



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, February 8

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News Excerpts

February 8, 2019

Times of Israel

Iran Unveils New Ballistic Missile in Secret Underground Facility

Iran's Revolutionary Guards on Thursday unveiled a new ballistic missile with a range of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles), their official news agency Sepah News reported. The move was the latest show of military might by the country as it celebrates the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution at a time of heightened tensions with the United States. The surface-to-surface missile — called Dezful — is an upgrade on the older Zolfaghar model that had a range of 700 kilometers (435 miles), aerospace commander Brigadier General Amirali Hajizadeh said. The new weapon was revealed after Iran on Saturday said it had successfully tested a new cruise missile named Hoveizeh with a range of 1,350 kilometer. See also, ["Israel uncovers new Iranian precision missile factory in Syria: report" \(i24 News\)](#)

Reuters

Lebanon: Israeli Gas Exploitations Threatens Our Oil Wealth

Lebanon's parliament speaker said on Thursday an Israeli move to license energy exploration near a disputed maritime boundary threatened to drain Lebanese oil wealth before its own drilling had started. Nabih Berri on Wednesday accused Israel of breaching Lebanese waters by licensing a company to exploit the area. Lebanon last year licensed a consortium of Italy's Eni, France's Total and Russia's Novatek to carry out the country's first offshore energy exploration in two blocks. One of the blocks, Block 9, contains waters disputed with Israel. Berri said the Israeli move threatened "to drain a whole basin and a large part of the oil wealth" before Lebanon had started to drill. See also, ["Israel Stealing our Oil & Gas Reserves: Lebanon" \(ET News\)](#)

AP

Kushner, Greenblatt to Visit ME to Seek Backing for Peace Plan

White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and other administration officials are headed to the Middle East later this month to brief diplomats in at least five countries on the economic section of a US proposal for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Kushner, who is US President Donald Trump's son-in-law, will be joined by US Mideast envoy Jason Greenblatt, US envoy on Iran Brian Hook and other administration officials who have worked on the economic part of the plan. Stops are confirmed in Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Other stops could be added to the trip. See also, ["Kushner and Greenblatt to visit region, discuss peace plan" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Ynet News

Palestinians Leaving Their Babies at Gaza Border

A worrying phenomenon appears to have developed on the border with the Gaza Strip that sees parents of children taken to Israel for medical treatment abandon their offsprings in order to remain in the country as illegal residents. According to the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), Israeli soldiers find abandoned Gazan children brought to Israel by their parents for medical treatment several times a months. This occurrence began a few months ago is not showing signs of slowing down. As recently as two days ago, a four-year-old boy was abandoned by his father at the Erez border crossing in the northern Gaza Strip.

Poll: Majority of Gantz Voters Say Settlements Endanger Israel

Benny Gantz has tried to remain vague on diplomatic issues to avoid being perceived as left wing ahead of the April 9 election, but the results of an opinion poll now show that a majority of those who say they will vote for his Hosen L'Yisrael party support left-wing positions on the Palestinian issue. The poll was conducted for the Geneva Initiative, an organization advocating efforts to achieve a peace deal with the Palestinians. The survey was conducted about a week and a half ago by the iPanel opinion polling firm among a representative sampling of Israelis. Asked whether Israeli settlements in the West Bank are a security asset or a burden that endangers the lives of soldiers and civilians, 58 percent of Hosen L'Yisrael voters said they are a burden that endangers lives. By contrast, only 40 percent of Yesh Atid supporters and a third of Likud supporters held this view of the settlements.

AG to Bar Use of Photos of Politicians with Soldiers in Campaigns

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit is expected to bar politicians from posting joint photos with Israel Defense Forces soldiers on their social media outlets in order to promote their election campaign. Prime Minister Netanyahu, who also serves as the defense minister, as well as members of his ruling Likud Party and members of other parties will not be allowed to use photos with IDF troops on their private Facebook and Twitter pages. They will also not be allowed to appear with the troops on billboards, however, the attorney general is expected to allow posting photo ops on official social media platforms. Mandelblit has been reviewing the issue after the Labor Party filed a petition to the Central Elections Committee Chairman, High Court of Justice Deputy Chief Hanan Melcer, calling on him to prevent further posts involving soldiers on politicians' private social media accounts. *See also, ["A-G tells Netanyahu to stop using IDF in election materials" \(Arutz 7\)](#)*

Google to Block Political Advertisements Ahead of Elections

Google announced on Thursday that the company will not be executing personal advertising until after the April 9 elections, meaning anyone engaged in political advertising will be blocked from advertising to segmented audiences, redirecting and using listed names. Google's advertising systems currently allow advertisements to target demographics by age, gender, area of residence, income, and psychographic data, the latter of which includes much more personal information such as values, interests and personality traits. In addition, the system allows parties to upload their supporters' information as a list, which would allow Google to monitor and keep track of the supporters' surfing.

