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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 11, 2019

Times of Israel

PM Derided by Right and Left as He's Forced to Shelter from Rockets

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's election rivals on Tuesday evening tore into his security record Tuesday, after Gaza rockets were fired near a campaign event in Ashdod, forcing the premier to briefly leave the stage and take cover. For many rivals, the scenes of Netanyahu being whisked away by a group of bodyguards provided a counterpoint to the image he has attempted to cultivate as Mr. Security, highlighting what critics say is his government's failure to deal with attacks from Gaza terror groups. "A red alert this evening in Ashdod while Netanyahu is on stage is a red flag for the citizens of Israel. Netanyahu is done and can leave the stage," wrote Yair Lapid, co-leader of the Blue and White party. See also, ["Netanyahu rushed off stage in Ashdod as rocket alert sirens blare mid-speech" \(Ynet News\)](#)

CNN

Netanyahu Vows Israel will Annex Parts of West Bank if He's Re-Elected

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced plans to annex parts of the West Bank if he wins re-election next week. Netanyahu told reporters at a press conference that, if re-elected and able to form a coalition, he would apply Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea. He said he expected US President Donald Trump to present his Middle East peace plan just days after Israelis vote next Tuesday, September 17, and that in co-ordination with the US, he would also look to apply sovereignty over all Israeli settlements in the West Bank. A US administration official told CNN: "There is no change in United States policy at this time." See also, ["In election pitch, Netanyahu vows to annex Jordan Valley right away if reelected" \(TOI\)](#)

Reuters

Arab League on Netanyahu plan to annex West Bank areas: 'Aggression'

Arab foreign ministers condemned a plan by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex parts of the occupied West Bank as "aggression" undermining any chances of a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Netanyahu said on Tuesday he planned to annex the Jordan Valley, a large swathe of the occupied West Bank, if he wins a closely contested election just a week away. The Arab League "considers his announcement a dangerous development and a new Israeli aggression by declaring the intention to violate the international law," Arab foreign ministers said in a statement after a meeting.

Ha'aretz

Trump Fires Bolton: I Disagreed Strongly with Many of His Suggestions

U.S. President Donald Trump announced on Tuesday that he is firing his national security adviser, John Bolton, after a year and a half on the job. Trump wrote on his Twitter account that the two had disagreements over policy questions, and therefore he informed Bolton "that his services are no longer needed at the White House." Trump added: "I asked John for his resignation, which was given to me this morning. I thank John very much for his service. I will be naming a new National Security Advisor next week." Bolton was considered the most hawkish among Trump's senior advisers, especially regarding Iran. By firing him, Trump is moving aside the one person in his administration who would have likely opposed any kind of negotiations with the regime in Tehran. See also, ["Five Policy Clashes Between John Bolton and President Trump" \(NYT\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Pompeo Hours After Bolton Fired: Trump Ready to Meet Rohani

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday that President Trump is willing to meet his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rohani "with no preconditions." Pompeo made the comment in reply to a question on whether Trump could meet Rohani before the end of the month, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Pompeo replied positively to the question. Pompeo spoke in a press conference with Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, during which new American sanctions were announced against Iran, Hamas, Al-Qaida and Hezbollah. The press conference was also supposed to include National Security Adviser John Bolton, but he was fired by Trump via Twitter shortly before it took place. Pompeo backed Trump's decision to fire Bolton, saying that the president has the right to choose his own staff. See also, ["Pompeo says Trump was 'well within his rights' to oust Bolton" \(CBS\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

After Rocket Attack, IDF Strikes 15 Terror Targets in Gaza

The Israeli Air Force attacked fifteen targets in Gaza overnight, the IDF confirmed early on Wednesday. Targets included a site used to manufacture weapons, a naval compound and a terror tunnel. Two rockets were shot from Gaza on Tuesday night. Rocket sirens went off in Ashdod and Ashkelon at about 9 p.m. The Iron Dome intercepted one rocket while another fell in an open field near Ashkelon. "The attack was carried out in response to rocket fire launched from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory earlier this night," the IDF wrote on Twitter. "The IDF will continue to oppose attempts to harm Israeli civilians and considers the terror organization responsible for what is happening inside and outside of the Strip," it added. See also, ["Israel Strikes 15 Hamas Targets in Response to Gaza Rocket Attack" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Times of Israel

Top Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi: no Concessions to Palestinian Demands

