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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

February 5, 2019

Times of Israel

Sa'ar Accuses PM of Waging 'Witch Hunt' Against Him

Former Likud minister Gideon Sa'ar accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday of leading a "witch hunt" against him. Ahead of today's Likud primaries, Netanyahu has dredged up unproven reports that Sa'ar and President Reuven Rivlin conspired to have Sa'ar form the next government. Netanyahu's efforts against Sa'ar has reportedly sparked anger among Likud MKs, who believe they have strengthened Sa'ar at their expense.

Ha'aretz

Poll: Gantz Keeps Momentum, but Netanyahu on Top

According to a Ha'aretz opinion poll, former IDF Chief Benny Gantz's party would receive 22 Knesset seats in the April election, after Netanyahu's Likud, in the lead with 30 seats. The current coalition (including Yisrael Beiteinu, which left for electoral reasons) numbers 64 MKs of 120 total seats, without Orli Levi-Abekasis' party (still at four seats, just above the voter threshold). Netanyahu's nightmare scenario, in which one or two of the parties that are "natural partners" don't make it past the voter threshold, does not yet seem to be coming true.

Jerusalem Post

Report: Ministers Endorse Goal of 2 Million Settlers

Dozens of center-right Israeli lawmakers overnight reportedly signed a declaration to support the "Nahal" movement, which aims to promote two million settlers in the West Bank. The senior officials who signed included Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, ministers Israel Katz, Yariv Levin, Ze'ev Elkin, Gilad Erdan, Ayelet Shaked, Naftali Bennett, Miri Regev and Tzachi Hanegbi. The plan reflects a significant shift in policy, including unbridled building within the current settlement blocs and establishing new settlements throughout the West Bank.

Times of Israel

Ya'alon Plugs 'Right to Settle Every Part of the Land of Israel'

Days after joining forces with Gantz, former defense minister Moshe Ya'alon outlined on Sunday his opposition to a two-state solution and praised the West Bank settlement project. Ya'alon said that as IDF commander of the Central Region and defense minister he had been instrumental in the community's establishment and was "delighted to see its expansion and

growth.” But not all agreed --- the meeting was interrupted by Samaria Settlers’ Committee Chairman Tzachi Dickstein, who branded Ya’alon a “political opportunist.”

Ynet

Poll: 52% of Jewish Israelis Want to Amend Nation-State Law

Over half of the Jewish public in Israel either opposes the controversial Nation-State Law or believes it needs to be amended, according to a poll ordered by the campaign to amend the legislation. The law, approved by the Knesset last July, defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and strips the Arabic language from its status as an official language alongside Hebrew. More than half of respondents (52.7 percent) said that in addition to being a Jewish state, the legislation should recognize Israel is also "a democracy with equal rights to all citizens of the state."

Jerusalem Post

Palestinian Man Killed After Throwing Explosive at Soldiers

IDF forces shot and killed at least one Palestinian man who hurled an explosive device at soldiers at a West Bank crossing on Monday night. According to the IDF, two terrorists arrived at the Gilboa checkpoint, north of Jenin, and threw an explosive device at the forces. No soldiers were hurt in the incident. The IDF immediately returned fire, killing one of the terrorists, and injuring the second one.

Ha'aretz

Hamas and Islamic Jihad Discuss Gaza with Egypt Officials

Representatives of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad were meeting Monday with Egyptian officials to discuss maintaining calm in the Gaza Strip. The delegation, led by Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh and Islamic Jihad Secretary-General Ziyad Al-Nakhleh, was set to meet Egyptian intelligence officials, including intelligence chief Abbas Kamel. The delegation is also expected to discuss a series of visits Haniyeh seeks to make to several Arab and Muslim countries. Islamic Jihad is reportedly trying to establish an equation in which any Israeli attack or violation of ceasefire terms would lead to retaliation by the group.

Ha'aretz

Former IDF Chief Rabbi Appointed Jewish Home Chair

Rabbi Rafi Peretz, a former Israel Air Force helicopter pilot and former chief military rabbi, was appointed chairman of Jewish Home on Monday by the party’s central committees, ahead of Israel’s April 9 general election. Peretz replaces Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who broke away to form a new party, “The New Right” with Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked. Peretz is considered much more conservative than Bennett, who stressed that the party was not only for the Orthodox.

