

# ISRAEL REPORT

To provide greater exposure to primary Israeli news sources and opinions in order to become better informed on the issues, and to gain a better understanding of the wide range of perspectives that exist in Israeli society and politics.

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## ISRAEL SPEEDS UP US EMBASSY OPENING IN JERUSALEM BY ELIMINATING BUREAUCRACY (JPost 3/28/18)

The red tape that could have delayed the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem was cut on Tuesday, when the National Planning and Construction Council authorized plans to build a wall and escape route from the structure chosen, when the embassy moves from Tel Aviv.

Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon exercised his rarely used authority to fast-track the process, so that the embassy will be able to move to Jerusalem – in part – in May, in conjunction with the celebrations of the state's 70th year.

Kahlon – who tweeted his plan to President Donald Trump last week – plans in the coming days to sign onto the council's decision to exempt the construction on the US-government owned Diplomat Hotel from going through the Jerusalem Municipality's bureaucratic process.

"As we promised, we won't let unnecessary bureaucracy delay moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem, Israel's eternal capital," Kahlon said. "This is a diplomatic, strategic move for Israel, and the planning bodies that I head will do all that is necessary to fit the schedule. As Finance Minister, I am thankful for the opportunity to be part of this historic move."

Trump announced US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the embassy move on December 6, while reaffirming his commitment to a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians stating that he is "not taking a position on... the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem."

Kahlon's part in the embassy move doesn't only tie him to a move that is very popular to Israel. It is also a chance to score points in his rivalry with Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat, who announced this week that he will not seek another term and will run for the Knesset with the Likud, instead.

Barkat has led the municipality to go on strike multiple times during Kahlon's tenure as finance minister, allowing garbage to pile up around the capital, and leading protests outside the Finance Ministry and claiming Kahlon is depriving Jerusalem – Israel's poorest large city – of much-needed funds.

A source close to Kahlon told *The Jerusalem Post* he didn't mention Barkat by name, but emphasized that the embassy move had gotten stuck in the municipality's bureaucracy.

He also pointed out that Deputy Mayor Meir Turgeman, who held the planning portfolio, is on a leave of absence after he was arrested on suspicion of accepting bribes.

A spokesman for Barkat said the embassy move "is not connected to the Jerusalem Municipality's bureaucracy, but to the law. The law states that all construction, anywhere in the country, must undergo authorizations, committees, etc. The law has an article that allowed the finance minister to give an exemption from this process in special cases.

"Nothing is stuck, the opposite is true," the spokesman added. "We are in constant contact with the Americans and they are fully satisfied."

## IDF GENERAL THREATENS 'HARSH MEASURES' AGAINST GAZA MARCHES (Arutz-7 INN.com 3/28/18)

IDF Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), Major General Yoav Mordechai, warned that the IDF would respond harshly to provocations at the Gaza border during the marches on the border fence planned for this Friday by Hamas.

"I want to say about the demonstrations, which I call demonstrations of anarchy, rather than Land Day demonstrations, that we will take harsh and tough measures against any attempt by demonstrators to reach the security fence or try to break into Israeli territory," Maj. Gen. Mordechai said in an

interview with the *Al-Hura* TV channel Wednesday evening. "The Israeli response will be strong, not just against the demonstrators," he warned.

When asked whether punitive measures would be taken against senior officials in Gaza, Major General Mordechai said, "We intend to do everything to prevent violent demonstrations and terror demonstrations."

"In recent hours, we have contacted more than 20 bus company executives whom Hamas paid to encourage people who do not want to leave their houses to take part in these violent demonstrations. We warned them that anyone who uses buses to get to the violent demonstrations will see personal steps taken against him and against the company he owns.

The general also addressed his recent participation in meetings with representatives of countries which provide financial aid to the Gaza Strip. "The conferences I attended in Cairo, Brussels and the most important in the White House are important conferences because Hamas has failed. In failed in the economy, it failed to run Gaza, in failed with the reconciliation agreement, and it failed in its terrorist military project, when it invested all its millions underground in the tunnels."

