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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

August 29, 2019

Israel Hayom

PM Expects US Peace Plan 'Very Soon' After Sept. 17 Election

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday that he expects the United States will release its long-delayed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan shortly after Israel's Sept. 17 election. "This evening we learned that President Trump's 'deal of the century' would be published and presented to the world after the election," he told a campaign rally following an announcement by White House envoy Jason Greenblatt. "I can reasonably estimate that it will happen very soon after the election," the prime minister said. "Who do you want to negotiate with President Trump on the 'deal of the century?'" Netanyahu asked the crowd at Wednesday's rally. "Me, at the head of a right-wing and Likud government, or Gantz and Lapid?" he asked. "That's the question in this election because we will be faced, full force, with the [peace] issue in a few weeks' time," he said.

Yedioth Ahronoth

Lieberman: Likud is Dying for Opportunity to Replace PM

Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman said yesterday that he has already begun to discuss with senior Likud officials the possibility that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu might be replaced, in the event that he should fail to secure a 61-seat coalition after the September 17 election. In a closed-door meeting at Yisrael Beiteinu headquarters, Lieberman said that he met earlier this week with several Likud MKs, mayors and Central Committee members. "Their assessment is that at least two-thirds of the Likud faction are praying that Netanyahu doesn't get 61 seats. That will create an opportunity to replace the Likud's candidate for prime minister. It's hard to believe how much those people, who not long ago signed a loyalty oath to Netanyahu, thirst to be rid of him," said Lieberman. See also, ["Lieberman presses Likud officials on ousting Netanyahu after elections" \(Ynet News\)](#)

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Zehut Could Withdraw From Election After Deal w/ Netanyahu

Ahead of the September 17 election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is reportedly close to sealing a deal with Moshe Feiglin, leader of the Zehut party, that would see the small far-right party drop out of the race and urge its supporters to vote for Likud. The contours of the deal include Government support for legislation to legalise marijuana as well as a cabinet post for Feiglin, if Netanyahu were to lead the next Government. Zehut is currently predicted in polls to win less than the 3.25 per cent electoral threshold required to win any seats in the next Knesset. The deal therefore advances Feiglin's far-right and libertarian agenda while minimising the number of "wasted" votes for Netanyahu's preferred right-wing bloc.

See also, ["Feiglin said poised to drop out of elections after clinching deal with Netanyahu" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Likud Will Form a Gov't with Gantz, Netanyahu's Son Says

Yair Netanyahu, the prime minister's elder son, has told an emissary of far-right leader Ayelet Shaked that Likud will form a government with Benny Gantz's centrist Kahol Lavan party. The written remark, which was obtained by Haaretz, was made as part of the emissary's efforts to reduce the Netanyahu family's resistance to having the former justice minister join Likud. In the correspondence between the younger Netanyahu and the emissary, Elyashiv Amitzur, the prime minister's son wrote about Likud's political plans: "We'll close with Gantz, and we'll go hard on Shaked. We'll reveal her leftism." In another message, Yair Netanyahu wrote to Amitzur that Shaked had hooked up with Yisrael Beiteinu chief Avigdor Lieberman and her party colleague Naftali Bennett to depose Benjamin Netanyahu. Shaked has repeatedly said in recent weeks that the prime minister prefers to join up with Gantz than to set up a right-wing government.

Israel National News

Blue White Denies Claim Russians Hacked its Phones, computer

The Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv has denied that Russians are behind the hacking of the cellphone of Benny Gantz, the head of the Blue and White Party, and Gantz called the finding a political attack. CGI Group, which Gantz hired to investigate a series of leaks from the party, said it was a "powerful and unprecedented attack by Russian hackers, a type we have never before encountered," Israel's Channel 12 reported on Wednesday. Gantz told Army Radio Thursday morning that there was no Russian hack of his cellphone, the cellphones of other party officials and of the party's computer system. "There are more than a few political figures who are trying to harm us. I don't want to think that the Russians are acting against us and I don't want to think that there is an entity here that is activating them against us and there are no findings to support that," he told Army Radio.

Times of Israel

Meeting US envoy, Israeli peace activists urge a 2-state solution

US Ambassador David Friedman on Monday met with a group of Israeli peace activists, who encouraged Washington to pursue a two-state framework for its peace plan that is set to be released in the coming weeks. The meeting was the first of its kind between Friedman, an envoy known for his close ties to settler organizations, and left-wing grassroots groups who have been heavily critical of the Trump administration's policies toward the Palestinians. The hour-and-a-half long sit-down was initiated by Gadi Baltiansky, whose organization the Geneva Initiative works to promote a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. He was joined by representatives from Peace Now, Darkenu, the Peace and Security Association, Mehakzim, Have You Seen the Horizon and activist Yariv Oppenheimer, a former director of Peace Now. In a Tuesday statement, Peace Now said its executive director Shaqued Morag told Friedman that "most Israeli citizens favor a solution guaranteeing peace and security over the ideological, Greater Israel one-state vision, which would spell an end to Israel's democracy."

