

Newsletter Monday December 3, 2018

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Netanyahu, Pompeo to hold urgent talks on 'regional developments'

PM Netanyahu heads to Brussels for "important and urgent" meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo • Meeting follows Pompeo's condemnation of latest Iranian missile test, reports U.S.-led coalition struck multiple government targets in Syria.

Mati Tuchfeld

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a previous meeting | Photo: AFP

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was set to meet U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Brussels late Monday, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

Sources close to the prime minister have called the meeting "important and urgent."

They said Netanyahu would fly back to Israel after the meeting, which was arranged last week for discussions on "developments in the region," but they did not provide details.

Pompeo is an outspoken critic of Iran's nuclear program and on Saturday, he condemned the latest missile test by the Islamic republic.

Iran "has just test-fired a medium-range ballistic missile that's capable of carrying multiple warheads. This test violates UNSCR 2231," he tweeted, referring to the United Nations Security Council's resolution endorsing the international nuclear agreement.

"We condemn this act," he tweeted.

Netanyahu's meeting with Pompeo had been tentatively scheduled for Wednesday or Thursday, but it was moved up to allow Pompeo to attend the funeral of former President George H.W. Bush, who died last week at the age of 94 and will be buried at his presidential library and museum at Texas A&M University on Thursday.

Netanyahu will be accompanied by Mossad Director Yossi Cohen, National Security Council Director Meir Ben-Shabbat and Military Secretary Brig. Gen. Avi Blot.

In April, Pompeo met with Netanyahu during a visit to the region. Talks between the two focused largely on Iran.

At the time, he said, "Unlike the past administration, President Trump has a comprehensive Iran strategy that is designed to counter the full array of threats emanating from Tehran. Regarding the JCPOA [the Iran nuclear deal], President Trump has been

pretty clear. This deal is very flawed. He has directed the administration to try to fix it, and if we can't fix it, he's going to withdraw from the deal."

Monday's meeting between Netanyahu and Pompeo comes amid reports that a U.S.-led coalition attacked Syrian government positions in the east of the country.

Newsletter Sunday December 2, 2018

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| Police recommend indicting Netanyahu on bribery charges

Opposition politicians demand early elections as police says it has evidence against Netanyahu, his wife and associates • PM: Recommendation comes as no surprise, it was decided before the investigation began • Two associates turned state's witness.

Itzik Saban, Ariel Kahana, Efrat Forsher, Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists there is "nothing" to the case | Photo: Oren Ben Hakoon

In a move that could have far-reaching political ramifications, the Israel police on Sunday recommended indicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on bribery charges related to a corruption case involving Israel's telecom giant Bezeq, prompting immediate calls for his resignation.

Police say their investigation has established an evidentiary foundation to charge Netanyahu and his wife Sara with accepting bribes, fraud and breach of trust. The recommendations include filing charges against a number of additional suspects, including former Bezeq owner Shaul Elovitch and his wife and son.

The case revolves around suspicions that confidants of Netanyahu promoted regulations worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the Bezeq telecom company in exchange for positive coverage of the prime minister and his wife on Bezeq's subsidiary news website, Walla.

The Bezeq case, known in the Israeli media as "Case 4,000," involves allegations that Netanyahu, who held the government's communications portfolio until last year, influenced regulation to benefit Elovitch. Former journalists at the Walla news site have attested to being pressured to refrain from negative reporting of Netanyahu.

After the police decision was announced, Netanyahu said, "The police recommendations about me and my wife come as no surprise to anyone, and neither does the obvious

timing of their publication. These recommendations were decided and leaked even before the investigations began."

"Police recommendations have no legal standing," Netanyahu added. "Only recently, individuals with actual authority categorically rejected the police recommendations against a long list of public figures. I'm sure that in this case, too, the relevant bodies will examine the evidence and arrive at the same conclusion – that there was nothing there because there is nothing there."

Gideon Markowicz

Shaul Elovitch, the controlling shareholder of the Bezeq telecom giant

Attorney Jack Chen, who represents Elovitch, said in response to the report Sunday that "the police leaks have been preparing us for this recommendation for some time. There's nothing new under the sun. We hope that now legal officials will be free to examine the evidence ... and try to meet the difficult task of withstanding the immense pressure on them [to indict]."

