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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, March 6

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News Excerpts

March 6, 2019

Jerusalem Post

AG Recommends Banning Kahanist Ben-Ari from Election

Otzmat Yehudit candidate Michael Ben-Ari should be prevented from running in the April 9 election, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit wrote the Central Elections Committee late Tuesday night. The committee will convene Wednesday to consider requests to disqualify Balad and Otzma Yehudit candidates. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had pushed for Otzma Yehudit to unite with Bayit Yehudi in a bid to get more right-wing MKs into the Knesset. The resulting merger caused an outcry as Netanyahu was accused of legitimizing racism, as Otzma Yehudit's candidates are influenced by extremist rabbi Meir Kahane.

Times of Israel

Smotrich Proposes Bill to Save Netanyahu from Prosecution

MK Bezalel Smotrich, number two in the new Union of Right Wing Parties, has initiated legislation designed to prevent any charges from being brought against Netanyahu so long as he remains in office by boosting protection from prosecution for all accused politicians. Netanyahu has been rumored to be planning to condition entry to a post-election coalition on support for such a law.

The New York Times

UNHCR Delays Database of Settlement-Friendly Companies

The United Nations human rights chief has delayed publishing a database of companies doing business with Israeli settlements, garnering praise from pro-Israel groups and outrage from human rights organizations. The United Nations' human rights office has worked for three years to compile a database of companies that have directly enabled, supported or profited from the settlements, which are considered illegal under international law. Israel fears that the database will be used as a blacklist to penalize companies that do business in the West Bank.

Ha'aretz

Egyptian Delegation Meets Senior Hamas Officials in Gaza

A delegation of senior Egyptian intelligence officials arrived in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday to meet with senior Hamas leaders in an attempt to ease tensions along the border and return to the understandings reached in the past between Hamas and Israel. Hamas says Israel has not kept its part of the understandings, including easing the Gaza blockade, extending the permitted fishing zone and advancing infrastructure projects, such as electricity production.

Palestinians Call for Mass Protests Over Temple Mount

Palestinians activists said on Tuesday that they will step up their protests against Israel's controversial decision to close the Golden Gate on the eastern side of the Temple Mount. Last month, officials from the Waqf, which manages the Temple Mount, and hundreds of Palestinians, reopened the Bab al-Rahma site in defiance of a court order issued in 2003 to keep it closed. The Palestinians claim that Israel is planning to turn the site into a synagogue.

Police to Recommend Indicting Likud MK for Bribery

Israeli police will likely recommend the indictment of Likud lawmaker David Bitan on suspicion of multiple incidents of bribery. The investigation is expected to continue until the April 9 election, after which the case and its evidence will be transferred to the prosecution. At the center of the investigation are alleged reciprocal connections that Bitan forged in the past with business figures who are linked to covering debt that Bitan amassed while he served as deputy mayor of Rishon Letzion. Bitan is suspected of collecting hundreds of thousands of shekels in bribes from businesspeople through his close associate Moshe Yosef.

Israel Strikes Gaza Targets After Balloon Attacks

The Israel Air Force carried out airstrikes on several targets in the Gaza Strip Tuesday night, after balloons with explosives were flown into Israel earlier in the day. There were no immediate reports of casualties in the Strip. Earlier on Tuesday, two bombs tied to balloons were flown over the Gaza border and exploded inside communities in southern Israel. There were no injuries or damage.

EU Court Upholds Freeze on Hamas Funds

A European Union court upheld a freeze on Hamas funds as it rejected the group's appeal against its EU listing as a terrorist organization. The General Court's ruling amounts to the latest rejection of Hamas's efforts to be struck from an EU blacklist created in 2001 based on a UN resolution following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. "In today's judgment the General Court looks into each of the arguments made by Hamas and rejects them in their totality," the Luxembourg-based court said in a statement.

What if a Desperate Netanyahu Embraces Annexation?