Israeli Election Committee Chief Warns of Foreign Meddling

The chairman of the Central Elections Committee warned Thursday about foreign interference in the election campaign over the next two months, though he declined to say whether attempts had been uncovered. "I can't say that I'm at ease," Hanan Melcer, who is also a Supreme Court justice, told reporters. "I'm concerned. The question of how many such attempts at interference will be successful is a function of the measures taken against them." Melcer said he had met with the head of the National Cyber Directorate at the Prime Minister's Office, and the agency was addressing the problem. Last month, the head of the Shin Bet security service said a foreign country intended to intervene in the election, though he did not name it, Channel 12 News reported.

Trump is Stumbling his Way to a Vainglorious Middle East Retreat

By David Ignatius, columnist at Washington Post

- Iraqi President Barham Salih measured his words in a telephone interview from Baghdad on Monday. He didn't want to worsen a quarrel with President Trump over U.S. access to an air base in western Iraq. But Iraqi politics is fragile, and ill-considered statements by U.S. presidents can have big consequences. "I appreciate what the U.S. has done to help Iraq," Salih told me. "We honor that sacrifice. But this success in Iraq is precarious and should not be unduly burdened. It could easily unravel."
- Short translation of this diplomat-speak: Mr. President, don't shoot yourself in the foot. If you describe al-Asad Air Base as if it's an American facility, it offends Iraqis — and adds to Iraqi domestic political pressure against any continued U.S. military presence there.
- Trump lurches from blunder to blunder on the Middle East. His latest statements about rebasing U.S. forces in Iraq were so glib and insensitive to local politics that you have to wonder if the president even understood the mistakes he was making. Sometimes, Trump's conduct suggests a behavioral syndrome in which he seems to have no real comprehension that his comments offend others and increase his social isolation.
- The Iraq gaffe followed a much more serious mistake in judgment in December, when Trump suddenly announced he was pulling about 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria at a time when their commanders said their job of destroying the Islamic State wasn't finished. Despite opposition from virtually every corner of the U.S. government, Trump pushed ahead, and officials say the withdrawal will be completed by the end of April.
- When you ask U.S. officials what future security arrangements will exist in northeast Syria, you get a mishmash of answers, none of which adds up to a coherent policy. The United States asked French and British forces if they might stay, but they balked, so right now, Turkish, Russian and Iranian forces are positioning to fill the vacuum.
- Trump last weekend invented a new solution: Everything would be fine, because he was moving Special Operations forces to Iraq. "We have a base in Iraq, and the base is a fantastic edifice. . . . We spent a fortune on building this incredible base. We might as well keep it," he told Margaret Brennan on CBS's "Face the Nation" in an interview that aired Sunday.
- Trump explained (if that's the right word for his chain of illogic) that if there is new trouble in Syria, as is widely predicted, "We'll come back if we have to. We have very fast airplanes, we have very good cargo planes." Trump's rebasing-to-Iraq approach, unfortunately, may put U.S. soldiers at greater risk. Right now, the people who kick down the doors of Islamic State terrorists in Syria are our Kurdish-led allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces. If the United States instead does the raids from Iraq, the danger for U.S. personnel will increase. But in Trump world, that's apparently an afterthought.
- Trump might have avoided a diplomatic crunch if he'd stopped with the rebasing. But no, he wanted to advertise that, with his plan, he could use the Iraqi base "to be able to watch Iran." He

continued: The al-Asad base is “perfectly situated for looking at . . . different parts of the troubled Middle East rather than pulling up. And this is what a lot of people don’t understand.”

- The disturbing part is that Trump doesn’t seem to realize that there’s an Iraqi government in Baghdad, facing substantial pro-Iranian pressure, that wants to control its own sovereignty. U.S. forces were invited to Iraq in 2014 to combat the Islamic State, and Iraqis are genuinely grateful for U.S. help. But they don’t want another occupation.
- Indeed, some Iraqis had been agitating recently about the United States’ continued presence at al-Asad and other bases. In the weeks before Trump’s botch-job on “Face the Nation,” Salih had in fact been struggling to keep pro-Iranian politicians from introducing legislation in the Iraqi parliament to force a U.S. withdrawal.
- Trump may have a proprietary feel about al-Asad Air Base because it’s the one place in Iraq that he is known to have visited. He was there on Dec. 26 for a flyby stop with troops that he turned into a quasi-political rally, touting his border wall, warning about caravans of migrants and signing “Make America Great Again” hats. “We’re no longer the suckers, folks,” he said. “Under my administration, we’re winning now.” It’s painful to watch an American president in this stumbling, vainglorious retreat. As one Middle Eastern leader said to me recently: “Who can look at the United States as a reliable partner?”