The pressure to indict, he said, has been a constant theme in the investigation "from the start, and it tainted it."

"Mr. Elovitch stands by his claim that he has committed no crime," the attorney stated.

Netanyahu has been questioned by police at least 12 times in connection with Case 4,000, the most serious of a number of corruption investigations in which the prime minister has been implicated.

Two of his top confidants, his former spokesman Nir Hefetz and Communications Ministry Director General Shlomo Filber, turned state witnesses earlier this year in exchange for immunity and are believed to have provided police with incriminating evidence.

Police have already recommended indicting Netanyahu on corruption charges in two other cases. One involves accepting gifts from billionaire friends and the second revolves around alleged offers of advantageous legislation for a newspaper in return for positive coverage.

The prime minister has denied any wrongdoing, dismissing the accusations as a witch hunt orchestrated by the media.

After the police recommendations were announced on Sunday, opposition politicians began demanding that Netanyahu resign and call an early election.

"The most serious bribery case yet leaves no room for doubt," said Tamar Zandberg, head of the dovish opposition Meretz party. "A prime minister who is accused of the most serious offense in the Israeli law books cannot keep serving one minute longer."

"The prime minister has no moral mandate to keep his seat and must resign today. Israel must go to elections," Zandberg said.

Other opposition figures, including **opposition leader Tzipi Livni**, quickly joined in the call for Netanyahu to resign.

The **coalition, however, took a different tone**. Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel tweeted that "I earnestly hope that the police recommendation will be revealed as unfounded. I very much hope that the prime minister will be acquitted and that the government will continue to operate for the benefit of the Israeli people."

During a meeting of Likud ministers, Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz said that, speaking on behalf of the ministers, he offers his full support for the prime minister.

Netanyahu responded: "Thank you very much, all of you, but you're obviously taking this more seriously than I am."

Newsletter Friday November 30, 2018

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| **Hard diplomacy takes center stage at G-20 summit**

Russian-Ukrainian tensions have shifted the focus of the G-20 summit from economics to diplomacy • **Multifaceted power struggles in the Middle East between the U.S. and Russia**, Sunnis and Shiites, and Israelis and Arabs are likely to have an impact too.

Yoav Limor

The G-20 summit in Buenos Aires has become the scene of multiple diplomatic showdowns | Photo: Reuters

Argentina is bracing for diplomatic drama. Selected as the first South American host of the G-20 summit – the powerful international forum of governments and central bank chiefs that aim to shape policy for the promotion of international financial stability – Buenos Aires has already become the scene of a showdown between Russia and Ukraine, after Russia opened fire on three Ukrainian Navy ships on Sunday and seized their crews in the Kerch Strait, between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

The incident quickly spiraled into an international crisis that has clouded the summit's agenda. It seems that, much like in the days of the Cold War, everyone is waiting to see what the United States and Russia will do.

U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin were supposed to meet over the weekend on the sidelines of the summit, but Trump announced Thursday that he was canceling the meeting, citing his disapproval over Russia's refusal to release the Ukrainian ships and sailors.

It is doubtful whether this meeting could have changed the situation on the Russia-Ukraine border, as it is far too rife with emotion and internal politics that are now being exploited by both parties. The Russians have reinforced their troops on the border and the Ukrainians have declared a tentative, one-month state of emergency.

Putin was also less than impressed by the joint air maneuvers conducted this week by the United States, France and Britain, which for the first time included F-35 stealth fighter jets. The move sought to send a clear message to Moscow, but as far as Putin is concerned, this was just another move in the global chess game the Kremlin is playing.

AFP

At odds, again: U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin Events in Buenos Aires will impact Israel. Even the accelerated development of the Israeli economy may not fully place it in the big league with other global power players, but as the focus of the G-20 has shifted from world economy to diplomacy, the issues discussed will not stop in Eastern Europe and the agenda will eventually, even if only indirectly, touch on the Middle East, with its multifaceted power struggles between the United States and Russia, Sunnis and Shiites, and Israelis and Arabs.

Israel's focus remains the developments in Syria. This tumultuous arena seems to have calmed in recent weeks. This may be a cooling effect of the Sept. 17 downing of a Russian plane by Syrian air defenses trying to counter an Israeli airstrike. Since that incident, all sides have been acting differently: Israel has been less aggressive in its operations, Iran has reduced its attempts to smuggle weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria, and Damascus has shifted its focus to its own rehabilitation after the seven-year civil war.

