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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, March 8*

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- **Israel, Jordan Holding Talks to End Conflict at Temple Mount Gate**
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- **Three IDF Soldiers Convicted in Palestinian Detainee Abuse Case**
- **Gantz Sues pro-Netanyahu Paper for Sexual Harassment Reports**
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# News Excerpts

March 8, 2019

## Ynet News

### **Orthodox Groups Warn of 'Reform Conquering Western Wall'**

Thousands of high school girls from Haredi and religious-Zionist communities will gather in the Western Wall Friday, in protest against the Women of the Wall, who will be praying and celebrating 30 years of struggle for freedom of religion in the holy site. Members of the multi-denominational feminist organization gather and pray at the Western Wall once a month, and have invited supporters to join the 30-year celebration and prayer this coming Friday. In response, ultra-Orthodox organizations decided to stage a major protest at the same time and place against non-Orthodox worship. The protest is unique in uniting the Religious-Zionist sector with the ultra-Orthodox, is expected to lead to a big turn up. See also, ["Women of Wall forced to move service amid 'violent' ultra-Orthodox protest" \(TOI\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Israel, Jordan Holding Talks to End Conflict at Temple Mount Gate**

High-level Israeli and Jordanian officials held talks Wednesday evening in an effort to end the conflict over a contested religious area on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The longstanding closure of an area near the Golden Gate has ignited tensions between Palestinian worshipers and Israeli police in recent weeks. Worshipers have forced it open and entered on several occasions. Jordan oversees the Waqf, the Islamic custodians of the Temple Mount. The Israeli team was led by the head of the Israel National Security Council, Meir Ben-Shabbat, Haaretz reported. See also, ["Senior Israeli Delegation Visits Jordan, but No Solution Yet for Temple Mount Crisis" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Analysts: Disqualification of Arab-Israeli Party a Political Ploy**

The Central Elections Committee's decision to disqualify the Israeli-Arab Ra'am-Balad party as well as Hadash candidate Ofer Kassif from running in Israel's upcoming national vote is politically motivated and unlikely to be upheld by the Supreme Court, political analysts argue. The Central Elections Committee, a body staffed by Israeli lawmakers and chaired by a Supreme Court justice, this week voted 15-10 to ban Kassif and 17-10 to prohibit Ra'am-Balad, one of the two main Arab-Israeli parties, from taking part in the April 9 contest. The far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party along with the right-wing Yisrael Beytenu party submitted petitions against Kassif, while the ruling Likud moved to disqualify Ra'am-Balad. See also, ["Far-rightists cleared for Israel election, Arab party blocked" \(Reuters\)](#)

## I24 News

### **Three IDF Soldiers Convicted in Palestinian Detainee Abuse Case**

Three Israeli soldiers from an ultra-Orthodox battalion were convicted on Thursday of beating two Palestinian prisoners after signing a plea deal with military prosecutors. They were formally charged with aggravated assault, which will likely result in 190 days in prison, a demotion in military rank and probation as a result of the plea bargain that helps them avoid the possibility of significantly harsher sentences. Five soldiers from the religious unit in the IDF's Kfir brigades stand accused of "striking the Palestinians with slaps, punches and bludgeons while they were handcuffed and blindfolded, causing them serious injuries," the IDF said last month. See also, ["Three IDF soldiers convicted of assaulting Palestinian prisoners" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Gantz Sues pro-Netanyahu Paper for Sexual Harassment Reports**

Benny Gantz, the chairman of the Kahol Lavan political alliance, filed a libel suit against Israel Hayom's editor-in-chief and a reporter on Thursday for publishing claims that he exposed himself to a woman when they were schoolmates. Gantz, who is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's main rival, announced he is suing Boaz Bismuth and Danielle Roth-Avneri for 1 million shekels (\$276,000) over "a series of false reports concerting fictitious charges that Jacobs published about him." Israel Hayom, which is owned by U.S. billionaire Sheldon Adelson, is aligned with Netanyahu and consistently toes the line with his views on almost every issue. Nava Jacobs, who now lives in New York, had published a Facebook post claiming that Gantz exposed himself to her when she was 14 while the two of them were classmates at a school north of Tel Aviv in the 1970s. Kahol Lavan called the allegation "a total lie" and an attempt at political incitement.

Calacalst

## **Airbnb Highlights Commitment to Israel After Settlements Ban**

Following backlash over an announced ban of listings in Israeli settlements, Airbnb highlights the company's commitment to Israel. "Airbnb has and will continue to have a significant investment in Israel," a company spokesperson said in an email sent to Calacalst Monday. Over the last five years, Airbnb has invested more than \$20 million in its activities in Israel, according to the statement. In November, Airbnb announced it will be removing "approximately 200 listings" in Jewish settlements in the West Bank from its service. The decision was lauded by Secretary-General of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Saeb Erekat as an "initial positive step." See also, ["Airbnb in Hot Water Over Boycotting Jewish Home" \(Israel Today\)](#)