By Susie Gelman and David Halperin of Israel Policy Forum

- Now that Israel Attorney General Mandelblit has announced his intention to indict Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Israeli leader's objective to retain his office at any cost – as already indicated by promising the most extreme racist party a place in his next government and control of some key government ministries – will intensify. Israelis are headed towards an election in which he evidently views re-election as a path not only to his political survival but a way to avoid or at least postpone jail time.
- Netanyahu's next desperate move may be to embrace West Bank annexation legislation that far-right wing Knesset members sought to advance last summer. He halted it then, but it is possible that, to ensure continued support from his far-right partners, and his own political survival, Netanyahu will no longer stand in the way. West Bank annexation is a very real threat that would have a disastrous impact on Israel, and Israel's advocates in the United States must take notice and respond, as they did when Netanyahu embraced the Kahanist party.
- Officially integrating all or part of the West Bank into Israel could generate severe consequences, recently documented in a report from the Commanders for Israel's Security, a network of more than 280 retired Israeli generals. The study demonstrates that any form of West Bank annexation would trigger a process that could propel Israel toward violence and ultimately lead to the end of Israel as both a Jewish and a democratic state. "[What Netanyahu] is saying to Americans in English is not what he has been saying to Israelis in Hebrew."
- The mainstreaming of annexation in Israel has taken place on Netanyahu's watch, within his own party. In the lead-up to the Likud primaries, 28 of 29 incumbent Likud MKs seeking re-election signed pledges affirming their support for annexation, many on behalf of pro-annexation groups such as Ribonut ("the Sovereignty Movement"). This group was also instrumental in lobbying the Likud Central Committee to endorse the application of Israeli civilian law to Area C, which translates into de facto annexation of 60 percent of the West Bank.
- The goal of annexation advocates is to legitimize annexation on Israel's national agenda, something that even right-wing governments have been loathe to do in the past. But circumstances have changed dramatically. The Israeli far right has been emboldened by the Trump Administration's policy of cutting all support for the Palestinians while refraining from criticizing any Israeli policies, such as continued settlement building even outside of the blocs. The goal of a two-state solution is no longer advocated by the White House and is completely absent from Israel's political discourse.
- In a few weeks, Netanyahu will appear at the AIPAC Policy Conference amidst an unprecedented wave of discontent with his recent actions and deep concern about the trajectory of US-Israel and Israel-Diaspora relations among Israel's advocates in the American Jewish

community. When he spoke to AIPAC members at last year's Policy Conference, he stated that "Israel is committed to achieving peace with all our neighbors, including the Palestinians," and he will undoubtedly reaffirm similar sentiments when he returns to the stage in a few weeks. But what he is saying to Americans in English is not what he has been saying to Israelis in Hebrew. Two weeks ago, in a bid to paint his political opponents as "weak leftists," he told Israelis that the new political party led by Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid would create a Palestinian state that would threaten Israel's future. He has repeatedly signaled to settler leaders his commitment to strengthening their enterprise.

- When Netanyahu visits Washington, policymakers and Jewish community leaders will have an opportunity to question him directly on the shameful alliance he has encouraged with Kahanists, but we must also press him for enabling a surge of support for dangerous annexationist proposals within his own political party. Israeli voters will determine the outcome of the upcoming election. They will be voting on annexation, whether or not they realize it. But proud Zionists and longtime supporters of Israel in the American Jewish community are also stakeholders in the Jewish state's future. The actions of the state of Israel will shape the story of the Jewish people, of which we are all a part.
- We are proud that our community condemned the recent abhorrent political maneuver that could give racists a platform in the Knesset. We should similarly denounce West Bank annexation that would undermine any credible pursuit to seek peace, threaten Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state, and dangerously erode Israel's alliance with the United States and with American Jewry.