He drew a direct line between Iran and the terrorist organization. "We have information that Hamas, after seeing that all its options were closed, is trying to open a direct line with Tehran, with the Al Quds force, with the Iranians, in order to smuggle money that unfortunately comes into the Gaza Strip."

## NEW HEAD OF LEFT-WING PARTY APOLOGIZES AFTER LYING ABOUT ADVISER WHO WORKED FOR FAR RIGHT (Ha'aretz 3/25/18)

Freshly elected Meretz party leader Tamar Zandberg released a video on her public Facebook page where she speaks out on a scandal that stained her first few days at the helm of the party.

Speaking on camera, Zandberg said she was sorry she had "disappointed so many in so little time" but at the same time claimed the issue of her meetings

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with campaign manager Moshe Klughaft had been “blown out of proportions, beyond any reasonable logic.”

During her campaign for the primaries, Zandberg met on several occasions with Moshe Klughaft, a renown strategy consultant who previously worked for the far right, but tried to keep the contacts secret.

Alongside working on the campaign of Habayit Hayehudi Chairman and Education Minister Naftali Bennett, Klughaft also created aggressive campaigns against Israeli human rights groups and left-wing activists.

His work includes a video published by Im Tirtzu that accused activists from the New Israel Fund and other left-wing groups of acting as agents for foreign governments.

At the height of the Im Tirtzu campaign, posters were disseminated that depicted New Israel Fund Chairwoman and former Meretz MK Naomi Chazan with a horn on her forehead.

“I met with him four times in the last few months, twice at his home in Givat Shmuel and twice at my place in Tel Aviv,” she admits in the Facebook post. “The last time he came over it was only five days before the elections, and he named a few artists he knew who could support my candidacy to the leadership of Meretz,” added Zandberg in the video.

Asked by Haaretz whether she had been in touch with Moshe Klughaft last week, Zandberg adamantly denied any contact. Her claims were exposed as false when Klughaft gave an interview to Israel Television News Company saying he did indeed consult for the Zandberg campaign.

A person involved in the campaign told Haaretz: “They were in continuous contact throughout the campaign. They were not friends, it was a professional relationship.”

Klughaft’s revelation put newly elected Meretz party leader Tamar Zandberg in a difficult position both politically and legally. On the one hand, she was exposed as lying and as resorting to the advice of a strategist who previously worked for Meretz’s political arch-rivals, such as Naftali Bennett’s “The Jewish Home.”

From the legal angle, Zandberg was exposed as having received strategic advice from a consultant without disclosing it to the state State Comptroller.

Under Israeli law, candidates have to declare all volunteers who work on their campaigns to the State Comptroller, as volunteering is seen as being a potential channel of illegal donations. That is, by not declaring her consultations with Moshe Klughaft Zandberg broke the law, even if the prominent Israeli strategist was reportedly not paid.

### **ISRAEL THANKS U.S. FOR ‘RECORD BREAKING’ MISSILE DEFENSE AID** (Israel Hayom 3/27/18)

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman thanked the United States on Monday for including a “record-breaking” \$705 million allocation to aid Israel’s missile defense systems in a U.S. spending bill passed last week.

Lieberman said the aid will be used in the further development of Israel’s multilayered defense system to intercept short- and mid-range rockets from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon and counter long-range threats from Iran.

The U.S. provides \$3.1 billion in military aid to Israel each year under a 10-year security arrangement. The \$705 million is a separate allocation, up from the \$600 million provided for Israel’s missile defense last year.

U.S. President Donald Trump signed a \$1.3 trillion spending bill on Friday that provides billions in new funding for the military and for national security.

### **CROATIA TO PURCHASE UPGRADED ISRAELI FIGHTER JETS** (YNet, 3/28/18)

Croatia said Wednesday it will purchase upgraded Israeli F-16 fighter aircraft as it seeks to bolster its defenses amid Russia’s arming of neighboring Serbia. Once formally approved by the government, it will be Croatia’s largest single military deal since it split from Serb-led Yugoslavia in the bloody 1991-95 war.