The most senior ultra-Orthodox rabbi in the Ashkenazi, non-hassidic world Rabbi Haim Kanievsky said on Tuesday that United Torah Judaism would not make any concessions to the Palestinians on their territorial demands in the West Bank. The rabbi's comments came just several hours before Prime Minister Netanyahu's declaration that the Trump peace plan would allow Israel to annex the Jordan Valley and Israeli settlements in the West Bank after the election. Kanievsky's comments are equally rare and suggest that UTJ is making a serious effort to appeal to the hardline religious conservatives in the religious-Zionist community, who are disillusioned with the traditional religious-Zionist parties that have represented the sector. See also, ["Rabbi Kanievsky campaigns for UTJ ahead of election" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Arutz 7

Foreign Minister: 'I, not Gantz, will be PM after Netanyahu'

Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz (Likud) told criticized Benny Begin's comments on Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's decision to reveal the existence of an additional secret Iranian nuclear site, saying that the decision is unrelated to elections. "I'm familiar with the details," Katz said. "It was important to expose this because we're in the middle of a battle to remove Iran's legitimacy. Yesterday something significant happened when the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Director-General came out and announced that Iran is breaching the agreement. The IAEA will soon discuss this, and the European countries with all their hypocrisy, headed by France, will need to respond to this and if there's been a breach they will need to start that process. I contacted these countries."

Painful Images in Ashdod

By Nahum Barneav columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- **Netanyahu is never going to forget his panicked departure from an election event in Ashdod. Regardless of their political affiliations, the rest of the Israelis are also going to have a hard time forgetting those images. Hamas, a small terror organization, succeeded in forcing the prime minister of Israel into a bomb shelter. The prime minister ducked a bit. The GSS agents leaned over him to provide protection. Islamic terrorism couldn't have asked for a bigger victory image than that.**
- **While that happened he was being watched by hundreds of his supporters who came to Ashdod to reaffirm with their presence that Israel under Netanyahu is a confident and strong country, a superpower. They didn't know what prompted the suspension of the event. They saw the prime minister panic. One of them grabbed his head with his hands, as if hearing terrible news.**
- **When all is said and done there was no reason to panic. The two rockets that were fired out of Gaza were intercepted well in advance. After a few minutes Netanyahu returned to the podium to speak. But the war on terrorism isn't measured only in casualties and property damage. It is measured in pictures, symbols, the ability to dictate the public agenda and the sense of security. Terrorism scored a stinging victory on all of those issues yesterday evening.**
- **The Israeli government has adopted an unwise policy in dealing with Gaza. The Israeli government and Hamas have a shared enemy: the Palestinian Authority. The government has placed its fight against the Palestinian Authority at the top of its agenda, even though the PA's security forces do everything in their power to foil terror attacks, working in full cooperation with Israel. The government views Hamas as the lesser evil. The government has chosen to accept Hamas's acts of belligerence along the border fence, has allowed funds to be funneled to it, and has refrained from taking steps to rebuild the Gaza Strip. For all intents and purposes, the government has sanctified the existing situation. It doesn't have any solution, barring bombastic statements between one round of violence and the next.**
- **The failure is a reverberating failure. It could very well be that the voters in Ashdod, Ashkelon, Beer Sheva and in the Gaza periphery have more important issues that dictate which party to vote for this coming Tuesday; they might not believe in any of the alternatives that the other parties have offered them. But no one should dare to patronize them or preach morality to them. Some of them certainly must have watched the event in Ashdod with a least a smidgen of satisfaction: at long last the prime minister has felt on his own skin what we've had to live through all these past few years.**
- **"Netanyahu. A different league," cry the Likud's billboards. Hamas restored Netanyahu to our league. The arrogant declarations about annexing territories, the trips overseas for phony meetings with world leaders, the decision to rely completely on an American president whom no responsible leader ought to rely on—none of that is going to solve the real problems facing Israel. In honor of the elections, Netanyahu put on the emperor's new clothes. It's a shame that it was a despicable, incorrigible terror organization that showed us all that the emperor was naked.**

“Dramatic Trouble”