SUMMARY: Trump lurches from blunder to blunder on the Middle East. His latest statements about rebasing U.S. forces in Iraq were so glib and insensitive to local politics that you have to wonder if the president even understood the mistakes he was making. Sometimes, Trump’s conduct suggests a behavioral syndrome in which he seems to have no real comprehension that his comments offend others and increase his social isolation. The Iraq gaffe followed a much more serious mistake in judgment in December, when Trump suddenly announced he was pulling about 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria at a time when their commanders said their job of destroying the Islamic State wasn’t finished. Despite opposition from virtually every corner of the U.S. government, Trump pushed ahead, and officials say the withdrawal will be completed by the end of April.

A Better Way to Choose

By Ehud Barak, former Israeli Prime Minister

- Three days ago, Likud held its primary. In three days, the Labor Party will follow. Media coverage of these events is enthusiastic, gushing even, along the lines of “red-letter day for democracy.” It’s time to tell the truth: the primary process is outmoded. It has become corrupting, occasionally corrupted and in any case completely irrelevant. Conclusive proof is the fact that large numbers of voters repeatedly vote for parties such as Yisrael Beiteinu, Yesh Atid, Kulanu and Hosen L’Yisrael — none of which holds primaries and some of which have an autocratic, near-draconian constitution. No voter, as far as is known, has ever hesitated for even a second to vote for a party due to the lack of “democratic process.”
- In Likud, the primary system pushed aside Dan Meridor, Reuven Rivlin and Benny Begin, in favor of Oren Hazan, Miki Zohar and Nava Boker. It made possible the hostile takeover by settler extremists of the Likud Central Committee. It allows registered party members who don’t vote Likud in the general election to determine the composition of its ticket. The “theft law,” as Benny Begin called the legislation that could bring Israel’s leadership to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, was imposed on a feeble party leadership by MKs who, terrified by the approaching primaries, went against the wishes of Likud voters and the national interests of the state. There are other examples.
- The primaries also raised the stature of “vote contractors.” Party chiefs attend their family events, mumbling praise and embracing people they’ve never met. They generated corruption: party registration fees reimbursed in cash; fictitious “supplier deals”; jobs during the campaign (and often for years) afterward) for relatives. In short, deep rot. And for what?
- In the Labor Party, the primaries have been the root of a number of evils, including dodgy membership registration. Every primary campaign leaves in its wake parties whose human fabric of trust and solidarity has been rent and scarred, often for years.
- The system in the so-called personality parties — in which a single individual, aided by associates or whim alone, draws up the list of candidates — isn’t necessarily more attractive. By definition, this is far from any reasonable understanding of democratic process. These parties often include heavy hitters, but these individuals are bound to be disappointed or to gradually disappear in the face of the party’s autocratic structure. I’ve often witnessed the heartbreaking sight of an experienced, highly talented figure waiting helplessly to be told, by the secretary of “the leader,” how to vote in a meeting of the inner cabinet. Is that the proper alternative to primaries? Definitely not.
- There is a simple way to be rid of both the rot of the primaries and the enervating arbitrariness of the one-person parties. There are half a dozen democracies around the world, including the Netherlands, where the ranking of candidates is assigned — can you believe it? — to the voters. In the voting booth on Election Day, at the voting booth, the ballot for each party lists all the candidates: The voters rank them in order of preference. An end to corruption, vote contractors, forged voter registrations and the whims of instant political stars. The voters, and only the voters, will decide. Why not expect this of our leaders, at the very least? What’s so hard to understand?

SUMMARY: Three days ago, Likud held its primary. In three days, the Labor Party will follow. Media coverage of these events is enthusiastic, gushing even, along the lines of “red-letter day for democracy.” It’s time to tell the truth: the primary process is outmoded. It has become corrupting, occasionally corrupted and in any case completely irrelevant. Conclusive proof is the fact that large numbers of voters repeatedly vote for parties such as Yisrael Beiteinu, Yesh Atid, Kulanu and Hosen L’Yisrael — none of which holds primaries and some of which have an autocratic, near-draconian constitution. No voter, as far as is known, has ever hesitated for even a second to vote for a party due to the lack of “democratic process.”