The Conversation That May Lead To A Netanyahu Conviction

Netanyahu can note that Walla! still published many negative stories about him, or argue that Elovitch wanted to please Netanyahu for his own reasons unrelated to Bezeq.

BY YONAH JEREMY BOB

- In every war, sporting competition and legal trial, there are tipping points where the opposing sides unleash the best that they have and one side decisively gains the upper-hand.
- In the somewhat distant future, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, by plea bargain or trial, will likely be convicted in the Bezeq-Walla! Affair. And if he is, the tipping point will probably be what emerged from Tuesday night's Channel 12 report of what his former aide, Shlomo Filber, told police.
- Until now, we knew from Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit that the prime minister would likely be indicted, with the timing expected to be by December.
- However, Netanyahu has a strong chance of getting Mandelblit to drop any indictment in Case 2000, the Yediot Ahronot-Yisrael Hayom Affair, probably has a 50/50 chance of beating the charges in Case 1000, the Illegal Gifts Affair, and has a series of real defenses even in Case 4000.
- There are two main prongs to Case 4000.
- One prong is the allegation that Netanyahu directed Filber to push through a series of policies to help his ally, Shaul Elovitch – the owner of both Bezeq and Walla! – even though the rank and file government experts opposed the policies as bad for the country.
- Mandelblit estimates that these policies made Elovitch NIS 1.8 billion.
- The second prong is the allegation that the prime minister directed top aide Nir Hefetz, and others, to get him positive coverage from Elovitch's Walla! in exchange for his help with making money for Elovitch's Bezeq.
- Netanyahu has serious defenses for both charges.
- Regarding the Bezeq prong, Netanyahu correctly points out that a range of non-political officials signed off on the new policies as legitimate.
- As to the Walla! prong, Netanyahu can note that Walla! still published many negative stories about him, can argue that Elovitch wanted to please Netanyahu for his own reasons unrelated to Bezeq, and can claim that he only wanted balanced coverage in a media environment that is generally against him.
- But most trials are not just won by legal arguments, but rather by people, meaning by witnesses.
- Former prime minister Ehud Olmert was not sent to jail because of the mounds of documentary proof against him – though that evidence was important. He was sent to jail

because his former aides and allies, Shmuel Ducher and Shula Zaken, turned against him and looked straight into the eyes of the judges and convinced them that Olmert was corrupt.

- Both were close to Olmert and told of key moments when Olmert ordered or condoned their own criminal behavior for his benefit.
- Filber will likely be that key witness in the future Netanyahu trial, and the conversation which was revealed Tuesday night in which he told the police about when Netanyahu gave him marching orders, will likely be that key moment.
- There will be witnesses on both sides and the other state's witnesses against the prime minister will provide evidence, but more mixed.
- Former top aide Ari Harow is not part of Case 4000, and even his role in Cases 1000 and 2000 is peripheral to provide context to the broader story.
- He also maintains a desire to be seen as loyal to Netanyahu and has not pointed the finger at him.
- Hefetz has pointed the finger at Netanyahu, but is an enigma who may not hold up well under cross-examination, and it is known that he sometimes came up with ideas independently about how to act for Netanyahu's benefit in order to please him.
- Netanyahu cannot be convicted of any actions where Hefetz went rogue.
- In contrast, until Filber turned state's witness, everyone was wondering for years why he had acted illegally to help Bezeq without receiving a shekel in return.
- Last night, the report told Filber's story for the first time in a convincing and genuine way that is likely to resonate with the judges.
- Filber did not claim too much. He did not say that the prime minister micromanaged him or knew all of the details. Some witnesses exaggerate like that and ruin their credibility.
- But his story about sitting with Netanyahu smoking a cigar on the couch, his descriptions of the prime minister's body language and of his directives to alter policies, but not too suddenly or blatantly in a way that would attract too much attention, sounded like vintage sophisticated Netanyahu.
- He also did not say that Netanyahu followed up with him about every detail. Rather, he said that Netanyahu assigned Eitan Zafir and Eli Kamir to follow up to make sure he would be "on deadline" with what he had been assigned.
- Deadlines for Netanyahu, he said, mean acting with immediacy as if to desperately "douse a flaming fire."
- He described his telling the truth to police as emerging from "a blackout" in which he had suspended his moral judgment because he felt on a personal high to have gotten the role as director-general of a key ministry.

