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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, March 13

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March 13, 2019

Associated Press

Israel Uncovers New Hezbollah Network on Syria Border

The Israeli military said Wednesday it has uncovered a militant network run by the Lebanese Hezbollah group inside Syria, along the frontier with Israel. The military said the network, which Hezbollah runs together with Iran's Revolutionary Guard, is stockpiling weapons, collecting intelligence and recruiting locals for attacks against Israel. Hezbollah operative Ali Musa Daqduq is the network's commander and has been operating covertly and apparently without the knowledge of Syrian President Bashar Assad's government, the Israeli military said.

Jerusalem Post

PM Says He Would Lose if Not for Kahanists

The Likud would lose the election if the bloc of Bayit Yehudi, National Union and Otzma Yehudit was not formed, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told senior Likud members. "We united the parties in order to ensure there would be a large enough chunk [of the votes], something that passes the electoral threshold," Netanyahu said in a recording broadcast on Kan 11 Tuesday. Netanyahu has faced widespread criticism for supporting the merger because Otzma is led by followers of extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane, and labelled a terrorist organization by the US.

Times of Israel

Police to Reopen Temple Mount on Wednesday

Jerusalem Police chief Doron Yadid ordered the Temple Mount compound reopened to Muslim worshippers on Wednesday morning after the holy site was shuttered Tuesday following a firebomb attack on a police post. Police said one officer was treated for mild smoke inhalation, while 10 suspects were arrested. Tuesday's incident came amid already high tensions at the site, and drew condemnation from Muslim officials and "concern" from the UN.

Reuters

Jordanian King Meets with White House Peace Team

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and White House senior advisers Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt discussed Middle East peace prospects with Jordan's King Abdullah on Monday in Washington, an American source familiar with the meeting said. Kushner and Greenblatt returned recently from a tour of Gulf states during which they sought support from Arab leaders on the economic portion of a Middle East peace proposal that President Donald Trump is expected to unveil in coming months. That trip, however, did not include a stop in Jordan.

Gantz Doesn't Endorse Two States in EU Meeting

Blue and White party Leader Benny Gantz avoided endorsing a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians in a meeting with European envoys, and expressed hardline views toward Iran and the Gaza Strip. Gantz met with European Union ambassadors in Israel "to hear his vision on EU-IL relations, Israel's security and regional issues," the EU's Ambassador to Israel Emanuele Giaufret tweeted. In his conversation with the EU ambassadors, Gantz did not explicitly endorse a two-state solution, but indicated that both Israelis and Palestinians "are here to stay" and that an arrangement needs to be found.

Al Monitor

GOP Senate Blocks Administration's Bid to Save PA Aid

The State Department is seeking \$35 million in security aid for the Palestinian Authority, but no humanitarian or economic aid, in the 2020 budget proposal released this week. But first, it needs Congress to rewrite a new law that has inadvertently choked off aid to the West Bank and Gaza, including programs favored by Israel. But the State Department has reached an impasse with Sen. Chuck Grassley, the author of the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act, which Congress passed last year. Democrats say Grassley is being too rigid. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's priority remains security assistance, which Israel supports as part of its coordination with the PA against groups such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the West Bank.

Ha'aretz

Palestinian Killed by IDF Near West Bank Settlement

Israeli forces shot and killed a Palestinian man in Salfit, a city near the settlement of Ariel in the West Bank, the Health Ministry in Ramallah said on Tuesday. According to the ministry, Mohammad Jamil Shahin, 23, was shot in the chest and was evacuated to a hospital in Salfit. The Red Crescent said 40 other Palestinians were wounded by rubber bullets and tear gas inhalation. The Israeli army said soldiers used riot control measures – not live fire.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Court Releases Footage of Soldiers Beating Detainees

Israel's military court in Jaffa cleared for publication on Tuesday a video showing Israeli soldiers hitting two Palestinian prisoners in the head after their arrest in the West Bank in January. Four of the five soldiers documented, all from the Netzah Yehuda infantry battalion, were convicted of aggravated abuse on Sunday and are expected to serve a six-month prison term. The video shows soldiers landing blows on the heads of two bound Palestinian prisoners with covered eyes. The soldiers can be heard saying "it's your party," and "say hello."