Croatia’s Defense Council accepted an Israeli offer that will replace the

country’s aging MiG-21 fighters.

Apart from Israel, the countries invited to submit bids included Greece, South Korea, Sweden and the United States.

The military experts did not specify details of the deal, but previous reports have said it involves 12 used F-16 aircraft worth some \$500 million that have been heavily modified with Israeli-made avionics.

Sweden’s manufacturer Saab had offered a squadron of new Gripen fighters, but the package was reportedly estimated at some \$700 million.

“If Croatia was a richer country, and if our economy was stronger, maybe we could have picked a more expensive offer,” Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said. “But, based on the parameters presented to us by our expert team, we believe that we have made a responsible decision which will meet all the needs of the Croatian air force in the next 30 years.”

“The defense council... has accepted that Israel made the best offer and gave a recommendation to the government to decide on acquiring” the Israeli planes, the defense council said in statement late Tuesday.

The minister has said he expected the first jets to arrive in 2020, and the remaining ones by 2022.

### **EL AL SUES OVER AIR INDIA FLIGHTS IN SAUDI SKIES** (YNet 3/28/18)

Israel’s national carrier filed a lawsuit against the government on Wednesday for allowing Air India to fly over Saudi airspace on its New Delhi-Tel Aviv flights, a move El Al says puts it at an unfair disadvantage.

El Al claims that when it was privatized back in the 1990s, the Israeli government at the time pledged to “encourage fair and healthy competition” between Israeli airlines and their foreign competitors. This promise is now being undermined, El Al said.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have no diplomatic ties. The kingdom’s decision to allow the Indian carrier to fly through its airspace en route to Tel Aviv reflected a recent, behind-the-scenes warming of ties between the two countries.

But El Al says it has been harmed as a result. It currently has the only flights connecting Mumbai to Tel Aviv but is forced to bypass Saudi Arabia on that route. The new Air India route significantly shortens travel time and airfare costs.

El Al is asking that the Air India flights be halted until Israeli airlines are also allowed to fly over Saudi Arabia. The suit also names Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s transport minister, Yisrael Katz, and Air India.

The Israeli government has lauded the new Air India route from New Delhi to Tel Aviv as a symbol of tightening ties between the countries, as well as a harbinger of Israel’s improving status in the region. Israel says it has seen a 33 percent uptick this year in incoming tourism from India.

Netanyahu has said he sees “huge” potential for Israel from the flights over Saudi airspace with “long-term implications.”

The first flight Air India flight over Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states landed last week.

### **MOST ISRAELIS BELIEVE MEDIA HOSTILE TOWARDS NETANYAHU, POLL FINDS** (Israel Hayom, 3/28/18)

Over half of the Israeli public believes the media is hostile toward Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a new poll found Tuesday.

The survey was performed by the Maagar Mochot Research Institute for the Sammy Ofer School of Communications at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, ahead of the IDC’s annual DIGIT conference for digital journalism, scheduled to take place on April 9.

The poll found that 48% of Israelis agreed that the media is biased against Netanyahu, 35% disagreed with this assertion and 17% said they had no opinion on the issue. If the figures are adjusted only from those who expressed an opinion, then 58% believe this claim to be true.

Asked whether they thought media reports affected the corruption investigations into the prime minister, 47% said they believe the media

impact the investigations, 25% thought the media had some effect on the probes, 19% said it had no effect on the investigation, and 9% said they did not know.

Netanyahu relationship with the media has sunk to an unprecedented low over the past year. Netanyahu has often said he is persecuted by the press and is not treated fairly. Many of the prime minister's associates have accused the media of being a tool in the police's hands with respect to the three investigations in which he is involved.

A segmentation of the results showed that older Israelis (44%) tended to believe the media was hostile toward Netanyahu more than younger Israelis (26%). Respondents with post-secondary education disagreed with this assertion compared with those with a high school education (38% to 26%), and Jews were more inclined to agree than Arabs (55% to 21%).

