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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, February 7*

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# News Excerpts

February 7, 2019

## Reuters

### **U.S. Blocks U.N. Statement on Hebron Monitors: Diplomats**

The United States blocked a draft United Nations Security Council statement on Wednesday that would have expressed regret at Israel's decision to eject a foreign observer force from the flashpoint Palestinian city of Hebron, diplomats said. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last week he would not renew the mandate of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), accusing the observers of unspecified anti-Israel activity. Norway, which has headed the multi-country observer mission for the past 22 years, said: "The one-sided Israeli decision can mean that the implementation of an important part of the Oslo accords is discontinued." See also, ["US blocks UN statement on Israel ending Hebron monitors mission" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Images Suggest Iran Launched Satellite Despite U.S. Criticism**

Iran appears to have attempted a second satellite launch despite U.S. criticism that its space program helps it develop ballistic missiles, satellite images released Thursday suggest. Iran has not acknowledged conducting such a launch. Images released by the Colorado-based company DigitalGlobe show a rocket at the Imam Khomeini Space Center in Iran's Semnan province on Tuesday. Images from Wednesday show the rocket was gone with what appears to be burn marks on its launch pad. Iranian state media did not immediately report on the rocket launch, though such delays have happened in previous launches. See also, ["Iran appears to have launched second satellite despite US warnings" \(i24 News\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Nasrallah to Lebanon: Accept Iranian Arms, Confront Israel**

The leader of Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah said Wednesday that he is willing to ask Iran to supply the Lebanese military with weapons and aerial defense systems to confront Israeli warplanes and called on Beirut to accept the offer. "Will the Lebanese government dare to accept the Iranian proposals? Why should Lebanon remain afraid to cooperate with Iran?" Nasrallah said in a televised address marking the 40th anniversary of the Iranian revolution and the overthrow of the Shah. "I'm a friend of Iran and I'm willing to bring the Lebanese Army air defense systems from Iran to confront Israel," Nasrallah said according to Lebanon's Naharnet news site.

## Ynet News

### **Palestinians: Gantz 'Encouraging' on Settlement Evacuation**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's spokesman gave a cautious welcome on Wednesday to remarks by Benny Gantz, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's closest election rival, that he opposed Israeli rule over Palestinians. "It's encouraging, if he succeeds and he sticks to this opinion," Abbas aide Nabil Abu Rudeineh told Reuters after the former IDF chief said in an exclusive interview to Yedioth Ahronoth, Ynetnews' sister newspaper, that he opposed controlling another people and that Israel could learn from the 2005 removal of its settlements in the Gaza Strip. See also, ""We need to find a way in which we're not controlling other people," Gantz said in the far-ranging interview, his first to the Israeli media since unveiling his campaign last month.

## **Greenblatt to Erekat: ‘Get Serious’ and ‘Use your Intellect’**

PLO Secretary-General Saeb Erekat needs to “get serious” and use his “intellect,” US Mideast negotiator Jason Greenblatt posted on Twitter on Wednesday, as a sharp social media exchange between him and Palestinian officials entered its sixth day. “Saeb: I saw your many tweets today. Your fears/emotions show – that won’t help Palestinians. I don’t agree w/ your assertions & you have offered no realistic solutions. Time to get serious & use your intellect. Palestinians deserve it. My door is open - don’t waste more time,” he tweeted. Greenblatt was responding to an angry twitter thread that Erekat unleashed on Tuesday, including a couple of tweets that were deleted from the thread on Erekat’s account. See also, [“Trump representative, Palestinians talk at each other on Twitter” \(i24 News\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Netanyahu Hails US Purchase of Israeli Iron Dome Batteries**

The Israeli Defense Ministry and US Department of Defense on Wednesday confirmed that the US Army will buy Israeli-developed Iron Dome batteries to defend deployed American troops. Announcing the purchase, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also serves as defense minister, said the deal was proof of the strength of the relationship between the two countries, before warning Israel’s enemies not to test the strength of the country’s “iron fist.” “This is a great achievement for Israel and yet another expression of the strengthening of our powerful alliance with the US and an expression of Israel’s rising status in the world,” Netanyahu said in a statement. “Israel has an Iron Dome and an iron fist. Our systems know how to deal with any threat, both in defense and in attack. I would not recommend our enemies to try us.” See also, [“US Army plans to purchase Iron Dome weapons “ \(CNN\)](#)

Ha’aretz

## **Israel Shells Hamas Target in Response to Gaza Projectile**

The Israeli army said on Wednesday evening that it shelled a Hamas position in southern Gaza after a projectile was fired from the Strip into Israel. Rocket sirens sounded in the southern Israeli Eshkol Regional Council, which borders Gaza. The council’s spokesperson said a projectile hit an open area and that an explosion was heard in the vicinity, adding that no injuries were reported. Palestinians reported that the Israeli army attacked a Hamas outpost east of Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip. An hour before the rocket sirens sounded, a Palestinian report said two mortars were fired from Gaza toward Israeli forces. The army said the rockets landed inside Gaza and refrained from reporting on it.