Russia's bombastic statements also seem different on the ground: The S-300 anti-aircraft defense systems deployed in Syria in the wake of the Sept. 17 incident have yet to be declared operational, nor has a timetable been set for handing them over to the Syrian army's control. Add to this the immediate implications of the U.S. sanctions on Iran – especially with respect to Tehran reducing its financial aid to Hezbollah, which is suffering from severe financial distress – the situation is very different than previously assessed, even if it remains highly volatile.

This reality, the ramifications of which extend far beyond Syria, has prompted Israel is engaged in intensive efforts to form international and regional alliances that will change the regional balance of power in its favor. Presumably, reports in the U.S. about the considerable Israeli efforts to placate American ire over Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's alleged involvement in the murder of exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi are true, and these efforts have succeeded and have contributed to the budding relationship between Jerusalem and Riyadh.

Add to that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's expected visit to Bahrain – on the heels of his Oct. 28 visit to Oman – and we see a new Middle East, one less naive than in the past, where alliances are based on strong military, economic and technological interests.

At the top of this complex pyramid is the United States. Trump told the Washington Post this week that U.S. forces remain in Syria in part "for Israel." This is a complex statement that has its bright side – the clear hint that Washington stands with Israel, which was not entirely certain in the Syrian context until now; and its lesser side, namely the possibility that Israel will now be blamed for every American casualty in the Middle East. But mostly it obscures the bigger picture, meaning that the Americans remain in the region mainly as part of their effort to prevent Iran from gaining more power, their desire to stabilize Iraq and, above all, their need to keep the balance of power against Russia.

In this respect, the Trump-Putin meeting in Buenos Aires would have been important for the Middle East. The overt Israeli dream is for a complex global deal, in which the sanctions imposed on Russia following the 2014 annexation of Crimea are eased in exchange for removing Iran from Syria and Lebanon.

It is doubtful that this will happen, certainly not immediately, but the bottom line is that adding the U.S. to this equation is good news for Israel, as it signals to all regional players that it does not stand alone in its efforts to stop Iran's regional aspirations.

Simmering tensions

Israel's focus on the tensions in the northern sector has been able to somewhat mask the agitation plaguing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The past few weeks have seen a slow but disturbing increase in violent incidents in the Palestinian territories, where some 900 terrorist attacks have taken place so far in 2018, 50 of them high-profile attacks that in total have killed 10 Israelis and wounded 55.

Most of the attacks were carried out by lone-wolf terrorists but the uncovering of a Hamas cell in Hebron that planned to carry out major attacks in key locations in Israel shows that while Hamas is trying to keep Gaza Strip from imploding, it is also trying to ignite tensions in the West Bank.

Illustration | IDF Spokesperson's Unit

Israeli troops remain on high alert in all sectors

The defense establishment is following these trends closely and warily. The past two years have proved that Palestinians in the West Bank have little energy for large-scale violence. But having said that, dangerous forces are at play on the ground: the constant discussions about the nearing end of the era of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the nagging questions about his potential successor; the pending eviction of Khan al-Ahmar; and the disturbing rise in settler violence across Judea and Samaria.

In this context, the Shin Bet security agency is still trying to apprehend the terrorist who perpetrated the Oct. 7 shooting in the Barkan Industrial Park in which two Israelis were murdered, and to solve the Oct. 13 Samaria stoning attack that killed a Palestinian woman.

The Shin Bet is taking different approaches to these two cases: While the manhunt for the Barkan terrorist is overt, the search for the perpetrators of the Samaria stoning, who are believed to be Jewish, is covert. If the agency has learned anything from the tragic Duma arson, is that it needs to have ironclad evidence before making arrests, to avoid the need for controversial interrogation tactics that might come into question during the legal proceedings.

The increased focus on the West Bank is the result of the relative calm in Gaza since the massive flare-up two weeks ago. Arson terrorism incidents have become few and far between, the massive border riots are waning and nightly border clashes have nearly stopped. Not exactly peace and quiet, but not a war zone, either.

