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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, March 5*

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# News Excerpts

March 5, 2019

## Jerusalem Post

### **Activists Call for Building a Synagogue on Temple Mount**

A large group of Israeli activists are calling on the government to establish a synagogue on the Temple Mount and open it for Jewish prayer, according to media reports. On Sunday, Religious Zionists leaders gathered to discuss the situation on the Temple Mount, known as Har Habayit in Hebrew. The reports did not indicate specifically which leaders took part in the talks. Jews believe the site - venerated as holy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike - is where the Beit Hamikdash used to sit. Late last month, riots erupted on the Temple Mount as thousands of Palestinians stormed the Golden Gate, which had been closed by a court order since 2003. Then, Jerusalem police arrested two senior Waqf officials banning them from entering the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound for 40 days. See also, ["Temple Mount Mosque Ordered Shut Within a Week, Israeli Court Warns" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Gantz Vows 'Never to Withdraw From the Golan Heights'**

Kahol Lavan chairman Benny Gantz vowed on Monday "never to withdraw" from the Golan Heights, annexed by Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War, adding he will work to promote American, European Union and United Nations recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the disputed territory. During a tour along Israel's northern border, ex-military chief Gantz said his party, co-led by former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, former Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and former Finance Minister Yair Lapid, "will know how to handle threats" to Israel's security "on all fronts." See also, ["Israel's Blue and White said to oppose Jerusalem split, settlement withdrawal" \(i24 News\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Israel Ranked 8th Most Powerful Country in the World**

An international survey published Monday ranked Israel as the eighth most powerful nation in the world for the third consecutive year, narrowly ahead of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The annual survey by the US News & World Report was based on the answers of more than 21,000 people from four regions. The survey ranked 80 countries on a range of issues, including power, cultural influence, economy and entrepreneurship, with the categories adding up to an overall "best countries" ranking. Israel was ranked 29th on the best countries list, up one place from the last two years, with Switzerland and Japan taking the first two slots. See also, ["These countries project their influence on the world stage. The United States and Russia head this list." \(USNews\)](#)

## TOI

### **US Deploys Advanced THAAD Missile Defense System in Israel**

The US military deployed in Israel for the first time its most advanced missile defense system as part of an exercise with the Israeli military. In a statement Monday, the Israel Defense Forces said the United States European Command's deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) was meant to drill dispatching the system quickly across the world and working together with Israeli air defenses against threats such as long-range ballistic missiles. "The IDF is working in cooperation with US forces in order to enhance coordination between the two militaries and to strengthen the ability to defend Israeli airspace," it said. See also, ["US deploys missile defense system in Israel" \(i24 news\)](#)

## **Netanyahu Kicks off Election Campaign with Attacks on Media**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu slammed the left, the media and Blue and White Party head Benny Gantz on Monday, in a speech at a Likud Party conference to mark the official launch of the party's campaign for the April 9 elections. "The win isn't guaranteed, it isn't going to be simple," the prime minister said of the upcoming elections, and accused the Blue and White Party of disguising what he said were leftist views. "They're saying 'we aren't left or right, there isn't left and right anymore.' Do you buy it? If it talks like the left, thinks like the left, acts like the left — it's the left," Netanyahu said. See also, "[In Likud Campaign Launch, Netanyahu Says Election 'Is Not in Our Pocket'](#)" (*Ha'aretz*)

## **ADL Calls to Condemn Antisemitism After Rep. Omar's Comments**

CEO and national director of the Anti-Defamation League Jonathan Greenblatt has called on Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi to table a resolution in Congress condemning antisemitism, in light of repeated antisemitic comments by Rep. Ilhan Omar. Omar said last week during a town hall event that "I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it is okay to push for allegiance to a foreign country," in reference to the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. Called to retract the comment by a fellow Democratic Rep., Omar tweeted "I should not be expected to have allegiance/pledge support to a foreign country in order to serve my country in Congress or serve on committee." See also, "[Democrats Planning Another Public Rebuke Of Rep. Ilhan Omar](#)" (*NPR*)