Netanyahu Veers Israel Away from Democracy

By the Editorial Board

- Rep. Ilhan Omar’s comments on Israel and its American supporters were dumb and offensive, and they deserved to be called out for their use of ugly anti-Semitic tropes. Donald Trump’s response to Omar’s comments — that the Democrats are an “anti-Jewish party” — was cynical and divisive and patently untrue. It deserves our contempt. But the real prize for repugnant, mean-spirited and undemocratic speech on the subject of Jews and Israel in recent days goes to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It’s not terribly surprising that the long-serving, right-wing prime minister, who faces reelection next month as well as a looming indictment on charges of taking bribes and trading favors, should be pandering to his base. But this time, he outdid himself. On Sunday, Netanyahu demeaned the status of the nearly 2 million Arabs who live in Israel, saying that although they are welcome to live there and are entitled to equal rights, it is not, in fact, their country.
- “Israel is not a state for all its citizens,” he said in a post on Facebook. “According to a basic law we passed, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people — and the Jewish people only.” Netanyahu was referring to an enormously controversial law passed by the Knesset last summer that declared the country to be the “nation-state” of the Jewish people. The measure downgraded Arabic from an official language to one with a “special status” and took other steps to make it clear just whose country it was. Though opponents called the law racist, Netanyahu hailed it as a major achievement. That law was perhaps more symbolic than meaningful. Everyone already knows Israel is a Jewish state, don’t they? But it was nevertheless troubling and unnecessary — a provocation that sent an unmistakable message about Jewish primacy and the contempt Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition hold for Palestinians and their rights. It omitted the promises of democracy and equality that are included in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. And it followed on the heels of right-wing efforts to exclude Arab legislators from important votes and to require Arab citizens to take loyalty oaths or be stripped of their citizenship.
- Now Netanyahu has doubled down on these anti-democratic moves. In Sunday’s Facebook post, he not only suggested that Arabs in Israel were second-class citizens, but also that his electoral opponents Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz, if voted into power, would put together a left-wing government “with the support of the Arab parties” that would undermine the security of the state. Netanyahu’s comments come just weeks after he cut a deal with a small, racist anti-Arab party known as “Jewish Power” whose leaders have called for violence against Palestinians, for the expulsion of Israel’s Arab citizens from the country, for a prohibition on intermarriage between Jews and Arabs, and for a takeover of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Netanyahu, in an apparent bid to strengthen his right-wing base before the April 9 election, arranged for that faction — whose leaders are disciples of the late ultranationalist rabbi Meir Kahane — to merge into a somewhat more mainstream party of religious Zionists.

- Even the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the most powerful organization lobbying on behalf of Israel in the United States, called the views of Jewish Power “racist and reprehensible.” Netanyahu could soon become the nation’s longest-serving prime minister. If he wins reelection next month, he will a few months later exceed the record of the nation’s founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. And it could happen: Netanyahu has remained firmly in control through many tumultuous years and previous scandals. It would shock no one if he pulled through again. But has he been good for his country? For years, he has manipulated fear and anger to dominate the Israeli political stage. He has been divisive and demagogic. He has been, on balance, an enemy of the two-state solution that has been the only realistic path to peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Not its only enemy, to be sure, but an obstacle nevertheless.
- Now, in the face of the corruption indictment and the strong electoral challenge, he seems to be growing desperate. Perhaps he will go too far and be driven from office. In the end, we hope for an Israel that is secure — but one that makes peace with its neighbors. And an Israel that is not a two-tiered society, but is egalitarian, liberal and democratic, and treats all its citizens fairly.

