



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 12, 2019

Ynet News

US Senator Vows to Seek Recognition of Israeli Rule in Golan

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham on Monday vowed to push for U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, in what would represent a new contentious political gift to Israel from the Trump administration. The South Carolina Republican said he aimed to change the current U.S.-designation of the Golan, which Israel captured from Syria in 1967, as disputed territory. He spoke during a tour of the frontier with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "The Golan is not disputed. It is in the hands of Israel and will always remain in the hands of Israel," Graham said from a cliff overlooking Syria. "My goal is to try to explain this to the administration," he said. See also, ["Senator Graham says he will lobby Trump to recognize Golan as part of Israel" \(Reuters\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Trump's Budget Includes \$175m That Might Support Peace Plan

The Trump administration's budget plan for fiscal year 2020 includes \$175 million that could support its Middle East peace plan, according to official documents released on Monday by the State Department and the White House. The documents show that the administration is planning to create a "Diplomatic Progress Fund" that will receive \$175 million, and that this sum would be available to support the peace plan, if it is indeed presented after the upcoming Israeli election. The White House's budget plan explains that the "Diplomatic Progress Fund" will provide "flexibility" in case there is progress towards regional peace.

i24 News

Jordan's King Abdullah to Meet with VP Pence on Peace Plan

Jordanian King Abdullah II will meet with US Vice President Mike Pence on Monday as the White House continues their efforts to drum up support for the reportedly imminent Middle East peace plan. The Hashemite king left Amman for Washington over the weekend to speak with members of Congress about strategic issues in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. King Abdullah is scheduled to meet with the vice president on Monday, though President Donald Trump's official schedule does not include time for the Jordanian leader. The Trump peace plan will be on Abdullah and Pence's agenda, as the White House prepares to present the so-called "deal of the century" after Israel's April 9 election. See also, ["King Abdullah to Meet With Pence to Discuss Middle East Peace Plan" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

12% Of Americans Think Israel is a Top Foreign Policy Partner

Only 12 percent of Americans think Israel is a top foreign policy partner, according to a Pew study released in early March. According to the poll, 37 percent of Americans believe the UK would be the most valuable partner and after that China (26%). One percent less believe Canada would be the most important partner. However, more Republicans seem to believe Israel is a key partner, with 25 percent in comparison to the 5 percent of democrats. Germans were also asked which country they view as the most important foreign policy partner. No significant number mentioned Israel. Most Germans viewed France as that partner (61%). See also, ["Partisan differences in the U.S. on top foreign policy partners" \(Pew\)](#)

AG Delays Release of PM Investigation Material

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced Monday that he agreed to the request by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's advocates, and will only release investigation materials regarding the PM's ordeals after the April 9 elections. The message was delivered to all the relevant parties in cases 1000, 2000 and 4000, that involved the prime minister. The advocates were requested to prepare accordingly regarding dates for a hearing, which are expected to take place no later than July 10th. Netanyahu's hearing will be conducted by Mandelblit while the others involved will face the Tel Aviv district attorney. The investigations material will be made available to the attorneys at the Tel Aviv DA's office beginning on the 10th of April, the day following the elections. See also, ["Netanyahu pre-trial hearing to take place by mid-July, attorney general says" \(TOI\)](#)

Times of Israel

Gantz: We'll Sit in Government with 'Anyone Jewish and Zionist'

Blue and White leader Benny Gantz on Monday said he was open to sitting in a coalition with "anyone Jewish and Zionist," apparently ruling out non-Jewish minorities as potential partners. Speaking to a crowd of some 500 people in the southern city of Beersheba — and facing questions from the public for the first time — Gantz also called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to resign over the mounting corruption allegations against him. The former IDF chief of staff discussed the prospects of future coalition partnerships as Netanyahu faced accusations of racism for suggesting that Arab Israelis have no place in Israel's government. See also, ["Haaretz Election Poll: Support for Gantz Drops Dramatically, Right-wing Bloc in the Lead" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Going for the Green Vote: PM to Consider Cannabis Legalization

