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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, February 4*

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# News Excerpts

February 4, 2019

Reuters

## **Netanyahu Uses Trump Photo in Election Billboard**

A giant billboard of a smiling Donald Trump shaking hands with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu loomed over a main entrance to Tel Aviv on Sunday, part of the Israeli leader's re-election campaign. "Netanyahu. In another league," read the Hebrew-language billboard. Trump is popular in Israel because of his policies toward the Palestinians and Iran. On Friday, Israel's attorney general said there was no legal reason to prevent him from announcing, before the election, any intention to indict Netanyahu on corruption charges should he decide such a move was warranted.

Jerusalem Post

## **52 Percent of Israelis: Netanyahu Should Resign if Indicted**

Some 52% of the Israeli public (49.5% of Jews, 66% of Israeli-Palestinians) believes that Netanyahu should resign if the attorney-general recommends that he be indicted, according to a new report by the Israel Democracy Institute. However, only 10% of Likud and 22% of Shas agree, compared to 89% of Labor voters, 87% of the Joint List, 86.5% of Gantz supporters, 83% Yesh Atid and 78% of all Kulanu voters.

Times of Israel

## **Yesh Atid MK: Gantz and Lapid in Talks to Unite**

Yesh Atid MK Ofer Shelah said Saturday his party was holding talks with Benny Gantz's Israel Resilience party on the possibility of joining forces. "Conversations are being held between Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz and a decision will come in the next two weeks," Shelah said. But he insisted that "the most established government alternative in Israel is Yesh Atid led by Yair Lapid, and it needs to lead those who want to change the government." Separately, Labor party head Avi Gabbay on Saturday ruled out an electoral alliance with the left-wing Meretz.

Jerusalem Post

## **Gantz and Lapid Intensify Wooing of Ashkenazi**

Gantz and Lapid have intensified their tug-of-war over former IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi, who must make a decision soon about whether to enter politics. Sources close to Ashkenazi have confirmed that he would be more likely to enter politics if it would cause the two parties to run together. Gantz met Sunday night with Ashkenazi and, according to Channel 12, gave him many options, including the number two slot. Gantz is expected to many of its new candidates after Tuesday's Likud primary.

Jerusalem Post

## **Report: Netanyahu Considering Merger with Jewish Home**

A senior activist in the Jewish Home party is reportedly trying to encourage his party to join Netanyahu's Likud party. This is amid fears the party will not cross the electoral threshold, after party leaders Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked left the party, and against opposition to joining the National Union led by Bezalel Smotrich, whom the activist views as extreme in his views. A senior Likud official confirmed that he heard Netanyahu was seriously considering the merger.

The New York Times

## **Israel Silent on Surge in Settler Violence**

The killing last Saturday of Hamdy Naasan, a Palestinian father of four, was the latest in a wave of settler violence in the West Bank. Attacks on Palestinians, their property and Israeli security forces increased by 50 percent last year and have threatened to ignite the West Bank, Israeli security officials say. Days earlier, Israeli authorities charged a 16-year-old yeshiva student from another Jewish settlement with manslaughter and terrorism, accusing him of hurling a four-pound rock that killed a Palestinian mother of eight in October. The Israeli government has remained conspicuously silent, wary of alienating potential supporters in an election year.

Jerusalem Post

## **Israel Begins Construction of New Gaza Barrier**

Israel's Defense Ministry announced that it has begun the construction of an upgraded security barrier along the Gaza Strip on Sunday. The new barrier will stretch from the new sea barrier near Zikim beach in the north to Kerem Shalom crossing in the south. Made from galvanized steel, it will weigh about 20,000 tons and will reach a height of about six meters. The smart-fence is the above-ground part of Israel's underground barrier, which has a system of advanced sensor and monitoring devices to detect tunnels.

Ynet

## **Abbas Refuses to Meet with Israeli Supermarket Mogul**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met Thursday with Breaking The Impasse, a group of leading Israeli businessmen, former IDF officers and academics promoting the two-state solution, but refused to meet with Rami Levy, the owner of the third largest Israeli supermarket chain, because he operates stores in West Bank settlements. The businessman is now promoting a first-of-its-kind Israeli-Palestinian mall in the Atarot Industrial Park near Jerusalem, which will serve both the Jewish and the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem and the nearby villages.