By Ben Caspit, columnist at Ma'ariv

- **Netanyahu can apply Israeli sovereignty to the Jordan Valley this morning if he wants to. He could have applied it yesterday as well. He doesn't need a Knesset majority, and he doesn't need a special bill. He doesn't need anything. He can simply convene the cabinet, introduce a motion and put it to a unanimous vote and that would be that.**
- **How? Very simply: by relying on the law that was passed by those leftists from Mapai on June 27, 1967. That law was an amendment to British law and ordinances that authorized the government to decide in which parts of the “Land of Israel” Israeli law, jurisdiction and administration would be applied. The Eshkol government used that law to annex East Jerusalem. Any decision to apply Israeli law and jurisdiction to a certain area is essentially a decision to annex it. The current government can use that law, or its previous iteration, to annex the Jordan Valley. Easy-peasy.**
- **Menachem Begin needed a separate law to annex the Golan Heights. Why? Because the Golan Heights wasn't part of the British Mandate (it was under the French Mandate), and the British law and ordinances didn't apply there. To remove any shadow of a doubt, Begin chose to pass a separate law for the Golan Heights. There isn't any problem with the Jordan Valley. There's a consensus within the public and in the political establishment—everyone's in favor. The Jordan Valley was part of the British Mandate. Despite all that, Netanyahu didn't announce a decision to annex the Jordan Valley and he didn't convene the cabinet to vote on the matter. Rather, he made do with a meaningless statement: after the next government is formed, I intend to annex.**
- **Moshe Feiglin, who is Netanyahu's latest bridegroom, attended the festive event yesterday. I'd wager that Feiglin's chances of serving as a minister in the next cabinet are higher than the chances that that government will annex the Jordan Valley. A decision to annex the Jordan Valley is a decision that has enormous and far-reaching security, political and economic implications. It will affect Israel's relations with the Arab world as a whole and the Persian Gulf states in particular. It will affect Israel's relations with the world, the situation with the Palestinians and the security tensions as a whole. It will affect Israel diplomatically and will radiate in every possible direction.**
- **As far as I was able to ascertain yesterday, Netanyahu has not yet held a single in-depth meeting about his “dramatic” decision. He hasn't convened the security cabinet; he hasn't instructed the National Security Council to do preparatory work, as one might have expected. He hasn't sat down to discuss the matter with the IDF chief of staff. He hasn't held a meeting with the Mossad director to discuss it. Actually, I'm not completely sure about the Mossad director. He hasn't held an orderly meeting with Israel's top security officials to discuss it. And the results were in kind. Something that walks like a shot from the hip, talks like a shot from the hip and acts like a shot from the hip is a shot from the hip.**
- **None of the above contradicts in any way the justified aspiration of most Israelis, including the pioneering residents of the area, to see the Jordan Valley placed under Israeli sovereignty—or**

Israeli control, at least. Netanyahu tried to exploit that public sentiment yesterday for political profit. That wasn't a particularly successful endeavor, but he wasn't the only one who was to blame. It wasn't successful because the truly dramatic statement of the day yesterday was issued somewhere entirely different. It was a tweet from the truly unbelievable Donald Trump, who fired his national security adviser, John Bolton, while publicly humiliating him.

- Bolton was Israel's most important strategic asset in the White House. He was the person who pushed for stiffer sanctions against Iran; he was the person who all but forced the decision to keep American troops deployed in Syria; he was the man who said an automatic yes to every Israeli demand or whim. Bolton bodily stopped American-Iranian negotiations, and he was considered to be the most outspoken opponent of a possible meeting between Trump and Rouhani.
- Bolton was tossed out on his ear just minutes after Netanyahu finished spinning the Jordan Valley. It was all but a replay of the events of the day before, when Trump announced two hours after Netanyahu's press conference that he had no problem meeting Rouhani. It seems that the gift that never stops giving, Donald Trump, has stopped cooperating with Netanyahu at the most critical juncture in time for Netanyahu.
- Bolton's ouster from the White House spells a change in policy. America is losing its teeth. The chance that Trump will enter into negotiations with the Iranians is high. The chance that those negotiations will end just as the negotiations with North Korea ended isn't low. Let's pray. The prevailing assessment yesterday among Israeli political officials was that Netanyahu asked Trump to give him American recognition of the Jordan Valley [as part of Israel], mirroring the American recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Trump refused. Bolton applied pressure, so Trump fired him. That hasn't been confirmed yet, but most of the turn of events described above did actually happen. "I offered to resign last night and President Trump said, 'Let's talk about it tomorrow,'" Bolton wrote on Twitter. He learned that he had been fired from Twitter.
- And since trouble tends to come in clusters, Bolton's dismissal wasn't the last catastrophe of the day for Netanyahu yesterday. A Red Color alert sounded while he delivering a speech at an election rally in Ashdod. The prime minister tried to put on a brave face, remained standing at the podium for half a minute and asked the audience to disperse "quietly." But he was loudly evacuated from the site. The video footage of Netanyahu's swift removal—the same Netanyahu who promised us on the eve of the 2009 elections that he would topple the Hamas regime in Gaza—set the internet on fire and hardly contributed to his good health. It probably also failed to contribute to his pool of voters. But no one should eulogize Netanyahu just yet. The cemeteries are full of people who eulogized him. He still has a few days left. More dramatic announcements still lay ahead.