Likud Primary Is First Act in Palace Coup Against Netanyahu

By Anshel Pfeffer, Senior Columnist

- In the first episode of his new Facebook channel Likud TV on Sunday night, Benjamin Netanyahu made a surprising accusation he had hitherto only made in private. He claimed to have heard from other party members that former minister and prominent campaigner in Tuesday's Likud primary, Gideon Sa'ar, was telling people that after the election President Reuven Rivlin would ask him, not Netanyahu, to form the next government. Not only has such a scenario already been vehemently denied by both Rivlin and Sa'ar, it also flies in the face of all political precedent and would probably be unconstitutional.
- Netanyahu chose to publicly recycle his conspiracy theory against Sa'ar and Rivlin on the eve of the party primary for a reason. He believes the return of Sa'ar to frontline politics is the first stage in an internal coup against him. He is hoping to taint Sa'ar as a plotter against his leadership and damage his prospects of doing well Tuesday and emerging as a leading candidate to succeed him. The reactions to the allegation were interesting. Sa'ar expressed regret over "the false accusation" and said that on "the eve of critical elections for Likud and the state, I will behave like the responsible adult and won't be dragged into an internal battle." In subsequent radio interviews on Monday morning, though, he didn't attack the prime minister personally and even pledged his support. Sa'ar didn't want to annoy Netanyahu supporters 24 hours before they hold his political fate in their hands.
- At the same time, however, other senior Likud figures were conspicuous in not rallying to Netanyahu's side. None of the ministers or Knesset members who can usually be relied upon to back up the prime minister, no matter what, were prepared to do so this time. In fact, the few who were willing to speak publicly expressed their disbelief that Sa'ar was behind a plot, albeit without criticizing Netanyahu directly. It was an intriguing moment in which, for the first time in years, no one of any seniority in Likud was prepared to endorse Netanyahu's latest bout of paranoia. It's much too early to say Netanyahu is losing control of his party. But for the first time, on the eve of the party primary in which his prospective successors will be testing their popularity against each other, it felt as if the Likudniks were hedging their bets. Bibi is still king, but Likud is in the first act of its palace coup. Over the last two years comparisons between Netanyahu and Donald Trump have abounded. And many – though not all of them – are credible. One key difference between the two men is that while the Republican Party still has a number of prominent figures openly critical of Trump and there will likely be challenges to his 2020 candidacy, Netanyahu literally has no open opposition in Likud today. And that's totally in character with the party's ethos.

- In the 94 years of its existence, Likud (originally founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky in 1925 as the Revisionist Zionists, which evolved into Herut in 1948 and then Likud in 1973) has had only five leaders: Jabotinsky, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon and Netanyahu. While they were sometimes challenged, none of the five ever lost the leadership. Jabotinsky died in the saddle, while his successors all chose the timing of their resignations. Netanyahu has now been leader of Likud for a total of 20 years (he was originally elected in 1993 but Sharon replaced him between 1999 and 2005), the second-longest serving leader after Begin, and no one is officially challenging him. The last leadership election, which was supposed to take place in February 2016, was canceled because no one but Netanyahu presented their candidacy.
- Whatever some party members think of him in their hearts, not one of them that hopes to get on the party's Knesset slate, perhaps one day competing for the leadership, is prepared to come out against him publicly. To do so would be political suicide. Netanyahu is a proven victor, the winner of four elections – more than any other Likud leader. The party grass roots ascribe to him almost mythical qualities, and anyone who is seen to be undermining him will suffer a toxic online onslaught and downfall in a primary. Jabotinsky was idolized for his brilliance and ideology. Begin was admired and loved for his sacrifice during years of opposition (and in the underground before that), and for his humility and humanity. Netanyahu is feared.
- And yet the undertone of Tuesday's primary is all about the day after Bibi. The election is for the number two and downward positions on the party's candidate slate, with the leader's number one spot not up for vote. But the next time the Likud membership is asked to vote is likely to be for the party's next leader, in the not-too-distant future when Netanyahu is forced out of office by nearly inevitable criminal charges. And since all four of Likud's leaders in the state era were at some point also elected prime minister, Likud members could in effect be voting for Israel's likely future leader. Netanyahu, of course, is not planning to designate a successor, and the candidates he is discreetly supporting – and behind the scenes urging his die-hard supporters to vote for – have not been selected by him on the basis of their future leadership potential. He still plans to lead Likud for decades to come, and his favorites are the most slavishly loyal and least-threatening candidates. But even the greatest Bibi sycophants are aware that he may not be around for much longer and are treating this primary as the preliminary round for choosing his successor.
- There are eight prominent candidates on the slate who see themselves as potential future leaders. Sa'ar, who considers himself a front-runner and was confident enough of his chances to take a break from politics in 2015 and is now returning to the Knesset, will undoubtedly be damaged by Netanyahu's allegations of disloyalty. But he remains very popular in the party and has actually been liberated by the campaign against him. He no longer has to prove himself by coming top, as he twice was in the past. This time, any place in the top five will be enough to confirm his status as a heavy favorite for the succession.
- Gilad Erdan, who came top last time while Sa'ar stayed home (and second in the two primaries before that), is under much more pressure. As public security minister, he has been criticized for

not doing enough to try to prevent the police investigations against Netanyahu (not that he had any power to do so, but logic doesn't necessarily apply in Likud primaries). He will probably be pleased with a top-five finish as well, which will keep him on the list of potential leadership candidates.