Prime Minister Netanyahu jumped on the cannabis legalization trend on Monday night, saying he would look into the policy. In response to a question about the matter on the LikudTV webcast, which can be viewed on Netanyahu's Facebook page, he said: "I am now looking into the matter you brought up. I will give you an answer soon. It's possible that it will happen." The remarks come as Zehut straddled the 3.25% electoral threshold, surpassing it in some recent polls. Party leader and former Likud MK Moshe Feiglin is attracting many traditionally right-wing voters, and he has refused to commit to sitting in a government helmed by Netanyahu or Blue and White leader Benny Gantz. Feiglin has advocated cannabis legalization for years, and it is part of his Zehut party's platform. See also, ["As pro-pot rival sweeps in, Netanyahu says he will consider legalizing cannabis" \(TOI\)](#)

TOI

Nechama Rivlin Said Recovering Well after Lung Transplant

Nechama Rivlin, wife of President Reuven Rivlin, was awake and alert Tuesday morning after undergoing a lung transplant the day before. "Nechama was taken of respiration this morning, she is awake, and she is talking and making contact with the medical team and members of her family," the president's residence said in a statement. Doctors at Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikva, where Rivlin is being treated, noted that the early days after a transplant are "critical," and that Rivlin faces a long road to recovery, the statement said. Medical staff are satisfied with her progress so far. Rivlin, 73, suffers from pulmonary fibrosis, a condition in which scar tissue accumulates in the lungs and makes it difficult to breathe. She has usually been seen in public with a portable oxygen tank.

Idolatry at the Western Wall

By Bari Weiss, columnist at the New York Times

- It is a strange experience to have another person spit on you. To have an ultra-Orthodox teenager look you dead in the eye and mutter “shiksa” or “kalba” — the Hebrew word for bitch — and then decide you deserve a little something more than a slur because he knows you are a liberal Jew. That this happened several times here Friday morning, on International Women’s Day at the Western Wall, tells you a lot about the state of religious liberty in a country that prides itself on being the Middle East’s only free nation — and about the resilience of activists who refuse to allow fundamentalists to control public Jewish life.
- The Women of the Wall are used to getting spit on, not to mention shoved, scratched, kicked and pelted with dirty diapers. For the past 30 years, the feminist prayer group has held a monthly service in the women’s section of the Western Wall, where they wear prayer shawls and read from the Torah. Walk into any Reform or Conservative synagogue in the world and women will be doing exactly that, without fanfare, often in synagogues helmed by female rabbis. But at the Western Wall, which, like other holy sites in Israel, is controlled by the Chief Rabbinate, such egalitarian displays inspire angry protests. Ultra-Orthodox Jews see such behavior at the holy site as sacrilege, and various members of Women of the Wall have been arrested for “disturbing the public order.”
- The feminist group is not just protesting the state of affairs at the wall. They are protesting the rabbinate’s monopoly on Jewish life in the Jewish state. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Israeli Jews are not Orthodox, the ultra-Orthodox hold the keys not just to Israel’s Jewish sacred places, but to the life cycle events — circumcisions, conversions, weddings, divorces, burials — of the country’s more than six million Jews.
- In January 2016, the Women of the Wall appeared to have won a major victory when the Israeli government outlined a new plan to honor progressive Judaism at the Western Wall by creating a prayer space where men and women would be able to pray together. The move was a hard-won symbol, especially to the largely liberal Jewish diaspora, that their voices mattered to the state meant to represent all Jewish people. Then, in June 2017, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reneged, citing pressure from his ultra-Orthodox coalition partners.
- Urged on by their rabbis and often bused in by their high schools, thousands of teenage girls in long skirts and teenage boys in black hats showed up to flood the zone. I have been to the Western Wall well over a dozen times in my life and I have never seen it so packed. The crowd made it extremely difficult to move and nearly impossible to escape if you found yourself surrounded. I watched as Yizhar Hess, the head of the Conservative movement in Israel, was circled by a group of screaming young men who shoved him, spit on him, ripped off his prayer shawl and tossed his kippah into the crowd.
- Rabbi Susan Silverman told me she was pushed to the ground and ended up banging her head on the Jerusalem stone. An ultra-Orthodox teenage girl went to kick her in the head, Rabbi Silverman said, and was only stopped when the rabbi’s 24-year-old daughter screamed at her. I met a few young women, some wearing Women of the Wall T-shirts, who were in tears, explaining how the crowd had pushed against them so aggressively that they had a hard time

breathing. Fira Zinger, an 18-year-old whose mother is a rabbi, told me that she cried because “this makes me feel like I’m not a part of my own country.”