"Israeli media should not and cannot cover the prime minister's investigations simply to cater to public opinion. Still, the public's faith in the media's motives and journalists integrity will determine the media's relevance and impact," DIGIT conference chairman Roy Katz said.

### **GERMANY DEFENDS BID FOR SECURITY COUNCIL SEAT AGAINST ISRAEL** (Israel Hayom 3/29/18)

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas rejected on Wednesday criticism of Berlin's decision to compete against Israel for a seat on the U.N. Security Council in 2019 and 2020, saying it was normal for a number of countries to seek representation.

The Security Council consists of 15 members, five of whom – the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France – are permanent members and have veto power over its resolutions. Ten rotating members are elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms based on regions: five from African and Asian countries; one from Eastern European countries; two from Latin American and Caribbean countries; and two from Western European and other countries – the bloc to which Israel belongs.

Israel is the only country in the Middle East that has never sat on the Security Council. Only 66 other countries in the U.N., many of them small island states, have not held a Security Council seat.

Germany last held a non-permanent seat in 2011-2012 and is vying with Israel and Belgium for one of the two seats to be filled in 2019-2020.

Maas told reporters before his first United Nations visit as foreign minister that Germany's candidacy had been announced long ago, and did not diminish its strong support for Israel.

"We are not running against anyone; we are running for a seat," he said, following the criticism from Washington's nominee as U.S. ambassador to Berlin and others. "That is a topic that one can deal with very normally."

Security Council candidates must win more than two-thirds of the overall vote by the 193-member General Assembly to be elected. The election for the term beginning on Jan. 1, 2019 is due to be held in June.

Regional groups generally agree upon the candidates to put forward and competitive races for seats are increasingly rare.

Last week, Arab League chief Ahmed Abul Gheit said that Arab League nations will meet in Riyadh on April 15 to work to prevent Israel from gaining a seat on the U.N. Security Council.

### **INVESTORS LIGHT UP ISRAELI CANNABIS STOCKS** (YNet, 3/28/18)

Israel-based Amir Marketing and Investments in Agriculture Ltd., a company that deals in real estate and agriculture products, is considering a pivot to medical cannabis, the company announced Tuesday.

The announcement sent Amir Marketing's stock up 28% on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange by Tuesday market close.

Israel's medical cannabis industry has seen significant growth since Israeli parliament rolled out a cannabis export reform plan in 2016, estimating the sector could bring Israel around \$1.1 billion a year. Nearly 400 farmers applied for a cannabis growing permit since then. According to a February

report by IVC Research Center Ltd., a Tel Aviv-based research center focused on the Israeli tech industry, 68 companies focused on medical cannabis and other cannabis-related technologies currently operate in Israel, more than half of them founded recently.

The reform has stalled in February due to in-government disagreements, raising uncertainties regarding the recent boom in the sector and leading a group of farmers to appeal to Israel's Supreme Court in attempt to counter the stalemate. Currently, the decision regarding medical marijuana export rests with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Unfazed by these regulatory hurdles, investors on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange are bullish.

### **ISRAELI CONSTRUCTION GIANT TEAMS UP WITH STARTUP TO BUILD SMART CRANES** (Times of Israel, 3/26/18)

A construction unit of one of Israel's leading infrastructure companies, Shikun & Binui Ltd., is teaming up with an Israeli startup to jointly create smart cranes using artificial intelligence technology.

Solel Boneh Building & Infrastructure Ltd., a subsidiary of Shikun & Binui, announced a cooperation agreement with IntSite, a startup founded in 2017 that develops autonomous cranes for construction sites using Internet of Things devices, machine learning, computer vision and natural language processing technologies. The idea is to increase cranes' productivity and safety and cut costs.

Shikun & Binui, which has a market cap of some \$716 million, set up an innovation program in 2015 called BuildUp, which focuses on identifying and implementing innovation in its production processes — from designs to workflows and products and communications with customers — in the areas of energy and water, infrastructure and construction.