## **World Mayors Unite Against Anti-Semitism**

In response to the recent uptick in anti-Semitism around the world, a coalition of mayors of cities around the world are pledging to combat hate, anti-Semitism and the BDS movement targeting Israel. The initiative is headed by Modi'in Mayor Haim Bibas, Mayor of Bal Harbour (Florida) Gabriel Groisman and Mayor of Frankfurt Uwe Becker. They intend to release a statement signed by the mayors of 40 cities to combat anti-Semitism. They will commit to a number of steps including conducting an annual gathering to discuss dealing with the issue, taking concrete steps to raise awareness in the educational system, examining the possibilities for applicable legislation and exploring ways in which to unite against the rise in extremism around the world. "We unequivocally condemn all forms of hatred, prejudice and contempt that have permeated our society, and we, municipal leaders from around the world, understand that we cannot avoid taking responsibility," read a statement signed by them.

## **Vatican to Open Secret Archives on Pope Pius XII**

Pope Francis announced on Monday that he has decided to open fully the Vatican's secret archives on the wartime pontificate of Pope Pius XII, something which Jews have been seeking for decades. Some Jews have accused Pius, who reigned from 1939 to 1958, of turning a blind eye to the Holocaust during World War Two by not speaking out forcefully. The Vatican has said Pius worked quietly behind the scenes to save Jews and so as to not worsen the situation for many, including for Catholics in parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. The archives will open on March 2, 2020, Francis announced in a speech to members of the Vatican's Secret Archives. He said "the Church is not afraid of history," adding that Pius' legacy had been treated with "some prejudice and exaggeration." See also, "[Vatican to unseal archives on controversial WWII pope](#)" (*Guardian*)

## **Time for Netanyahu to Go**

By Bret Stephens, opinion columnist at the New York Times

- **When the final chapter on Benjamin Netanyahu’s political life is written — and it may be a long time from now — he is likely to go down as the Richard Nixon of Israel: politically cunning, strategically canny, toxically flawed. The flaws came further to light on Thursday when Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced that he would indict the prime minister on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu called the inquiry “a witch hunt” and accused Mandelblit of being “weak,” sounding (surely not by coincidence) just like Donald Trump on the subject of Jeff Sessions and the Russia investigation.**
- **Israeli law allows Netanyahu to contest the indictment through a hearing, a process that could take as long as a year. He has no intention of resigning and hopes to win a fifth term when elections are held on April 9. Perhaps he will. He shouldn’t.**
- **That’s not because Netanyahu is necessarily guilty, or guilty of much. Previous Israeli leaders, including Yitzhak Rabin, have been subject to legal inquests that hinge on relatively trivial crimes. The charges against Netanyahu — the most serious of which involves the claim that he helped a businessman obtain favorable regulatory decisions in exchange for positive media coverage — are still far from conclusive. Then again, what was Watergate other than a third-rate burglary?**
- **Just as the real crime of Watergate was the bungled cover-up, the real scandal of Bibigate has been the repugnant political patch-up. Until last month, Netanyahu looked as if he would coast to re-election. But the race became much tighter with the creation of the center-right Blue and White party, led by the former army chief of staff, Benny Gantz, and the former finance minister, Yair Lapid. The pending indictment only increases Netanyahu’s political peril.**
- **Netanyahu’s solution has been to scrounge for votes on the farther — and farthest — right. A few of those votes will come from Otzma Yehudit (or “Jewish Power”), a racist party descended from Rabbi Meir Kahane’s outlawed Kach Party. Its leader, Michael Ben-Ari, was denied a United States visa because Washington rightly considers Kach a terrorist organization. If Netanyahu manages to cobble together a ruling coalition, Ben-Ari could become a power broker within it.**
- **That alone is reason enough to want to see Netanyahu given the boot. Add to the list his demagogic attacks on Israeli Arabs, his closeness to far-right European leaders such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and his public sympathy for an Israeli soldier who killed a wounded Palestinian terrorist in cold blood, and a consistent picture emerges. Netanyahu is a man for whom no moral consideration comes before political interest and whose chief political interest is himself. He is a cynic wrapped in an ideology inside a scheme.**
- **Nor is the blight simply moral. Jews the world over face a swelling and increasingly deadly tide of anti-Semitism, while Zionism has become a dirty word in left-wing circles. To have an Israeli prime minister lend credence to the slur that Zionism is a form of racism by prospectively bringing undoubted racists into his coalition is simply unforgivable. It emboldens the progressive assault on Israel. It leaves its defenders embarrassed and perplexed.**