- **Filber, unlike Hefetz, is not a career man at spinning, and in his testimony to police he came off as authentic. His future testimony in court will likely do the same.**
- **When he tells Tuesday night's story in the future trial, that will likely be the legal knock-out punch that will decide Netanyahu's future.**

The Israel-Iran Shadow War Escalates and Breaks Into the Open

By David M. Halbfinger, Ben Hubbard and Ronen Bergman

- Israel has carried out a series of attacks across the Middle East in recent weeks to prevent Iran from equipping its Arab allies with precision-guided missiles, drones and other sophisticated weapons that could challenge Israel's defenses.
- The attacks represent a new escalation in the shadow war between Iran and Israel, which has broken into the open and threatens to set off a wider confrontation. In one 18-hour period over the weekend, an Israeli airstrike killed two Iranian-trained militants in Syria, a drone set off a blast near a Hezbollah office in Beirut's southern suburbs and an airstrike in Qaim, Iraq, killed a commander of an Iran-backed Iraqi militia. Israel accuses Iran of trying to establish an overland arms-supply line through Iraq and northern Syria to Lebanon.
- The attacks, only one of which Israel has publicly acknowledged, were aimed at stopping Iran and signaling to its proxies that Israel will not tolerate a fleet of smart missiles on its borders, officials and analysts said.
- "Iran is building something here in the region," said Sima Shine, a former head of research for Israeli intelligence, now a scholar at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv. "What's changed is that the process reached a level in which Israel has to act differently."
- Iranian officials said the Israeli attacks would not go unanswered. Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, who oversees covert military operations outside Iran, said on Twitter that "the Zionist actions are insane and will be their last."
- While Iran has not publicly acknowledged the transfer of missile technology, an Iranian with knowledge of Iran's regional efforts said that in the past year Iran had shifted its focus from training its proxy forces for ground battle in Syria and Iraq to equipping them with high-tech weapons and training.
- Leaders on all sides say they do not want an all-out war, but the accelerating pace of violent strikes, often with cheap drones and other covert technologies, has raised the possibility that even a minor attack could spiral into a larger conflict. And public taunting, saber-rattling and domestic politics are all contributing to an atmosphere of volatility and brinkmanship.
- Israel acknowledged carrying out the airstrike in Syria on Saturday, which it said was to prevent militants from launching an explosives-laden drone into Israel.
- The drone blast near Beirut early Sunday destroyed what Israeli officials described as machinery vital to Hezbollah's precision-missile production effort. Israel's responsibility for that strike, the aim of which was first reported by The Times of London, was confirmed by two officials briefed on the operation.
- In Iraq, bases belonging to Iranian-backed paramilitary groups have been attacked repeatedly in recent weeks, and their leaders have accused Israel, saying Israeli drones had hit their vehicles in Qaim, killing one commander. Israel carried out at least one of the attacks, on a

base north of Baghdad on July 19, and American officials have said that Israel carried out others.

- On Wednesday, the Lebanese Army said it had fired on two of three Israeli drones that breached Lebanese airspace before returning to Israel.
- The flare-ups highlight how Iran's opportunistic expansion in much of the Middle East is coming up against fierce Israeli pushback.
- "The military theater has been broadened by Israel in terms of the targeting of its attacks," said Randa Slim, an analyst at the Middle East Institute in Washington. "It is no longer about Iranian presence in Syria. It is about Iran's network in the region."
- For years, as unrest and conflict have weakened Arab states, Iran has moved in, building strong ties with local forces that benefit from its patronage while expanding its influence and amplifying the threat to Israel.
- Iran pioneered this approach by building Hezbollah into Lebanon's most formidable military force, with tens of thousands of trained fighters and an arsenal believed to contain more than 100,000 rockets and missiles pointed at Israel.
- More recently, Iran has strengthened its regional network by providing arms and expertise to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, militias in Iraq and pro-government forces in Syria. Iran has also strengthened cooperation between its allies: Hezbollah operatives from Lebanon have trained fighters in Iraq and Yemen and sent aid to Palestinian jihadist movements, and Iran has airlifted thousands of militiamen from Iraq and elsewhere into Syria to help President Bashar al-Assad defeat a rebellion there.
- The lives of the two militants killed by the Israeli strike in Syria over the weekend illustrate the borderless nature of the Iranian network. The fighters, Hassan Zabeeb and Yasser Daher, grew up in Lebanon, studied aviation engineering in Iran and returned to Lebanon to work with Hezbollah, according to the Lebanese news media.
- Iran calls its regional network the "axis of resistance." While its members operate with significant autonomy in their own countries, they share the broader goal of combating American, Israeli and Saudi influence in the Middle East. Having militarized allies across the region also serves as a deterrent against Israeli and American strikes on Iran, since any such attacks could elicit violent responses elsewhere.
- Israel's efforts to hinder Iranian expansion in recent years have focused largely on Syria, where Israel has carried out more than 200 airstrikes since early 2017 on suspected weapons convoys, bases and other sites associated with the Iranian war effort.
- Israel mostly avoided killing Hezbollah fighters in Syria and attacking inside Lebanon, which could have provoked counterstrikes. This led to an unwritten understanding — often called the rules of the game — about where and how their conflict would and would not play out.
- The attacks last weekend appeared to break the rules by killing two Hezbollah fighters in Syria and reaching into the heart of a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut.