- Despite all of this, the activists I spoke to were determined. “The fact that so many Haredim came today is only because they know their monopoly is collapsing,” Dr. Hess told me, using a Hebrew word for the ultra-Orthodox. “Pluralism will succeed in Israel.”
- Yadid Eral told me he came from Tel Aviv to be a “body man” for his mother. She comes semi-regularly, but he joins only “when it seems like it will be a rumble,” he said while holding her purse. “These women don’t come here to kick their feet up and drink martinis. These women are strong.” Einav Kahila, an 18-year-old who came out to support the Women of the Wall, said, “We read the same Torah; we say the same prayers. The Western Wall is not theirs. It belongs to all of the Jewish people.” Rabbi Silverman used even stronger language. “As soon as a sect of Judaism says, ‘We know God’s will,’ it’s like saying ‘God is something we can fit into our minds like something we can fit in our hands.’ That’s idolatry.”
- I also spoke to the ultra-Orthodox girls on the other side of the divide. Many told me, variously and earnestly, that the feminists are provoking this reaction. That this is inevitable when you are near a crowd of young men. That it hurts them to see Reform Jews practicing Judaism in a way they are sure, they tell me, God does not like. That they love God so much that they deny their own desires — like singing out loud in public — to show Him their devotion. That they turned out that morning because their rabbis told them to.
- These passionate, ideological young women may not know any better. Others do. And they deserve blame. I blame politicians like Yaakov Litzman, the deputy health minister, who refused to denounce the ultra-Orthodox violence and said that the Women of the Wall “should have been thrown out.” I blame the Jerusalem police who condemned not the thousands of young people who came to antagonize, but the 150 or so Women of the Wall who came with “the express intention to create friction and provocations.” This is an utter lie. What was scary about Friday morning was the fact that every time I saw a conflict break out, it was instigated by the ultra-Orthodox, and almost every time, those who ought to have been protecting the Women of the Wall were nowhere to be found.
- Ultimately, I blame the government of Israel, which has done nothing to change the status quo and has sent a very clear message to non-Orthodox Jews: You do not matter. We do. And those of us who support the righteous work of groups like Women of the Wall should send the government a clear message back: The wall is just the beginning. It’s time to dismantle the rabbinate itself.

SUMMARY: These passionate, ideological young women may not know any better. Others do. And they deserve blame. I blame politicians like Yaakov Litzman, the deputy health minister, who refused to denounce the ultra-Orthodox violence and said that the Women of the Wall “should have been thrown out.” I blame the Jerusalem police who condemned not the thousands of young people who came to antagonize, but the 150 or so Women of the Wall who came with “the express intention to create friction and provocations.” This is an utter lie. What was scary about Friday morning was the fact that every time I saw a conflict break out, it was instigated by the ultra-Orthodox, and almost every time, those who ought to have been protecting the Women of the Wall were nowhere to be found.

Would Israeli Unity Government Advance Trump's Plan?