Why Arab Countries Are Working to Win U.S. Evangelicals

By Amir Tibon, Senior Columnist

- A delegation of evangelical Christian leaders, mostly from the United States, touched down in Azerbaijan early Monday morning. The decision by the Muslim-majority country, which has close ties to Israel, to host the group is part of a broader trend in which many Muslim and Arab countries are making efforts to improve their standing with U.S. evangelicals. There are an estimated 60 million evangelicals in the United States, and under President Donald Trump they have enjoyed historical levels of political influence in Washington — especially with regard to foreign policy. This has led countries that are seeking to gain more influence in D.C. to reach out to prominent evangelicals in a bid to win their support.
- Evangelicals are known to generally be very supportive of Israel, which has led some Arab and Muslim countries to emphasize their ties with the Jewish state as a “selling point” to them. This week’s Baku delegation is led by New York-based Orthodox rabbi, Marc Schneier. Prior to departing, Schneier told Haaretz last week that Azerbaijan will highlight to the visiting evangelicals that “it is the most supportive of Israel among the world’s Muslim-majority countries.” The Azerbaijan delegation includes 14 evangelical pastors. One of them is Robert Stearns, a pastor who told Haaretz last year about his ongoing battle to connect young U.S. evangelicals to Israel. Both Stearns and Schneier spoke at an event on Capitol Hill last year marking the friendship between Azerbaijan and Israel.
- “Azerbaijan is very unique in its commitment to interreligious dialogue and activities,” observes Schneier. He adds that, to the best of his knowledge, the evangelical delegation visiting Baku this week is the first of its kind to the country. Alongside meeting leading political figures in Azerbaijan’s government and attending a conference called “From Interfaith and Intercivilizational Dialogue to Cooperation,” the pastors are also scheduled to meet with the Israeli ambassador to Baku, George Deek — himself Israel’s first Arab-Christian diplomat.
- Azerbaijan is not alone in investing in its ties with the evangelical community. Prominent U.S. evangelicals have met with leaders from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over the past 18 months, while Qatar and Bahrain have separately made their own outreach efforts. While there have been ties between the evangelical community and Muslim governments for years, the cooperation since Trump entered the White House in January 2017 is unprecedented.
- One person who has played a key role in advancing these new relationships is Joel C. Rosenberg, a best-selling author who was born in the United States but currently lives with his family in Israel. Rosenberg, himself an evangelical Christian, has written a number of political thrillers on the Middle East, including one in which ISIS conquers Jordan and another focusing on Iran’s war efforts in the region. None of his books, however, has featured a scene in which

an Israeli citizen sits next to the Saudi crown prince. Something like that could only happen in real life.

- It began in April 2017, when Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi arrived for his first visit to Washington since assuming power in 2013. During that visit, aside from meeting with Trump in the White House (an honor not bestowed on Sissi by the Obama administration, which had criticized his violent rise to power and his government's widespread use of torture), the Egyptian president also held an off-the-record discussion with "opinion shapers" who deal with the Middle East. Rosenberg was in town at the time and was invited to attend the briefing, alongside former U.S. officials, senior fellows at various think tanks and the leaders of American-Jewish groups. Rosenberg tells Haaretz he was a bit surprised to receive the invitation. After the discussions were over, though, he walked over and introduced himself to the Egyptian president. "I told him I had observed that in recent years he held meetings with Jewish-American leaders, invited the pope to Egypt and met with the leaders of other Christian denominations — but he has never had an interaction specifically with evangelicals," Rosenberg recounts.
- Rosenberg says he told Sissi, "You may want to try and do that," explaining that in addition to the 60 million evangelicals in the United States, there were 10 times as many worldwide. "Without blinking, he immediately told me, 'Would you be interested in organizing such a meeting?'" Rosenberg recalls. Some seven months later, in November 2017, a dozen influential evangelicals — including several members of Trump's evangelical advisory board — arrived at Sissi's presidential palace in Cairo. It was the first time an Egyptian president had ever hosted such a delegation. (That delegation and the one to Azerbaijan this week are not connected.) Larry Ross, a public relations expert from Texas who was among the participants, recalls that the meeting with Sissi "was scheduled to be about 30 minutes long, but we ended up sitting with him for three hours." During the conversation, Sissi told the group he wanted to "build on the legacy" of Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who signed the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in the late 1970s. He also emphasized the importance of finding a way to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians, saying that such an agreement would open up the possibility of "regional peace" between Israel and the entire Arab world.
- Two days after the meeting with Sissi, the delegation flew to Jordan, where it was hosted by King Abdullah II. Unlike the Egyptian president, Abdullah had met with evangelical leaders before. Still, for this specific evangelical delegation it was an impressive achievement: Meeting two of the most important leaders in the Arab world within one short trip. The visit was covered by news outlets across the Middle East — and it turned out to be just the beginning. Sissi held a second meeting with Rosenberg's evangelical group last September, this time on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. Not coincidentally, the meeting took place just before a rare meeting between Sissi and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — a fact the Egyptian president didn't fail to mention in his discussion with the evangelicals.
- Then last December came the most unexpected development in this evolving Arab-evangelical relationship: Rosenberg and other members of his delegation were invited to visit the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, to meet their respective crown princes (Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman) for the first time. Rev. Johnnie Moore, an evangelical pastor from California, participated in the meetings — which took place just weeks after he returned from a separate visit to Saudi Arabia as part of an interfaith initiative. “It was a real surprise,” he recalls, noting that Saudi Arabia has had a decades-long reputation for being the harshest Arab-Muslim country on religious issues. Moore says he views the fact that a visit by an evangelical group could take place there as “a huge sign of change.”