## Trump Peace Plan Up in Smoke?

By Amir Tibon, Senior Columnist

- Until a few months ago, Mideast media outlets closely tracked the movements of Jared Kushner, U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, and Jason Greenblatt, the president's special envoy to the Middle East. Every visit to a country in the region was worthy of commentary on top of the news reports, as the media eagerly awaited the release of the administration's peace plan. This week, the White House announced that Kushner and Greenblatt would both take part in the mid-February summit in Warsaw on the future of the Middle East. While Haaretz and other news outlets have briefly reported on the Americans' travel plans, the news didn't create the interest of previous stories about interactions between the Trump administration and regional leaders. The main reason is that the peace plan is now considered in the region to be in a state of hibernation. Washington's intensive preparations for its release, which geared up in the last months of 2018, slowed down once Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for an early election. Now the earliest the plan could be published is in mid-April after the April 9 vote; there's a chance the release could be further delayed into the summer.
- Greenblatt and Kushner, according to a senior White House official who spoke with Haaretz this week, aren't concerned about the skepticism or low expectations regarding the plan. They've viewed low expectations as a positive from their earliest days working on the issue – something that would allow them to surprise everyone. Many experts and former officials are highly skeptical about the plan. They assume it will adopt so much of Netanyahu's worldview on the conflict that it will have zero chance of support in the Arab world. Others believe the plan will never see the light of day because of political calculations and Trump's desire to preserve his base among evangelical Christians. When that's the level of expectations, the administration can only surprise the many skeptics.
- Trump, according to the senior official who spoke with Haaretz, has been briefed on the plan – and he supports it. As has previously been reported, the administration has a document a few dozen pages long that touches on every core issue of the conflict, and also on many economic aspects. Trump probably hasn't read every page, but he's committed to the general framework. The plan, according to the senior official, has a strong "regional context" behind it. Trump views it as part of his broader objective of "creating new alliances in the Middle East." That's the main reason Kushner and Greenblatt will be in Warsaw this month with Netanyahu and top officials from a raft of Arab countries.
- It's undeniable that since Trump took office, the public signs of Israel and the Arab world getting closer have increased. Netanyahu visited Oman last year. Leaders of other Gulf countries have praised Israel publicly for its military actions against Iran and Hezbollah. These developments are continuing a trend that began before Trump took office, but they've definitely intensified

under his watch. Still, there are still clear limitations to the Israeli relationship with the Arab world, and the administration is aware of the Palestinian issue's impact on those limitations. Late last year the administration tried to persuade Arab countries to support, or at least not oppose, a UN resolution denouncing Hamas. Yet every Arab country voted against the resolution, leading to its defeat.

- The administration wants to strengthen the coordination between Israel and the Arab world against both Iran and Sunni terror groups. The peace plan is viewed as an essential part of that effort. Last year the White House told Haaretz that the plan would be “sellable” to everyday Israelis and Palestinians. It's not clear, however, what the administration views as sellable on the Palestinian side.
- On the Israeli side, it seems two key words will help present the plan to the Israeli public. The first is “security.” Vice President Mike Pence, the administration's most popular spokesman to the evangelical world and the Jewish right wing, has stressed in speeches over the past two years that even if peace will require tough decisions for Israel, the Trump administration will never compromise on Israel's security. Some in Israel interpret this as meaning that, in a future peace agreement, Israel will have complete military and intelligence control over the entire area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea – even if that area gets divided into two independent states, Israel and Palestine. (No part of this hypothesis has been confirmed by the administration.)
- Complete military control from the river to the sea has been Netanyahu's position for years, and his main challenger on April 9, former military Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, made a similar promise when he launched his election campaign this week. But if Israel indeed will receive full security control over a future Palestinian state, what will the Palestinians get to make the plan sellable to their own people? When Israelis hear Netanyahu and Gantz talk about military control, they imagine the ability of military units to arrest dangerous terrorists and stop weapons from being smuggled into the Palestinian state. When Palestinians hear that phrase, they imagine Israeli soldiers putting up roadblocks and checkpoints within the Palestinian state, arresting suspects in their own cities, and confiscating land “for security considerations – with their own government completely helpless and humiliated. The other word that seems an essential part of making the plan sellable on the Israeli side is “regional.” Opinion polls in Israel over the past decade clearly show that while Israelis are pessimistic about peace with the Palestinians (and many on the right aren't even interested in it), there is still significant support and optimism regarding a broader “regional peace.”
- The White House, almost two years after beginning its work on the plan, still refuses to release any details. But if we assume, based on public statements, that Israel indeed will get “security control” and “regional peace” out of the plan, the question of what the Palestinians will get still hangs in the air. This is the greatest mystery surrounding the plan, the question with the highest potential of political danger for the administration. The senior official who spoke with Haaretz said the administration understands that “compromise is hard,” thus “some people won't like

elements of the plan.” But there is a belief in the White House that when the plan is viewed in its entirety and not through selective and unverified leaks, “the critics will realize that it is a realistic basis to resolve the conflict and chart a new future.” As Haaretz has reported, the plan won’t be a take-it-or-leave-it document. The leaders in the region won’t be asked to accept it as is, but to agree to it as a basis for peace talks. “We hope that the leaders in the region will consider the many positive elements of the plan and be willing to engage on the plan,” the senior official said.