The Israel Builders Association — which represents some 2,000 construction companies working in Israel — has teamed up with the Construction Ministry, the Ministry of Economy and Industry, and SOSA, a company that connects startups with investors and corporations, to set up the Construction Innovation Zone, which aims to bring new technologies to cranes, planning and building procedures, and infrastructure.

"In the next few years, Solel Boneh will allocate significant resources for the innovative development of autonomous cranes to be used on construction sites, in order to increase the use of groundbreaking technologies in our projects and the entire field," said Solel Boneh's VP Business Development, Shlomi Assaraf, in a statement.

"We are confident that with our partner, bringing autonomous cranes to construction sites is a viable vision, and we aspire to be that world-leading company to introduce this technology to the construction and equipment industry," Tzach Ram-On, the CEO of IntSite, said in the statement.

Ram-On, a construction engineer, co-founded the company with his brother Mor Ram-On, an aeronautical engineer. Both of them are graduates of the Technion — Israel Institute of Technology. The Haifa-based company is at the seed stage of development.

Solel Boneh specializes in constructing roads, bridges and interchanges, public buildings and shopping centers.

### **HOW ORLY LEVY-ABECASSIS PREVENTED AN ELECTION** (Baruch Stein, JPost 3/27/18)

The Israeli political scene just spent two weeks in a state of "crisis" as declared disagreements over ultra-Orthodox army enlistment threatened to break apart the governing coalition.

There is a narrative being passed around according to which Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked prevented the coalition's fall by mediating between ministers who advocate for ultra-Orthodox conscription and those whose mission is to prevent it, and by working to ensure that even if the coalition collapsed the Knesset would not schedule the next election until the fall.

While I do not doubt the efforts of Bennett and Shaked, I do not believe this is the whole story because I do not believe that the “crisis” erupted as naturally as the Bennett-Shaked narrative presents it, two weeks before the Knesset’s Passover recess.

Though the Supreme Court struck down the framework through which ultra-Orthodox are exempted from service and gave the Knesset a limited amount of time to legislate a new system, the Knesset has until fall to pass revised legislation. Though theoretically Yisrael Beytenu opposes the exemptions, that has never precluded it sitting alongside ultra-Orthodox parties in coalitions which have consistently upheld them.

The corruption investigations involving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his wife and at least one of his sons is the real context: a prime minister in need of a public relations diversion. Notwithstanding his stated desire that the coalition live out its term, the idea that Netanyahu, Yisrael Beytenu chairman Avigdor Liberman and Ya’akov Litzman, chairman of United Torah Judaism, may have engineered the “crisis” together is not surprising. Netanyahu’s actions and statements left many questioning his dedication to the coalition’s survival and from his detractors to his supporters there are few left who consider Netanyahu credible. The question is whether his manipulations are a flaw or a virtue.

The investigations make this a counterintuitive time for Netanyahu to want an election, but corruption is not enough to turn Likud voters into ultra-Orthodox or left-wing voters. His chairmanship of the Likud is not in jeopardy, and he has been gaining in recent polls.

Being reelected just prior to being indicted, despite the leaking of many details of the investigations, would strengthen Netanyahu’s morale going into a trial. “Vote for me, I am about to be indicted” was not the slogan Netanyahu was going for, though, and an invented religio-political crisis helps both Liberman and Litzman rally their bases.

The presumption was that if a “crisis” over enlistment brought down the coalition it would lead to a new election. Netanyahu is known to consider capitulation to the ultra-Orthodox a political necessity, so his coming out against them was not a realistic scenario. Though Yisrael Beytenu was willing to stage a confrontation with the ultra-Orthodox, the coalition would still have a one-seat majority without them. That is the only explanation I can see for why Litzman picked an additional, otherwise unnecessary fight with Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon and his Kulanu Party, declaring that if the exemption legislation did not pass before the Passover recess his party would vote against the proposed 2019 budget.