This means little going forward. Gaza is still facing a dire economic crisis and, in the absence of a broad solution, it will soon come full circle, meaning recurring violence is only a matter of time.

For the time being, Hamas has opted to calm the situation down: The second round of Qatari aid funds is due to be delivered to the coastal enclave soon, power supplies have nearly tripled, and negotiations with Egypt and the U.N., which are trying to broker a long-term cease-fire between Hamas and Israel, are slowly progressing. These talks have a long, landmine-filled road to go, but it seems that both parties are making an earnest effort to cement the truce.

None of this means Israel's troubles with Gaza are over. None of the core issues is close to being resolved and tensions have been exacerbated further by the botched Nov. 11 commando operation in Khan Yunis. Hamas is sparing no effort to get to the bottom of that incident, not only to understand what its true aim was, but also to embarrass Israel.

This effort is two-pronged: Hamas has released the photos of the troops in an attempt to crack the military censor's restrictions on local media and the Israeli public's self-imposed censorship, while more nefarious attempts to find out more about the troops and their

mission are made via fictitious social media profiles Hamas uses for phishing information.

Israel has been investing almost unprecedented efforts in damage control. This incident has highly volatile potential and the IDF's challenge now is not only to prevent its troops' cover from being blown, but also to avoid their modus operandi from becoming public knowledge.

This is also why the IDF named a special committee to study the case. The Middle East is not going to change and Israel will be required to mount covert operations in the future, so the military needs to understand what happened in order to decide what to do next. One thing is for sure: The committee's findings are likely to rattle the entire defense establishment.

These myriad challenges are now Netanyahu's to deal with, as he is also the acting defense minister. Netanyahu is seasoned enough to know that as well as providing great photo ops while visiting military bases, this job comes with risks. If there is anything we know for sure, it is that we can leave it to the complex reality of the Middle East to constantly pose new challenges.

Newsletter Thursday November 29, 2018

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US urges PA to free American-Palestinian charged with dealing with Jews

Palestinian Authority is holding Issam Akef for allegedly selling property in east Jerusalem to Jews • Palestinian law says such sales "cement occupation" • U.S. ambassador: Akef's arrest antithetical to U.S. values. We demand his immediate release.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman | Photo: Matty Stern / U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem

The U.S. ambassador to Israel called on the Palestinians on Wednesday to free an American-Palestinian who was detained for "selling land to a Jew," apparently violating a long-standing Palestinian ban on selling land to Israelis.

Through its official Wafa news agency, the Palestinian Authority has accused property dealer Issam Akef, a U.S. citizen, of attempting to sell a property in east Jerusalem without permission of his business partners or the authorities. The Wafa report did not identify the intended buyer.

Palestinian law bars selling land to "a hostile state or any of its citizens," and requires the permission of the Palestinian Authority for all land sales in east Jerusalem.

Land sales in the Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem, are highly fraught for Palestinians, who see Israeli efforts to buy up land as part of a plot to cement control.

"The Palestinian Authority has been holding U.S. citizen Issam Akel in prison for 2 months. His suspected 'crime'? Selling land to a Jew," U.S. Ambassador David Friedman wrote on Twitter.

"Akel's incarceration is antithetical to the values of the U.S. and to all who advocate the cause of peaceful coexistence. We demand his immediate release."

Osama al-Qawasme, an official from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement, rejected Friedman's remarks and called the U.S. envoy "an ambassador of the settlers."

"We deplore his statement that Akel's arrest violated American values. Does building of settlements adhere to American values?" al-Qawasme said. "We in Fatah will confront all attempts to harm the city of Jerusalem or its sacred places."

Akel's father, Jalal, said a Palestinian court had extended his son's detention by 45 days on Monday.

"They are stalling. There is no evidence my son sold anything to Israelis, all charges are void," he said.

Maj. Gen. Adnan Al-Dmairi, a spokesman for the Palestinian security forces, said 20 people had been arrested in recent years on suspicion of violating land laws.

An Israeli security official said Akel was detained on Oct. 10 in Ramallah, the hub city of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

Israel said its security services had appealed to their Palestinian counterparts for Akel's release.

Israel briefly arrested two Palestinian Authority officials from East Jerusalem over the last month on the basis of what the Israeli security official said were suspicions that they had information on Akel's detention.

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