AP

## **US House Passes Bill Condemning Anti-Semitism After Remarks**

Divided in debate but mostly united in a final vote, the House passed a resolution condemning anti-Semitism and other bigotry Thursday, with Democrats trying to push past a dispute that has overwhelmed their agenda and exposed fault lines that could dog them through elections next year. The one-sided 407-23 vote belied the emotional infighting over how to respond to freshman Rep. Ilhan Omar's recent comments suggesting House supporters of Israel have dual allegiances. For days, Democrats wrestled with whether or how to punish Omar, one of two Muslim-American women in Congress, should be singled out, what other types of bias should be decried and whether the party would tolerate dissenting views on Israel. See also, ["Keep It Up, Ilhan Omar" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

New York Times

## **Rabbi Leads US Evangelicals in Visit to Muslim Azerbaijan**

A group of evangelical pastors from the U.S. visited the predominantly Muslim Shiite nation of Azerbaijan to promote interfaith dialogue and highlight cooperation with Israel, with pastors saying Thursday the visit has already challenged their views about the potential for coexistence in America's polarized landscape. New York-based Rabbi Marc Schneier, who led the evangelical delegation, told The Associated Press from the capital of Baku that this was the first ever Christian evangelical delegation to visit Azerbaijan. Most of Azerbaijan's population of 10 million are Shiite but it's also home to Sunnis, Christians and around 30,000 Jews, said the rabbi. The country shares borders with both Iran and Russia. See also, ["Rabbi leads US evangelicals in Azerbaijan visit to nurture Israel ties" \(TOI\)](#)

## **Israel Should be Better at Disqualifying Unsuitable Election Candidates**

*Attorney General was right to back a ban for former Kahanist Michael Ben-Ari, but his mental gymnastics over why Balad should not be outlawed were a masterpiece of legal sophistry*

By Ben-Dror Yemini, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- During each Israeli election there is a set dance. Zionist parties demand the disqualification of parties or candidates that deny the State of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state, and the Central Elections Committee approves the request. The matter then goes to the High Court of Justice - which regularly overturns the decision and allows the parties or candidates in question to run.
- In the 1960s, the High Court imposed a ban on a party similar to Balad, without the need for explicit legislation. In the meantime, an explicit law has been legislated. It states that there is a need to disqualify when there is "explicit or implicit" support for racism, terrorism or denial of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state.
- It is doubtful whether there is one serious person in the country who cannot appreciate that people like former politicians Azmi Bishara and Hanin Zoabi, or those of the current crop like Ofer Cassif, the Hadash candidate who was disqualified Wednesday, fit this description.
- Between election campaigns, when they do not have to present a palatable image to the electorate, these people oppose the Law of Return for Jews and support the "right of return" for Palestinians, and as such it is clear that their disqualification is justified. Labor representatives also understood this during the last election campaigns, but this week the party did a u-turn, and did not join the demands for these people to be banned.
- The attorney general is right in his call to ban Michael Ben-Ari of Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) from running. The racist statements the former Kahanist made justify the decision. But on the other hand, Mandelblit's opinion on why Israel should not disqualify Balad is a masterpiece of legal sophistry. He is engaging in mental gymnastics in order to trample all over the explicit meaning of a law.
- The disqualification of parties is anchored in the constitutions of most European countries. Even in Turkey, an Islamist party was disqualified despite a ruling party, and in Spain a Basque party was disqualified, partly because it refused to condemn terrorism. The European Court of Human Rights approved the disqualifications, even though those parties are less extreme than the ones the High Court of Justice and the attorney general refuse to disqualify in Israel. This is not how you strengthen the rule of law; this is how you trample it. And then we bemoan the lack of public trust in the rule of law.

## **Why Netanyahu is Ignoring Growing Israeli-Palestinian Tensions**

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor

- **A consensus continues to grow in Israel that another round of violence with the Palestinians is in the offing. The signs are evident in a series of events and escalations on all fronts. Despite this evidence and warnings by professionals and the heads of Israel's security agencies, no one is lifting a finger to prevent a conflagration despite the potential for heavy losses on both sides. Why? Israel's April 9 elections. At any other time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — a generally responsible leader with an aversion to adventurism — would have convened the Security Cabinet and security chiefs and attempted to douse the flames. These, however, are not normal times.**
- **Netanyahu is in the throes of a desperate battle for political and personal survival that leaves him disinclined to extinguish such fires. In this fight, Netanyahu is competing for the support of right-wing voters against the likes of the New Right's Naftali Bennett, HaBayit HaYehudi's Bezalel Smotrich and Yisrael Beiteinu's Avigdor Liberman. Any move on his part signaling hesitancy or moderation could harm his prospects for victory.**
- **In recent weeks, Bennett, Liberman, Smotrich and Netanyahu have been going at each other with combative declarations, vehemently right-wing positions and blatant contempt for the Palestinians even as tensions with the Palestinians increase. All that remains is to pray that the explosion can somehow be staved off until April 10 and hope that after election day someone somewhere will come to his or her senses and try to restore calm. For now, only the Egyptians are attempting to do so.**
- **The storm clouds are gathering. In recent days, Palestinians in Gaza have been launching explosives-bearing balloons toward Israeli border communities. These are different from the “incendiary” balloons and kites set on fire that caused numerous wildfires for almost a year but did not result in casualties. At the same time, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have intensified their retaliation, with tanks shelling Hamas positions every time a balloon explodes in Israeli territory.**
- **Violent protests and nightly clashes between Palestinians and Israeli troops along the Gaza border fence are escalating. A delegation of Egyptian intelligence officials visited Israel and Gaza March 5 in an attempt to mediate, but without apparent success. Financial pressure on Gaza is also increasing, mostly at the instigation of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is also under financial pressure and is repeatedly slashing Palestinian Authority (PA) funding to officials in Gaza. This month, the PA refused to accept the tax revenues that Israel collects on its behalf to protest Israel's decision to deduct an amount equivalent to what the Palestinians pay the families of inmates in Israeli jails, including those convicted of terrorism. The productive cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security agencies is also at risk.**
- **Two other events also threaten the relative stability in the West Bank. One is the decision by Israeli prison authorities, under the direction of Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, to install jamming equipment in security prisons to prevent Palestinian inmates from using cell phones**