- Most seriously, it weakens a central element in the defense of Israel and the Jews: moral self-confidence. Anti-Israel slanders may abound, but they will do little to hurt the state if a majority of Israelis understand they have no serious foundation in truth. Netanyahu's behavior jeopardizes that confidence.
- It's a shame. As I noted last year, in matters of policy and execution, Netanyahu has been a remarkably effective prime minister. On his watch, Israel's economy has thrived, its diplomatic horizons have widened, its borders have been defended and its enemies humiliated. Thanks to Donald Trump, whom he cultivated astutely and assiduously, he got his way on the Iran deal, brought the American Embassy to Jerusalem and pursued openings with the Arab world without making irreversible concessions to the Palestinians.
- Israel's critics may like none of this, but from an Israeli standpoint they are considerable successes. Yet just as Nixon's achievements in domestic and foreign policy were undone by skulduggery and paranoia, Netanyahu's legacy has been permanently tarred by his apparent corruption, his appeals (or indifference) to bigotry and his demonization of his political opponents. Lest it be forgotten, both Gantz and Lapid are veterans of Netanyahu's governments.
- The good news is that through the planned indictments, Israel has again furnished proof that it's a state governed by law. And with the creation of the first serious opposition party in a decade, Israelis have also shown that they are committed to competitive democratic institutions and a meaningful political alternative. It's time they seize it. The idea that Gantz and Lapid are leftist squishes is absurd. And the reign of King Bibi has gone on long enough.

**SUMMARY:** Just as the real crime of Watergate was the bungled cover-up, the real scandal of Bibigate has been the repugnant political patch-up. Until last month, Netanyahu looked as if he would coast to re-election. But the race became much tighter with the creation of the center-right Blue and White party, led by the former army chief of staff, Benny Gantz, and the former finance minister, Yair Lapid. The pending indictment only increases Netanyahu's political peril. Netanyahu's solution has been to scrounge for votes on the farther — and farthest — right. A few of those votes will come from Otzma Yehudit (or "Jewish Power"), a racist party descended from Rabbi Meir Kahane's outlawed Kach Party. Its leader, Michael Ben-Ari, was denied a United States visa because Washington rightly considers Kach a terrorist organization. If Netanyahu manages to cobble together a ruling coalition, Ben-Ari could become a power broker within it. That alone is reason enough to want to see Netanyahu given the boot. Add to the list his demagogic attacks on Israeli Arabs, his closeness to far-right European leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orban and his public sympathy for an Israeli soldier who killed a wounded Palestinian terrorist in cold blood, and a consistent picture emerges. Netanyahu is a man for whom no moral consideration comes before political interest and whose chief political interest is himself. He is a cynic wrapped in an ideology inside a scheme.