- Raising temperatures further are brash public statements on both sides, which seem intended as much for domestic audiences as for each other.
- Israel's military has taken to taunting its adversaries on social media: After the airstrike in Syria, it ridiculed General Suleimani.
- On Tuesday, it launched a Twitter account in Persian to try to undermine him with the Iranian public.
- Addressing his followers over the weekend, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, vowed to retaliate, shouting his determination to prevent attacks in Lebanon from becoming frequent.
- "We in the Islamic resistance, we will not allow for this type of path, no matter the cost!" he said. He did not say how or when his forces would respond.
- "I suggest to Nasrallah to calm down," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel responded mockingly on Tuesday. "Israel knows how to defend itself and to pay back its enemies. I say the same to Qassim Suleimani: be careful with your words and even more so with your actions."
- Some analysts suggested that the approaching Israeli election encouraged Mr. Netanyahu's tough stance, while Mr. Nasrallah also could not appear to be weak at a time when American sanctions have hurt his group's finances.
- Talal Atrissi, a sociologist who studies Hezbollah at Lebanese University, said he expected the group to retaliate against Israel to prevent attacks in Lebanon from becoming commonplace.
- Alluding to Israel's national elections on Sept. 17, he added: "There are elections, and Netanyahu needs to show that he is protecting Israel, but if there is no response, he'll keep doing it. It won't just be the election. It will become a new strategy."
- Officials and analysts said the recent uptick in strikes, and their spread into Iraq and Lebanon, came in response to adjustments to Iran's strategy.
- One involved General Suleimani's efforts to maintain supply lines for shipments of arms and equipment from Iran. Until about a year ago, according to a senior Middle Eastern intelligence official, Iran used unmarked or Iranian commercial planes flying into the Damascus airport to reach Hezbollah or Quds Force units in Syria.
- But repeated Israeli airstrikes drove Iran to reroute supplies through airfields in northern Syria instead.
- When Israel struck those fields, too, General Suleimani moved to set up a land route. That route goes from Iran through Iraq, where drivers and vehicles are often changed to elude surveillance, before crossing into northern Syria.
- The Israeli attack on July 19 at Amerli base, north of Baghdad, struck a shipment of guided missiles bound for Syria. It was the first time Israel had carried out an airstrike in Iraq since it destroyed a nuclear reactor near Baghdad in 1981, when Saddam Hussein was in power.

- **Israel has been working to prevent Hezbollah from manufacturing its own precision-guided missiles since early 2017, using a combination of disclosures, warnings and threats, Israeli analysts say.**
- **Prevented from military action by its understanding with Hezbollah and a desire to avoid war, Israel at first tried to weaponize its intelligence gathering, hoping that exposing Hezbollah's missile project as a threat to regional security would create international pressure to quash it.**
- **That approach culminated in a speech by Mr. Netanyahu to the United Nations last September, in which he showed aerial photos of what he said were three factories for precision-guided missiles in downtown Beirut.**
- **Ofek Riemer, a former Israeli military intelligence officer who writes frequently on national security, called the public-relations tactic "coercive disclosure."**
- **But he said that phase appeared to have ended with Sunday's blast in Beirut.**
- **He cautioned that the explosion in Beirut still appeared well short of an all-out Israeli attempt to stop Hezbollah's precision-guided missile project by military means.**
- **"We're still in the signaling business, as I see it," Mr. Riemer said. "We're not really going head-on against this project. But it's also signaling to the international community: Either we take action, and you don't know where that leads, or you come in and try to pull strings and influence the Lebanese government, Hezbollah by proxy, or even Iran."**