- Yisrael Katz, the oldest of Likud's big beasts and certainly the wildest, is under a lot of pressure to prove he can come top. He has one of the strongest grass-roots organizations in the party, but his best showing so far was third last time around. At 63, this could be his last chance to present himself as a viable candidate. However, he will have to overcome pockets of Netanyahu loyalists who suspect him of plotting against the prime minister.
- Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein came second in the 2015 primary, largely thanks to not being seen as a threat to anyone else. He is expected to do well again this year and is known to harbor leadership aspirations behind his mild-mannered exterior. This time, though, he is perceived as a contender. In addition, as speaker he has clashed with a number of Likud MKs and ministers as he tried to rein them in.
- Out to get him is another contender for top spot – the culture minister with whom Edelstein clashed over the staging of last year's Independence Day event marking Israel's 70th anniversary. Miri Regev is expected to do very well, even to possibly become the first woman to take the top spot in a Likud primary. Her provocative style as minister, threatening to shut down any "non-Zionist" events and productions (though she rarely succeeded in doing so), and her constant willingness to serve as Netanyahu's attack dog on every screen, won her admirers among the party's grass roots and the prime minister's support. However, of all the main candidates, a strong showing by Regev is the least likely to indicate future success in a leadership race: With Netanyahu gone, she will be far less powerful.
- One veteran Likudnik who could do well is Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, who only made 10th spot last time around. Hanegbi enjoys both widespread popularity among the party's grass roots and Netanyahu's trust. He is also the only "prince," a son of Likud's founding generation, in the running – not that this counts for much anymore. Hanegbi, who defected to Kadima in 2005, is seen as someone who lost his chance to be considered a future leader. However, a top five primary result could put him back on the list.
- There are also two newcomers who are eager to establish their credentials as possible future candidates. Nir Barkat spent the entire five years of his just-ended second term as Jerusalem mayor shamelessly using city hall as a venue to host party members. A high-tech millionaire, he also has the funds to run a well-oiled campaign. But despite his high hopes, there is a feeling among the party's grass roots that "he lacks the touch" to be a senior Likud leader. He will need to get a top 10 spot Tuesday to be considered going forward.
- The other newcomer, Immigrant Absorption Minister Yoav Gallant – who just defected from Kulanu, although for the past two years he did little to hide the impression he was planning to do

so, attending Likud events while not even a member – has Netanyahu's backing. Currently, he is the only former army general in the running, and Likud needs generals to stand up to Benny Gantz, who is proving the main rival to Netanyahu ahead of the April 9 election. Gallant has not proven himself as a politician or in his previous posting as housing and construction minister. But he is arrogant enough to think he can be prime minister. And a strong showing Tuesday will only reinforce his self-importance.

- All that said, there are a number of reasons why success in the primary may not necessarily portend a strong chance in a future Likud leadership race. The moment Netanyahu is forced to leave office, at least part of his influence over the party membership will evaporate – which could greatly change their future voting preferences. But on the other hand, the manner of Netanyahu's departure – especially if he is seen to have been forced out by his party colleagues – could cause his remaining die-hard supporters to punish any plotters and make sure that whoever wielded the dagger will not sit on the throne.
- A post-Netanyahu Likud could also herald the return to the fold of ex-Likudniks who fell out with Bibi. Moshe Kahlon, Avigdor Lieberman, Moshe Ya'alon, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked are all heads of their own right-wing parties now, but given half a chance to get back and compete for the succession, would do so in a heartbeat. But assuming a leadership contest would be held quickly after Netanyahu's departure, Likud party rules may not allow them back in time. In the absence of a clear successor, on the day after Netanyahu Likud will almost certainly descend into a prolonged bout of internecine bloodletting. Tuesday's primary results will give us the first indications of who may come out on top.