- Some skeptics – and some of the administration’s supporters on the right – believe that the plan will be constructed in a way to ensure complete Palestinian rejection; it will then be used to foster a separate channel of negotiations between Israel and the Arab world. The administration has denied this from the start. According to the senior official, “ultimately, everyone understands that only the Israelis and Palestinians themselves can resolve this conflict.” The administration also insists it’s not trying to bypass Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in any way, even though it has had no official communication with the Palestinian Authority since December 2017, when Trump “took Jerusalem off the table,” as he put it.
- The senior official told Haaretz that “the PA’s boycott has seriously hurt the Palestinians and the PA’s reputation around the world. The administration is committed to the Palestinian people – in both Gaza and the West Bank – and we believe that when the Palestinian people see the plan they will see a great future for themselves.” But so far the relationship has been characterized by an endless stream of headlines about Washington ending its support for programs in the Palestinian territories. Even programs benefiting Palestinians in areas controlled by Israel, such as hospitals in East Jerusalem, have lost American support. The United States was overwhelmingly unpopular among everyday Palestinians even before those steps were taken, and its popularity sank even lower last year. This makes any attempt to sell the plan to the Palestinian side even more complicated – though the administration’s riposte is that in terms of raw polling numbers, the decrease in the United States’ image hasn’t been dramatic.
- On Friday the president’s son Donald Jr., who often advises his father on political issues, shared a story about the United States cutting all funding to the PA security forces, and described it as “great.” This came after weeks of the administration striving – and failing – to convince Congress not to cut the funding because the PA security forces work in coordination with Israel to thwart terror attacks. The Don Jr. tweet perhaps doesn’t represent the administration’s policy, but it does represent a deeper problem: Trump’s right-wing base has strong anti-Palestinian elements that are in sync with Israel’s most right-wing political forces. Any deal that’s sellable to the Palestinians would contradict the views of these Trump supporters. When will we find out if the skeptics were right about the plan being a one-sided document, or if the administration has managed to surprise everyone, using the low expectations to its own benefit? Probably not anytime soon. The Israeli election isn’t the only consideration regarding the timing for releasing the plan. According to the senior official who spoke with Haaretz, other factors include the period after the election when a new governing coalition has to be formed, and “sensitive” dates such as Passover, Israeli Independence Day (Nakba Day for the Palestinians) and Ramadan.

- On one thing, however, the administration is adamant. Despite rumors to the contrary, White House officials insist that Kushner, Greenblatt and U.S. Ambassador David Friedman are in tandem on all recent decisions regarding the plan. “The peace team is also fully coordinated with the State Department and the National Security Council,” the senior official added. Trump remains popular in Israel despite criticism over his recent decision to withdraw forces from Syria. The Israeli right wing rejoiced over Greenblatt’s denial of a Channel 13 report last month that outlined some of the concessions Israel would supposedly have to make under the Trump plan. But if the plan truly contains what’s required to make it sellable to the Palestinians, the administration will sooner or later have to contend with criticism from the right. Thanks to the election, it has a few more months to prepare for that.

## **Gaza War Takes Center Stage in Israeli Campaign**

By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist

- Israel is the only place where a military operation that occurred almost five years ago could resurface and feature in a crucial election campaign, with the army and defense chiefs who commanded it — both running for high office — coming under intense fire from the politicians who directed them. The fallout from Operation Protective Edge continues. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and members of his Security Cabinet have recently launched harsh attacks against Lt. Gen. (res.) Benny Gantz, the former military chief of staff now running for the premiership, and his running mate and former defense minister, Lt. Gen. (res.) Moshe Ya'alon. The accusations are absurd, especially given that the accusers themselves had previously declared clear and total victory over Hamas in Gaza.
- Netanyahu and his senior ministers are reacting in part to viral videos from social media highlighting pronouncements they made in 2014. In the clips, they are seen praising the military operation and its commanders with the same passion with which they are now vilifying them. Others have also been caught up in the fray, among them former Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, a cabinet member during that war and now in the Knesset opposition, and Maj. Gen. (res.) Yoav Galant, former commander of the southern front now running in Netanyahu's Likud. Then there are Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked of the New Right, whose current versions of 2014 events consistently contradict what they said at the time.
- Gantz, founder of the new party Israel Resilience, saw this coming and launched a pre-emptive strike with three videos posted online. One video documents the horrific destruction wrought on Gaza by the Israeli army under his command, with a counter adding up the number of Palestinian "terrorists" killed, stopping at more than 1,300. Another shows images from the 2012 killing of Hamas military commander Ahmed Jabari by the Israel Air Force, which was also under Gantz's command at the time. For the sake of balance, and to snag the support of center-left voters, the other video has Gantz saying that Israel must keep striving for peace. The clips did the job. They boosted Gantz's standing in the polls — from voter support equaling 11 Knesset seats to 15 seats, even before he officially declared he would run for the premiership, and then to more than 20 seats after the Jan. 29 speech launching his campaign. In response, Netanyahu's entourage sent the word for the Likud to ramp up attacks.
- Lacking other damning material, the broadside against Gantz has focused on his conduct as the country's top soldier in general and especially during the 2014 Gaza war. Operation Protective Edge, the Israeli campaign during the war, lasted 51 days, during which time Hamas fired thousands of rockets at Israel, including Tel Aviv. Gaza sustained extensive damage, and the Palestinians thousands of deaths and injuries, but the fighting ended in a draw, not a knockout. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) did not conduct a significant ground campaign in Gaza, like it