- The fact that an Israeli citizen, Rosenberg, led the delegation and was joined by his son, who is also an Israeli citizen, was in itself significant. Saudi Arabia doesn't officially allow most Israelis to enter the country: Having two Israeli citizens sit inside the crown prince's palace in Riyadh was proof that, in order to win the support of evangelicals, Saudi Arabia's leadership was open to updating some of its stances toward Israel. Bahrain and Qatar have also attempted to reach out to prominent evangelicals recently. The Qataris went as far as to spend tens of thousands of dollars on bringing Mike Huckabee — an evangelical pastor and the father of White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders — on a well-publicized visit to the Gulf state.
- While the Arab governments reaching out to evangelicals are predominantly Sunni Muslim, Azerbaijan is a Shi'ite-majority state. “This is part of a long process of creating real partnerships between people of different faiths,” says Schneier of this week's delegation. “There is an opening now more than ever for doing that.” One clear reason for Muslim governments to try to attract evangelical support is the influence of the evangelical community upon the Trump administration. Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are both evangelicals, and both have played a key role in outlining the administration's Middle East policy (including being the two most senior U.S. officials at last month's Mideast summit in Warsaw).
- Moore says that while Trump's rise to power has “clearly accelerated” the ties between these Arab leaders and U.S. evangelicals, there is more to the story than just an attempt to get closer to the current administration. “In the past,” he says, “these countries relied solely on the support of American administrations when it came to their relationships with the United States. Now, they are beginning to realize that in order to have a truly strong and stable relationship, you also need to have support among the American people — not just in Washington, but all over the country.” This realization can have an impact on policy priorities. A nation that views its relationship with Washington solely through the prism of maintaining good relations with the U.S. government will focus on security, intelligence and economic ties alone. But a country seeking to win support among a large political and religious constituency in the United States will often try to promote issues that are important to that constituency.
- In their attempts to appeal to evangelicals, Arab leaders have focused on promising to protect the well-being of Christians in the Middle East, and on the prospect of improving their countries' ties with Israel. One Arab official who spoke with Haaretz about the evangelical outreach efforts, and who asked not to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue, explained that “no country is going to change its policy toward Israel in order to make evangelicals happy. But if a country is

already taking some steps toward a different kind of relationship with Israel — and presenting those steps in a more public way can also help you win support in the United States — then perhaps it should be considered.”

- The increased contacts between the evangelical community and the Arab world could certainly contribute to changes in how Arab countries conduct their ties with Israel. Some believe it could also change, or at least challenge, some long-held views about the Middle East within the evangelical community. In recent decades, evangelicals have donated tens of millions of dollars to Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, and many of them have opposed the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel. Could the ongoing interaction with Arab leaders who support a two-state solution lead to a more nuanced view of this issue for some evangelicals?
- Rosenberg says he believes there is a common misconception about evangelical views regarding Israel and the Palestinians. In the delegation’s meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed, he says, he touched on that misconception by telling MBS: “Some people think evangelicals who love Israel care little or not at all about the plight of the Palestinians. This is probably true of some evangelicals, but it’s not true of us, or of most evangelical Christians. We grieve for the suffering they have endured. We want a better life for them.” He also admits that the meetings with Arab leaders were illuminating on this specific issue for some evangelical members of the delegation. He mentions that Sissi, for example, told the delegation why it was important for Egypt to promote a reconciliation agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. “I think if it was another leader speaking about this diplomatic effort with Hamas, some people in our group would have been very uncomfortable,” says Rosenberg. “But with Sissi, people felt like we should give him some space to work on it. He’s proven his commitment to peace and to fighting terrorism. Even if we disagree, we shouldn’t be cynical about it — we should at least listen to him.”