Sa'ar Outcome a Test of Netanyahu's Power

By Lahav Harkov, Senior Columnist

- Polls are set to open across the country today for nearly 120,000 eligible Likud voters to participate in the party's primary and determine its list for the next Knesset. Some of the major contenders for the top five are Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan – who reached first place last time, Transportation Minister Israel Katz, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein and Culture Minister Miri Regev, among others.
- The most embattled candidate is Gideon Sa'ar, the former interior and education minister who has returned after a four-year break from politics, to the open dismay of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu has made it known that he does not want Sa'ar to reach the top of the Likud list, meaning to be number two after the prime minister, a feat that he has achieved in past primaries. The reasoning is that if Sa'ar is not in first place, he cannot present himself as an alternative candidate for the premiership, which Netanyahu has long maintained that Sa'ar is conspiring to do. The prime minister recycled his theory – that Sa'ar seeks to be appointed prime minister after the elections instead of him because of the expected corruption charges against Netanyahu – on the inaugural episode of "Likud TV," a campaign webcast, this week.
- The prime minister's son Yair Netanyahu joined in the Sa'ar-bashing with a Monday evening Facebook post, saying: "It's no wonder that Channels 12 and 13 and the rest of the media glorifies and praises Gideon Sa'ar. They know who's on their side. [President Reuven] 'Rubi' Rivlin is just waiting until after the election to refuse to give my father the mission of forming the government, even if the Likud wins, and to give it to his good friend Gideon Sa'ar instead. We won't let them!" Sa'ar defended himself on all of Israel's major television and radio stations. "It's a false tale," Sa'ar told Channel 12 News. "It started with a conspiracy between me and the president, then that I was planning it with members of the coalition, and now it's that I'm planning it with Likud members – all anonymous. Give me names, let me confront it." Sa'ar vowed that he will only seek to be prime minister if he will be elected leader of Likud, that he is a "loyal soldier of the Likud" and that he stands behind Netanyahu in the elections. "I respect the prime minister... but that shouldn't allow him to sully my good name," he said. "He is doing to me what he hates, a kind of media attack. I would expect someone who feels persecuted not to persecute others."
- The bad blood between Sa'ar and Netanyahu hasn't stopped the former from being able to raise serious funds for his campaign. His top donors include Isaac Appelbaum of Auckland with NIS 120,000, as well as Nissan Shalom and Amnon Shahal of New York and Kerry Proper of Massachusetts, who donated NIS 50,000 each. The law no longer permits incumbent MKs to

raise funds for primary campaigns, with the state granting them NIS 300,000 each, but Sa'ar is not an MK. Nor is former Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat, who is independently wealthy and donated NIS 200,000 to himself. Netanyahu has repeatedly said that he backs all of the Likud's current Knesset members, but he has specifically and publicly thrown his support behind Edelstein and Tel Aviv District candidate David Sharan, Netanyahu's former chief of staff and a suspect in the "submarines affair," who police have recommended to indict on various corruption charges. Netanyahu also made phone calls advocating for Tourism Minister Yariv Levin, Channel 12 reported; his spokesman would neither confirm or deny the report.

- Tuesday's primary will have nearly 23,000 more eligible voters than the last one, and the distribution of the new votes sheds light on the current makeup of the Likud. The district with the most growth is Tel Aviv, which also includes the cities of Holon and Bat Yam, with over 3,000 new voters, bringing it to 11,656. This is a likely indicator of the power of the New Likudniks – a group seeking to make the party more moderate – which is significant, but far less than what the group has claimed. On Monday, the High Court of Justice rejected a petition by the New Likudniks and MKs Tzachi Hanegbi and Yehudah Glick, who they support, among others, to reinstate 1,000 members of the party thrown out on grounds that they oppose the party's constitution. The Judea and Samaria District lost 800 members since the last election, making it the smallest, with 6,100 members. Some in the Likud see this as a result of former MK Moshe Feiglin forming his own party, Zehut. The large settlements of Ma'aleh Adumim, Betar Illit and Givat Ze'ev are in the Jerusalem district, making Judea and Samaria a less populous area for the party. But that has not stopped numerous interest groups in the West Bank to release lists of recommended candidates. Some of the popular ones for settler groups are Barkat, Edelstein, Jerusalem Affairs Minister Ze'ev Elkin, Erdan, Regev and Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely.
- Labor and Social Services Minister Haim Katz released his list on Monday, as well. As the former head of the Israel Aerospace Industry's union (IAI), he is thought to have thousands of IAI workers voting according to his recommendations. They include Edelstein, Erdan, Hotovely, Sa'ar, and Regev, as well as coalition chairman David Amsalem and MKs David Bitan, Avraham Neguise and Yoav Kisch. Also going to a vote Tuesday is Netanyahu's proposal to allow him to appoint candidates to the 21, 28 and 36 place on the Likud's list for the next Knesset. The prime minister said in a video sent to all Likud members Monday that he seeks this power in order to allow mergers between the Likud and other parties in the event that more center-left parties join forces. The New Right and Bayit Yehudi have denied that they seek to run together with the Likud. Tekuma leader Bezalel Smotrich suggested that the Likud run with radical right-wing party Otzma Yehudit, led by disciples of Rabbi Meir Kahane, who was banned from running for the Knesset due to racist incitement. Netanyahu had previously called for Bayit Yehudi and Tkuma to merge with Otzma, but Smotrich argued that "they are much better suited to the political culture and the variety that already exists in the Likud, anyway."