## **Recent Clashes Have Israel, Palestinians on Brink of Broad Escalation**

By Amos Harel, columnist at Ha'aretz

- The vehicular attack in which an Israeli army officer and a border policeman were injured just before dawn Monday, west of Ramallah, was exceptional. Veteran security figures who have been keeping watch on the West Bank for years can't recall a case of using a car to deliberately ram into people when there was more than one person inside the vehicle. Car ramming attacks generally involve one person, who may have acted on momentary impulse. In this case there were three Palestinians in the car, two of whom were shot dead by soldiers immediately after the attack.
- The Shin Bet and army sources insist that the description of events is accurate. According to the initial debriefing in the field and based on questioning the Palestinian who was wounded but survived, the event happened during a routine arrest in the village of N'ima. An army vehicle broke down and army and border police forces were working on extracting it. The surviving Palestinian told his interrogators that he and his two friends were driving back from a different attempted terror attack – throwing firebombs on Route 443, near an army checkpoint. When they saw the military forces in the village, the driver changed lanes and drove into the soldiers.
- A battalion commander from the Kfir Brigade was badly injured but is expected to survive; one border policeman was mildly injured. Two of the three Palestinians in the car were shot by the soldiers. In the backdrop, tensions have been mounting in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, and the Israeli election is approaching. Ostensibly almost all the elements for the perfect storm are here, which could exacerbate the tensions in the territories further, even before the April 9 election
- Army sources say that every day that passes without broader escalation in the West Bank is a happy surprise; in the Gaza Strip, much depends on the damage done by the bombs thrown at Israeli soldiers during the night-time protests. Bloodshed could lead to a stronger Israeli response; the Israel Defense Forces have already stepped up the intensity of their reactions, which now include, after bombs are thrown, tank fire towards Hamas positions.
- The one supplying the means for restraint in the Strip right now is Egypt, which on Thursday acceded to persistent pressure from Hamas and released eight Gazans from prison – including four of Hamas' naval commandos. The Egyptian gesture was apparently designed to guarantee that Hamas wouldn't escalate the protests along the border fence. This comes in addition to the opening of the Rafah crossing in recent weeks.
- However, on the other side, the components of a possible explosion continue to build up. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas again announced that he would reject tax refunds from Israel because of the Israeli cabinet's decision to take half a billion shekels from it to punish the PA for its assistance to security prisoners in Israel. Abbas threatens in parallel to cut the financial support he provides for the government in Gaza.
- There are two more worrying processes at play. Tensions between the wardens and the Palestinian prisoners are simmering in prisons after Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan had

disrupters installed in their wings to garble conversations on smuggled cellphones. Erdan and the prison authority argue that it was necessary, although it has already led to violent incidents with inmates. The army is worried that matters could escalate into a broad clash whose effects will spill over beyond the prison walls. Meanwhile, cabinet minister Naftali Bennett has been challenging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to hold his ground against the prisoners.

- Meanwhile, at the Temple Mount, no solution has yet been found for the conflict over the decision by the Waqf, the Islamic custodian of the Temple Mount, to reopen the contested building Bab-a-Rahma, by the Golden Gate, which had been closed down in 2003. The police, who responded belatedly to the developments (partially because of gaps in their intelligence and that of the Shin Bet), expelled the Waqf guards. Now those guards have called for mass protest prayers on Friday by the entrance to the Mount, like those that took place when metal detectors were installed at the site in the summer of 2017.
- The components for escalation in the territories, even before the elections, are obvious. The government would probably prefer to steer clear of a clash, which could develop in any direction and which could affect the outcome of the election. But the fear of appearing weak to the Palestinians could induce the government to escalate matters – and on the Palestinian side too, some evidently view the situation as a tempting opportunity to drive Netanyahu into a corner.

**SUMMARY:** the components of a possible explosion continue to build up. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas again announced that he would reject tax refunds from Israel because of the Israeli cabinet's decision to take half a billion shekels from it to punish the PA for its assistance to security prisoners in Israel. Abbas threatens in parallel to cut the financial support he provides for the government in Gaza. There are two more worrying processes at play. Tensions between the wardens and the Palestinian prisoners are simmering in prisons after Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan had disrupters installed in their wings to garble conversations on smuggled cellphones. Erdan and the prison authority argue that it was necessary, although it has already led to violent incidents with inmates. The army is worried that matters could escalate into a broad clash whose effects will spill over beyond the prison walls. Meanwhile, cabinet minister Naftali Bennett has been challenging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to hold his ground against the prisoners. Meanwhile, at the Temple Mount, no solution has yet been found for the conflict over the decision by the Waqf, the Islamic custodian of the Temple Mount, to reopen the contested building Bab-a-Rahma, by the Golden Gate, which had been closed down in 2003.