Ha’aretz

## **Gantz-Lapid Bloc Would Tie with Netanyahu's Likud, Poll Shows**

If the general election was held today, the Labor Party would win only six seats, while Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon’s Kulanu would barely clear the electoral threshold with four seats, according to the latest poll by Israel’s public broadcaster, Kan. The Likud maintains its lead with 32 seats, followed by Benny Gantz’s Hosen L’Yisrael with 22 seats and Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid with 11 seats. The poll indicated that the Geshet party, headed by former Yisrael Beiteinu MK Orli Levy-Abekasis, would fail to make it into the Knesset. The pollsters also pitched hypothetical alliances to potential voters. If former chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi would join Hosen L’Yisrael, Likud’s lead would shrink from 32 to 28, while Yesh Atid would slip to seven seats. However, if Gantz and Lapid would run together, their unified party would fetch 35 seats.

## **Netanyahu Rival Wins Big in Likud Primary**

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor

- **The Likud primaries this week were discouraging for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. None of the high-ranking Likud officials likely know what came over Netanyahu to make him paint former Minister Gideon Saar as the enemy of the nation. Saar, who resigned from the Knesset more than four years ago, is now making a comeback. Netanyahu is obsessed with demonizing Saar as someone conspiring to bring the prime minister down.**
- **One way or another, Netanyahu has used his extensive influence, including the dirtiest of the tricks in his arsenal, to politically eliminate Saar or at least to restrain him. Saar, who was confronted with Netanyahu's mythological power in the Likud, scored quite an achievement, arriving reaching fourth place on the list, a dramatic blow for Netanyahu. Even the Likud voters are signaling the prime minister that his powers are limited. They are willing to follow the prime minister through hell and high water, but not everywhere. The Likud has never seen such a phenomenon. Netanyahu stopped at nothing: First he enlisted his son Yair to make a series of toxic posts to Facebook against Saar. The young Netanyahu accused Saar and his wife, popular television presenter Geula Even, of being leftists. Saar was blamed for all the woes of the Likud and even of the entire country.**
- **When that didn't succeed, Netanyahu went on the offensive directly. He accused Saar of subversion and conspiracy with President Reuven Rivlin to depose him while his associates hinted that Rivlin plans to charge Saar with composing the next government if the Likud wins. Netanyahu did not let up even on the day of the primaries. "I do not retract a syllable of what I said regarding Saar," he said into the microphones. The prime minister invested tremendous energy this past week in telephone calls and a personal lobbying campaign against Saar. Someone in the Likud told AI-Monitor that if Netanyahu had been so determined with the Iranians, Iran would have long since become a liberal democracy.**
- **Evidently, Saar's main sin was that he took first place in the two Likud primaries in which he participated (2009 and 2012). Another was running Rivlin for president over Netanyahu's head and winning. Saar, a clear-cut right-wing figure, is viewed as the only one in the Likud capable of standing up to Netanyahu when the time comes to do so. That time is coming soon, if and when an indictment is filed against the prime minister. Netanyahu is investing all of his energy into erasing any source of opposition within his home party. Netanyahu is fighting a defensive battle to nip any signs of rebellion in the bud and harness the future coalition he'll assemble (assuming he wins the election) into letting him continue to serve in his position even during a criminal trial. In the prime minister's residence, Saar is viewed as the only Likud member capable of challenging that outcome, not because of anything that Saar said or did, but because of his independent personality and record.**
- **Netanyahu's efforts failed miserably and achieved the opposite effect: Saar became the natural candidate to inherit the premiership, to Netanyahu's great consternation. Thus, on the morning following the primaries, Saar emerged strengthened as the candidate who received the party's votes against the express opposition of its leader. It was Netanyahu's first defeat of this magnitude in his own political home for many years.**

- **Netanyahu's campaign against Saar began in April 2017, when Saar announced his return to politics. Netanyahu's initial goal was to convince Saar not to run in the Likud primaries. He failed. Afterward, Netanyahu continued to Plan B: to keep Saar out of the top ten. That did not happen either. In the next stage, Netanyahu swore to block Saar from the top five, but then had to concede defeat again.**
- **Netanyahu has most recently shifted to keeping Saar off the top of the list. At least here, Netanyahu earned a modicum of success. However, now everyone in the Likud knows that if not for Netanyahu's valiant efforts, Saar would have reached first place. Netanyahu forced Saar to demonstrate leadership and pass a test that few would have withstood. At the same time, Saar demonstrated statesmanlike behavior by refusing to engage in an ugly mud-slinging contest. Instead he succeeded in portraying Netanyahu as the bad-guy persecutor, the image that Netanyahu tried to attach to the former Police Inspector General Roni Alsheikh and the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit. Saar himself took on the coveted role of the persecuted.**
- **If Mandelblit ultimately indicts Netanyahu (which seems to be inevitable at this point) toward the end of the current year, it will be a windfall for Saar. Other contestants will be Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz, Knesset Chairman Yuli Edelstein and perhaps Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan, all of whom scored in the top five. Another name to remember is tech millionaire and former Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat. The next Likud leader will evidently be someone on this list, and the changing of the guard will probably take place in the course of the year.**

