel was shocked by the murder. Under no circumstances would it agree that the family of a Palestinian assailant behind such a brutal rape and murder of a 19-year-old girl would receive payment from the PA for as long as the perpetrator sits in an Israeli prison.
- This is where the trap lies. The PA has announced that it would refuse to accept the taxpayer money owed to it if the salaries of terrorists are deducted. In other words, an economic crisis is right around the corner. As aforementioned, this is a self-imposed crisis, intended meticulously to bring about the economic collapse of the PA, which would, in turn, lead to calls of SOS to extricate it from the very crisis it was forced to bring on itself.
- What happens then? Apparently, no one in Israel, Ramallah or Washington can say with any certainty. Obviously, Abbas knows that on the day he stops payments to the families of the martyrs and prisoners, the Palestinians themselves will bring him down. As far as he is concerned, the imminent economic crisis is a way to alleviate the blow, which is coming no matter what.

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