Like the exemptions, the 2019 budget could theoretically wait until after the Passover recess, but I do not believe Kahlon was involved in any back-door schemes. His relationship with Netanyahu is contentious and parts of the budget bills pertain to 2018. Furthermore, though Kahlon does not like speaking about the possibility of Netanyahu being indicted and though the attorney general’s decision on the matter is not expected until fall, it could still come sooner than expected, which actually would likely bring about the next election and throw the budget off course, and for Kahlon and his party, budgets are holy.

So what happened? I believe the enlistment exemptions were a readily resolvable matter that was intentionally drawn out for nearly two weeks, during which two things dissuaded the conspirators.

First, many people were not buying the charade, the “crisis” was labeled a fake and the prospective election was still viewed as being about corruption. Bennett deserves credit for his efforts in this regard, including his insistence that for the Israeli Right the current coalition is a dream come true and no better outcome can be hoped for from an election.

Second, the expectation that an election was approaching contributed to MK Orly Levy-Abecassis’s decision to announce that she was forming a new party. In the polls that followed, Levy-Abecassis, who opposes the coalition, received five seats, likely to the detriment of coalition parties. I believe the anticipated outcome of the prospective election was all that mattered to

Netanyahu et al. They faked its onset to better test the waters. The test worked, but the results showed much less support for Netanyahu than what he wants you to believe. The very presence of Yisrael Beytenu and Shas in the next Knesset has fallen into question, Levy-Abecassis is in close range of drawing enough votes to block the current coalition from reincarnating itself, and so the election plan was aborted.

### INFILTRATION FROM GAZA IS OUR WORST FEAR (Matan Tzuri, YNet 3/28/18)

More than the Code Red sirens, more than missiles and even more than terror tunnels—the scenario of terrorists infiltrating directly through the Gaza border fence is the event that residents of the Gaza vicinity are most concerned about.

On Tuesday it happened, and only miraculously ended without casualties. Finger-pointing and criticism aside, something about the sense of security cracked that day. While the sense of security in the communities surrounding the Gaza Strip is relatively good, it is also fragile.

In the everyday atmosphere there is a sense of security, even if disturbances on the border fence put a damper on the Passover holiday, and even if rockets are fired here and there. But when the paths near the settlements are freely treaded by three Palestinians armed with grenades and knives, anxiety rises. The nightmare scenario becomes reality.

It will take time, a long time, for this event to be forgotten—but we all know it will happen eventually, because it is human nature and that is the nature of the residents of the Gaza vicinity. Families will not leave because of the infiltration, and the number of children in the playgrounds in the surrounding communities will not decrease. The special relationship between the IDF and the residents will be maintained.

All this is true, but nevertheless the infiltration incident sharpened the frightening understanding that despite everything, if the terrorists really want to, then anything is possible. There is no such thing as one hundred percent protection. The border is not hermetic. Our fears are justified. It can happen. This is reality. Learn to live with it, because otherwise it is impossible to live at all.

Currently, the barrier project is being built around the Gaza Strip, which is part of an underground obstacle against tunnels, and its upper part is a massive fence. The fence, which is identical to the fence that is currently located along the Israel-Egypt border, will be a significant obstacle and almost entirely prevent infiltrations such as Tuesday’s, but there will always be a small hole through which it will be possible to penetrate Israeli territory.

Residents of the Gaza vicinity do not delude themselves into thinking they can somehow be completely safe. Hamas or any other organization will continue its efforts to try to attack Israel in any way possible. The knowledge that the IDF is defending us makes a significant contribution to the sense of security, and the army has a very significant role in the growth of the settlements and in the decision of new residents to settle in the Gaza vicinity. An event like Tuesday’s was expected, but should not have happened. The IDF also understands

that this is a serious failure, as they have admitted

Wednesday. But this failure is exactly the same as the small theoretical hole in the nearly, though not quite, perfect defense barrier for the Gaza vicinity communities.

### Dry Bones