**SUMMARY: Netanyahu has most recently shifted to keeping Saar off the top of the list. At least here, Netanyahu earned a modicum of success. However, now everyone in the Likud knows that if not for Netanyahu's valiant efforts, Saar would have reached first place. Netanyahu forced Saar to demonstrate leadership and pass a test that few would have withstood. At the same time, Saar demonstrated statesmanlike behavior by refusing to engage in an ugly mud-slinging contest. Instead he succeeded in portraying Netanyahu as the bad-guy persecutor, the image that Netanyahu tried to attach to the former Police Inspector General Roni Alsheikh and the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit. Saar himself took on the coveted role of the persecuted.**

## **Burned by Israel, Iran to Move Weapons Supply Center Out of Damascus**

By Amos Harel, columnist at Ha'aretz

- Iran would like to move its weapons supply center for Syria from the Damascus international airport to a Syrian air base located very far from the capital city. Specifically, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which runs this operation, apparently will relocate the center to the Syrian air base known as T4, located between Homs and Palmyra.
- The decision is related to the latest wave of Israeli attacks on the Damascene airport. That wave caused tensions between Iran on the one side and the Assad regime and Moscow on the other because it undermined the attempt by Syria and Russia to create the impression that the regime had restored stability to the country after scoring a series of victories in the civil war.
- Iran has progressively stepped up the presence it established years ago at the Damascus airport, with the consent of the Assad regime, during nearly-eight years of the civil war. During the war years, the international airport turned into a hub where arms hailing from Iran have been received, sorted, stored and supplied.
- The Quds Brigade of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, commanded by General Qasem Soleimani, has its own independent compound within the airport, just tens of meters from the international terminal through which passengers and tourists enter and leave Syria. Israel claims that the Iranian operations at the airport, which Russia is ignoring, endangers passengers and imperils the regime's safety as well.
- The Damascus facility is Syria's main civilian airport. Traffic through it diminished during the war, in part because the regime severed diplomatic ties with several countries. Next to the civilian terminal is the seven-story Glasshouse, which was originally built as a hotel. In recent years, the Glasshouse has served as the headquarters from which Iran runs its Syrian operations. Access to the Glasshouse is restricted. Arms storage depots, including two underground bunkers (which were originally intended to protect jet planes from aerial attack), lie nearby.
- War matériel, from ammunition through surface-to-air missiles to kits to improve the accuracy of Hezbollah's guided missiles are smuggled to the Damascus airport on board planes leased from private Iranian companies by the Revolutionary Guard Corps. Arms shipments are stored for hours to weeks, before their transport by truck to Hezbollah in Lebanon, or to Iranian army bases in Syria, or to the Syrian army itself.
- Israel recently admitted to two attacks on the airport. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed the first one, which took place on January 11. The second, in the wee hours of January 29, came in response to an Iranian missile being fired and intercepted by the Iron Dome system in the vicinity of Mount Hermon the day before – which itself was an Iranian response to an attack, which Israel had not confirmed, that same day. The Arab media have reported on other Israeli air raids in recent months, which according to the reports were designed to foil specific weapon shipments.

- The area of the airport is protected by Syrian SAM missile batteries, which also have SA-22 missiles. The Syrian aerial defense was extensively activated during most of the Israeli attacks in the area. During the last round of attacks in late January, the Israeli air force destroyed a large number of Syrian missile launchers that had been firing at its planes.
- The Israeli leadership has said on numerous occasions that it will take action to frustrate the arms smuggling and Iran's attempts to establish a military presence in Syria. Israel argues that the Iranian activity at the Damascene air hub involves massive weapons smuggling, which endangers civilian passengers and air traffic as well as the stability of the Assad regime. Iran's presence also violates the Russian promise to keep the Iranians at least 80 kilometers from Israel's border (an obligation the Russians later qualified, saying it didn't include Damascus). The airport is about 50 kilometers from the border.
- The latest series of attacks at the Damascus airport, some done in broad daylight and documented by the international press, caused some embarrassment in Assad's circles, vis-à-vis Russia as well. In recent days Iran has been preparing for the apparent move to T-4. The Israel Air Force has attacked Iranian military installations at T-4 before, at least twice, last February and May, during two rounds of escalation in operations against Iran in Syria.

**SUMMARY:** The Israeli leadership has said on numerous occasions that it will take action to frustrate the arms smuggling and Iran's attempts to establish a military presence in Syria. Israel argues that the Iranian activity at the Damascene air hub involves massive weapons smuggling, which endangers civilian passengers and air traffic as well as the stability of the Assad regime. Iran's presence also violates the Russian promise to keep the Iranians at least 80 kilometers from Israel's border (an obligation the Russians later qualified, saying it didn't include Damascus). The airport is about 50 kilometers from the border.