By Yossi Beilin former Israeli Minister

- The government that will stand following the April 9 election will quite likely be a national unity government joining a populist party with shades of liberalism and a right-wing party with shades of racism. Until the last-minute it will be hard to predict which one would win the necessary support to ensure the prime minister's office for itself. It depends on the party's ability to form a bloc of at least 61 mandates (a clear Knesset majority) to oppose granting the prime minister's role to the head of the other camp. A tie could also lead to a rotation between the leader of the Blue and White party, Benny Gantz, and the leader of the Likud. We can assume that this will not be Prime Minister and Likud head Benjamin Netanyahu. After all, Gantz had promised not to join a government with him in light of the attorney general's declared intention to indict him.
- The important milestones of the election cycle are already behind us: The political map was shaped when the parties submitted their list of candidates for the Knesset, and the attorney general announced his intention to bring Netanyahu to trial, following a hearing. Two large lists will vie in the political arena, and it is expected that Gantz's party will be slightly larger than the Likud, and that the election will be decided by the small parties that would or would not pass the vote threshold of four Knesset seats. The two large parties are deciding whether to undertake a wide effort to recruit every possible vote to their camp in order not to lose votes to the small parties, or whether to undertake an opposite effort, to accept a loss of mandates to the small parties in their bloc in order to ensure that they pass the vote threshold and would be partners in the next coalition.
- The question of who the president will charge with an attempt to form the next government — the largest party or the leader that the greatest number of Knesset members recommends — has become decisive. The answer is not so complicated. If 61 Knesset members recommend a certain person to President Reuven Rivlin, he will not have discretion and he will charge him with forming the government even if he heads the smallest party. But usually, not all the parties recommend a candidate and the president holds another round of consultations, during which other parties reveal their cards. The president can then decide which candidate has the best chance of successfully forming a government. If his decision does not make sense, the High Court can get involved, something that has never happened in Israel's history. If one party receives significantly more votes than the runner-up, but the number of recommendations from each of the two camps is even, the president could charge the head of the largest party with forming the government. If he is not able to form a coalition, he would have to return the mandate to the president, who would then grant that task to his rival.
- Gantz's tactic — to widen the gap over the Likud — could cost him the prime minister's seat if he does so at the expense of his potential partners. Why? Some of the parties teetering on the vote threshold include right-wing voters and their entrance to the Knesset could in fact improve Gantz's chances, even if it is at the expense of his own party's size. If these teetering parties fail to enter the Knesset, then obviously they will not be available as coalition partners. Netanyahu is experienced enough to try to execute a gambit — sacrificing a soldier in a chess game for the

purpose of defense — and give up the margins of the Likud’s candidate list in order to bring in right-wing lists, among them extremists and crazies, to join his coalition after the election.

- But even if Netanyahu succeeds in these moves, he would find it very hard to maintain a coalition with a scant majority. These partners might abandon him if he does not categorically reject US President Donald Trump’s diplomatic plan, or if he acts in a way that is interpreted as a moderate diplomatic move. And so, the Likud would prefer a broad coalition, and only Blue and White would present this potential. If Netanyahu can’t convince Gantz to break his vow and join him — at least until the attorney general’s final decision following the hearing — Israel would face another election or the Likud would oust Netanyahu.
- Gantz could not form a government without the Likud. If he insists that Netanyahu can’t participate in his government, he would have two options: new elections or personnel changes in the Likud.
- If a national unity government does form, it could make economic reforms that narrow governments would have difficulty implementing, and it could help the secular public stand up to the trends of religious influence and religious coercion. However, the most significant challenge it would face will be how to relate to Trump’s plan. Previous unity governments advanced economic moves, but did not dare advance moves in the realm of religion and state, and the diplomatic-security moves they undertook were very careful. On the other hand, they were politically stable and long-lasting. We can assume that Blue and White will demand to overturn some of the laws related to the expropriation of land in the West Bank and the imposition of Israeli law on the territories, and to fix other laws including the Nationality law (anchoring the Jewish nature of the State of Israel), the law damaging the nonprofit sector and the “Nakba law.” One can’t overstate the importance of such moves, if they do happen. If Netanyahu does not head the Likud, implementing such changes will likely be easier.
- But the immediate and most important challenge a national unity government would face is how to react to the “deal of the century,” the peace plan formulated in recent years in the White House, led by Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and the team of Trump’s private lawyers, who have become his trusted advisers on foreign affairs. A stable unity government — with four years in power ahead of it — could let go of the fear of the threats of the right, seriously examine the plan and not make do with a diplomatic response that centers on expecting the refusal of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. This will be its greatest challenge, and if it meets it successfully, the 2019 election would be remembered as a crucial one.

SUMMARY: If a national unity government does form, the most significant challenge it would face will be how to relate to Trump’s plan. Previous unity governments advanced economic moves, but did not dare advance moves in the realm of religion and state, and the diplomatic-security moves they undertook were very careful. On the other hand, they were politically stable and long-lasting. We can assume that Blue and White will demand to overturn some of the laws related to the expropriation of land in the West Bank and the imposition of Israeli law on the territories, and to fix other laws including the Nationality law (anchoring the Jewish nature of the State of Israel), the law damaging the nonprofit sector and the “Nakba law.” One can’t overstate the importance of such moves, if they do happen. If Netanyahu does not head the Likud, implementing such changes will likely be easier.