did in Operation Cast Lead at the end of 2008. Instead, it carried out a limited operation to destroy tunnels dug by Hamas into Israel to use for attacks. The performance of the military, Security Cabinet, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ya'alon came under harsh public criticism and an especially tough assessment by the state comptroller.

- Now the protagonists of that campaign find themselves engaged in another round of fighting, this time confronting each other from opposing trenches. Netanyahu is being forced to criticize the operation that he led and misleadingly hailed as a triumph. Ya'alon and Gantz are having to justify themselves. Bennett and Shaked are trying to score points at all the others' expense, forgetting that when the fighting stopped, they too had heaped praise on the IDF and its commanders for their performance and achievements. In this fight, the combatants are highlighting what their comrades said at the time compared to what they are now claiming as rivals. The public is confused: Which of the contradictory statements are true, and which are not? When do the officials mean what they're saying, and when do they not?
- Netanyahu is vulnerable and worried about Gantz's surge in the polls. For the first time in a decade, someone other than himself seems to be scoring high marks and has even achieved near parity in the most important area of all – suitability to serve as prime minister. Previous Netanyahu rivals, among them former Labor Party Chair Isaac Herzog and current Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid, never came close to Gantz's current poll numbers. Almost overnight, Gantz catapulted from a one-digit suitability rating before he officially announced his candidacy to a virtual draw, at 42% afterward, according to a Channel 13 News poll. This dramatic shift, making this period particularly fateful for the election campaign, led Netanyahu to order a full-scale assault on Gantz's soft underbelly — allegations about his performance in the 2014 war and in general.
- Netanyahu was prime minister during the operation and has worked hard in the ensuing years to explain just what a heroic victory he and the IDF had achieved. He also extended Gantz's term for a year, heaping praise on him at the war's outcome and again after Gantz left the army. Netanyahu declared repeatedly how the IDF had vanquished Hamas and how Israeli fighters had displayed superiority and a wonderful fighting spirit. Such praise is now coming back to bite Netanyahu as he authors a new version of events to the sounds of cheering supporters. Gantz has adopted a calm, business-like strategy, sticking to laconic responses, no more than a few words at a time. In fact, he barely needs to react. Social media are doing it for him through the video clips. In fact, Gantz's mission is more complex than merely slinging mud at the other side.
- Gantz has chosen not to conduct a negative campaign, for now. Instead, he is trying to position himself as “all things to all people.” On the one hand, he is a military hero, a commander who eats Arabs for breakfast and a defense hawk who can step into Netanyahu's shoes as Mr. Security. On the other hand, he is a moderate leader, sober and peace loving. In the Israel of 2019, Gantz still needs these latter traits to attract voters from the political center-left. With that in mind, Gantz's greatest asset is positioning himself as the leader of the anti-Netanyahu camp. This sizeable Israeli tribe, which can no longer stand Benjamin Netanyahu, will whitewash

Gantz's sins and ignore any lapse or wild veering to the left or right just as long as he defeats Netanyahu.

- That is the state of affairs, for now. What was at the start a campaign featuring one outstanding party, the Likud, against a gang of downtrodden parties has turned into a two-player challenge: Bibi versus the anti-Bibi. To complicate matters, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit has decided to announce his decision on whether to indict Netanyahu for corruption before the April 9 elections, rejecting Netanyahu's demand to postpone the announcement until after the balloting. If Mandelblit announces a decision to indict, the campaign conducted thus far, including the allegations over Operation Protective Edge, will seem like child's play. It will be a very different type of war, hopefully one that the public can withstand.