Kushner's Challenge: Convincing Skeptics Without Details

By Amir Tibon, Senior Columnist

- While most of the conversation in Israel has focused on the April 9 election in recent weeks, the White House has been holding meetings with people it hopes to turn into supporters of its Middle East peace plan. The small team working on it is looking at whether it is possible to convince people to support a plan without telling them what's in it. The administration's pre-rollout efforts have included meetings with heads of Arab countries, leaders of American evangelical churches, former U.S. officials who have worked on past peace plans and analysts at different Washington think tanks. "They've been talking to everyone ever since the beginning of this year," said one person who has had multiple meetings with the administration's peace team recently. "It looks like this time they are really preparing to put out something."
- There is no date for the plan's publication, and it could become public anytime after the Israeli election ends. Last week, the White House hosted evangelical leaders to hear their views on the peace plan and ask them not to judge it before seeing the document. Joel Rosenberg, an evangelical author and analyst who participated in the meeting and also separately spoke with Trump, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, told Haaretz that participants received assurances that the peace plan will not harm Israel's security, but "that both sides won't like some parts of it, and there isn't going to be movement toward peace without some compromises."
- The administration's Arab world outreach has included a briefing for journalists from Washington-based Arab media outlets in mid-January and an interview given by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, to Sky News Arabic last month. Both occasions were the first of their kind and represented an attempt to not only court the leaders of prominent Arab states, but also try to engage with the public in those countries through the media. Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, the president's special envoy for the Middle East, also visited five Arab countries last month, mostly to present the economic aspects of the peace proposal to their leaders. This week, the two met with Jordanian King Abdullah II, who is visiting Washington, and discussed some of the plan's content as well as its timeline. Abdullah also met with Pence and Pompeo.
- One of the many challenges the administration is facing is a high level of skepticism and doubt toward the plan — especially in D.C., where former officials and experts have been predicting its failure for over a year. Kushner and Greenblatt are aware of this, but it hasn't stopped them from initiating conversations with some of the most skeptical voices, particularly since the beginning of 2019. "They're meeting with people who used to work for George W. Bush's administration, but also with former officials in the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama administrations," said one source who has participated in discussions with Trump's advisers.

The same person added that Trump's advisers "ask a lot of policy questions and disclose very little information of their own. The most they will do in response to criticism about their policy is to ask people to remain open-minded and not tear into the plan before actually seeing it."

- Greenblatt spent two days last month having meetings in the offices of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank considered supportive of Israel and a two-state solution. The top experts on the Israeli-Palestinian issue there include Dennis Ross, who played a key role in peace negotiations under Clinton and Obama; Ghaith al-Omari, a former senior adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas; and David Makovsky, who has spent years outlining potential geographic scenarios for a two-state solution. Greenblatt has also met with former Obama administration officials Ilan Goldenberg and Hady Amr, who published a comprehensive plan last year for rehabilitating Gaza, and with Martin Indyk, who led Obama's peace efforts in 2013-2014. These meetings show Greenblatt's willingness to meet with experts who regularly criticize different aspects of his and Kushner's work and the administration's broader Middle East policy, from cutting Palestinian humanitarian aid to pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal.
- At the same time, the administration is reaching out to potential critics from the right — mostly Trump supporters who are nevertheless worried that the peace plan will disappoint them. Greenblatt met with Daniel Pipes of the right-wing think tank Middle East Forum last month, after Pipes wrote in the Wall Street Journal that "Trump's plan is a closely held secret, but the signals look worrying for supporters of the Jewish state." Pipes' article caused concern in the White House because criticism from within the right wing can hurt Trump's support among Christian evangelicals. In the meeting with evangelical leaders last week, the administration officials heard questions that expressed similar concerns to those raised by Pipes. But not everyone within the evangelical world is worried about the plan. Rosenberg says he doesn't think the Palestinian Authority, under Abbas' leadership, will accept it, but he added that if the plan will include the right kind of language, it could help in promoting peaceful relations between Israel and Sunni Arab states.
- Rosenberg shared that message, which is based on visits he made in recent months to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in his conversations with Trump and Pence. Another mostly right-wing constituency the administration doesn't want to alienate is Orthodox American Jews, who, unlike the majority of Jews in the United States, voted in big numbers for Trump in the 2016 election and for his Republican Party in the 2018 midterms. Greenblatt gave an exclusive interview to the Orthodox magazine Ami last week, in which he said: "We firmly believe that when the Israelis and Palestinians see our plan, despite the compromises it entails, they will see what the future can hold for both of them. We believe that they will both gain more than they give."
- Throughout all of these conversations, public and private, almost no specifics of the plan itself have leaked out. This is mostly a result of the administration's insistence to share almost no concrete details about the content of the proposal, and instead use the meetings to emphasize its general commitment to Israel's security and the advancement of a peace plan. "Those I've

spoken with in the administration understand there's a certain balance to releasing details of the plan to the regional stakeholders in a timely fashion, lining up those who will be publicly supportive of the plan in advance of its release, and preventing information from getting out publicly, prematurely and partially," says Matthew Brodsky, a senior fellow at Security Studies Group, a right-wing think tank. "They're also aware the plan's overall initial reception will be determined in no small part by how it is rolled out publicly," he adds. "They are cautious in attempting to thread that needle."