smuggled in to them. The move has set off widespread unrest among prisoners and is spreading beyond the prison walls to the West Bank. Of even more potential to cause volatility is the decision by the Islamic Waqf to reopen the Bab al-Rahma building, which Israel shut down in 2003. An improvised mosque has been set up on the site, next to the Gate of Mercy in Jerusalem's Old City. On March 4, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ordered the site cleared within a week. The Netanyahu government cannot afford to back down. In ordinary times, Netanyahu would have rolled up his sleeves, called Jordan's King Abdullah and other influential Muslims and ordered Israeli security forces to do their best to ease tensions. This being an election season, however, the two sides keep thumbing their noses at each other.

- The Temple Mount and Jerusalem are at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and are two of its most cogent symbols. The Israeli political right, like the Palestinians, will not consider any concessions on this issue. With Netanyahu fighting for every vote on the right to avoid losing to the rival Blue and White alliance, caution is not an option. Faced with the prospect of a defeat at the ballot box that could hasten his indictment on corruption charges and send him to jail, Netanyahu appears to be losing control. It is unclear whether he will step on the brakes before it's too late.
- The IDF's latest annual threat assessment, issued at the beginning of 2019, warns of the increased prospect of Palestinian violence. Nonetheless, steps have not been taken to prevent such an outcome. Lt. Gen. (res.) Gadi Eizenkot, former IDF chief of staff, warned last September that a conflagration in the Palestinian arena was a far greater risk for Israel than any other threat. The way he saw it, a bloody conflict with the Palestinians could last for years — like the first (1997-2003) and second (2000-2005) intifadas — and be far harder to end than short-lived wars on other fronts — for instance the 34-day Second Lebanon War (2006).
- Eizenkot had been successful during his 2015-19 term in containing an outbreak of knife attacks against Israelis. He prevented its escalation into widespread violence, at a relatively low cost, thanks to a policy of containment and restraint and differentiating between the assailants and the broader Palestinian society. There is no certainty that Israel would today be able to contain a similar outbreak to the same extent. On March 4, three Palestinians on the West Bank threw firebombs at an IDF post and then drove their car into a group of Israeli soldiers. Experts have described the car-ramming as “unusual” in the perpetrators first hurling the firebombs at targets.
- Another key question is how long Abbas will continue to restrain Palestinian security forces and direct them to prevent clashes with Israelis. The recent loss of US financial support for the security forces, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars a year, has created an unprecedented economic crisis for the PA, and that does not bode well. At 83, Abbas is a sick man facing the toughest decision of his life: What legacy does he want to leave? Will he decide, in the twilight of his tenure, to make a U-turn and let his people launch another confrontation with Israel or will he stick to his long-standing stance against terror and his conviction that it harms the Palestinian cause? Either way, with or without Abbas, Israel and the Palestinians are careening toward a point of no return at which a clash appears to be inevitable.

**SUMMARY:** A consensus continues to grow in Israel that another round of violence with the Palestinians is in the offing. The signs are evident in a series of events and escalations on all fronts. Despite this evidence and warnings by professionals and the heads of Israel's security agencies, no one is lifting a finger to prevent a conflagration despite the potential for heavy losses on both sides. Why? Israel's April 9 elections. At any other time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — a generally responsible leader with an aversion to adventurism — would have convened the Security Cabinet and security chiefs and attempted to douse the flames. These, however, are not normal times. Netanyahu is in the throes of a desperate battle for political and personal survival that leaves him disinclined to extinguish such fires. In this fight, Netanyahu is competing for the support of right-wing voters against the likes of the New Right's Naftali Bennett, HaBayit HaYehudi's Bezael Smotrich and Yisrael Beiteinu's Avigdor Liberman. Any move on his part signaling hesitancy or moderation could harm his prospects for victory.