



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, January 14*

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# News Excerpts

January 14, 2022

## Ynet News

### **Attorney General Rejects Netanyahu's Terms for Plea Deal**

Former Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#)'s attorney Boaz Ben Tzur recently approached Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit in an effort to secure a plea deal and end his [trial](#) on charges of corruption, according to media reports. Netanyahu is on trial in the Jerusalem District Court on charges of bribery, breach of trust and fraud. The timing of the talks was linked to the end of the AG's term in office, scheduled for the end of January. Mandelblit was said to aspire to complete most of the volatile, ongoing cases, before handing over his office to the next attorney general. Mandelblit was approached a number of weeks ago, by Netanyahu's attorney. The attorney general's office defined the conversation as a "feasibility check" and not a negotiation. [Dig Deeper "Secret Plea Deal in Netanyahu Corruption Trial Said to Await His Approval" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Arutz Sheva

### **Thousands of Right-Wing Activists Rally in Jerusalem**

[Thousands](#) of people turned out for a right-wing demonstration against the government outside Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office in Jerusalem. Religious Zionism MKs Bezael Smotrich, Itamar Ben Gvir and Simcha Rothman, as well as Likud MK Shlomo Karhi, were among several opposition lawmakers and officials who spoke at the protest, organized by Samaria Regional Council head Yossi Dagan. The demonstration was originally aimed at protesting the government's attitude toward illegal outposts, claiming it was delegitimizing the settler movement. But many participants held signs and chanted against the government as a whole, and specifically against any compromise with Bedouin demonstrators in southern Israel, following clashes over a controversial tree planting initiative in the area. [Dig Deeper "2,000 Bedouin Uproot Disputed Trees as Negev Protests Intensify" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Palestinians Married to Citizens Excluded From Program**

Palestinians who are married to Israeli citizens and are legal residents of Israel are unable to download the Health Ministry's Green Pass, which certifies that they are vaccinated against the coronavirus or recovered from the virus. Many Palestinians reported difficulties in acquiring the Green Pass, even if they were vaccinated in Israel. The Health Ministry said in response that the matter is being dealt with, but affected Palestinians say the issue is persisting. Health regulations require that members of the public show a proof of vaccination to gain admission to certain public places, including restaurants, mall food courts, museums, movie theaters and fitness centers. Without Green Passes, Palestinian residents' access to employment and services could be jeopardized, according to Reut Shaer, a lawyer from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel. [Dig Deeper "Israel Probes Death of Elderly Palestinian Who Was Detained" \(Associated Press\)](#)

## Reuters

### **With Most Gaza Homes Still in Ruins, Smiles for a Few**

Palestinian Zeyad Abu Odah watched with a smile as his four-story house, destroyed in an Israeli air strike in last May's fierce fighting, was slowly being rebuilt in Gaza's Beach refugee camp. He is one of the lucky few. Only 50 of 1,650 homes wrecked in an 11-day war between Gaza militants and Israel are being restored, leading to frustration among Palestinians at the slow pace of reconstruction eight months after the conflict ended. Gaza officials estimate that it will take \$479 million to rebuild homes and infrastructure damaged in the war. Qatar and Egypt have each pledged \$500 million for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip. COGAT, the Israeli Defense Ministry's liaison office to the Palestinians, did not respond to a request for comment. Israeli air strikes partly damaged another 59,000 homes during the conflict, according to Gaza's Hamas-run government. Some homes in Israel were damaged by rockets launched by Hamas and by fellow militant groups. [Dig Deeper "From Refugee Camps to 5-Star Hotels: Hamas' Top Officials Leave Gaza en Masse"](#) (Ynet News)

## I24 News

### **Hamas Accuses Israel's Military of Using Spy Dolphins**

A representative of Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades claimed in a video that the militant group discovered a dolphin allegedly trained by Israel's military to pursue its naval forces, according to reports from Palestinian media outlets. The spokesperson said that the dolphin was also equipped with a device, which was shown later on in the footage. He did not provide any additional details regarding the time of the operation, or the location where the incident allegedly took place. The announcement, published by the Jerusalem-based Al-Quds newspaper, follows a similar story released by the daily back in 2015. That year, Hamas also claimed that it managed to discover such a killer dolphin, which Palestinian media said was "stripped of its will" and trained to be "a murderer" by Israel's military. Israel has long been accused by its neighbors of using animals for espionage or other military purposes - in 2013 Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV alleged that the state was using a bird to spy on the country. [Dig Deeper "Hamas Claims of Israeli Killer Dolphins Are Easy to Mock, but Not So Farfetched"](#) (Times of Israel)

## Al-Monitor

### **EI Salvador Journalists Targeted by Pegasus Spyware**

The cell phones of dozens of El Salvador-based journalists and activists were targeted with the Israeli-made Pegasus spyware, according to a new digital forensic investigation that adds to the slew of scandals plaguing the NSO Group. Researchers from the University of Toronto's [Citizen Lab](#) and the cyber watchdog Access Now said they had identified 35 cases of journalists and civil society members whose phones were infected with Pegasus between July 2020 and November 2021. NSO Group is best known for its Pegasus software, which cyber experts say can be used to remotely access a phone's contents, camera and microphone. The Israeli firm has pushed back on reports that its hacking technologies have been used to commit human rights abuses and says it licenses Pegasus to governments that are fighting terrorism and other crime. [Dig Deeper "Israeli NSO Spyware Found on Activists' Phones in Kazakhstan"](#) (Ha'aretz)

## **Prime Minister Bennett Speaks with Vladimir Putin**

Prime Minister Bennett told Russian President Vladimir Putin that countries negotiating with Iran in Vienna must stand firm against progress in Tehran's nuclear program. According to the Prime Minister's Office, the two spoke via phone about regional security issues, and agreed on "continued close cooperation in this area" — a likely reference to Israeli Air Force activity in Syria, where Moscow maintains a military presence. "Against the backdrop of the nuclear talks in Vienna, the prime minister stressed the importance of a strong and determined stance against Iran's progress in the nuclear project," the statement read. The PMO said the conversation between the pair was "good" and that Putin invited Bennett and his wife to visit St. Petersburg, an invitation the prime minister indicated he would accept. Russia is one of seven parties — along with China, France, the UK, the US, the EU and Germany — negotiating with Tehran in Vienna over its nuclear program. The talks restarted in November after taking a months-long break during which hardliner Ebrahim Raisi was elected president of Iran. [Dig Deeper "Biden Administration Not Waiting for Nuclear Talk Denouement to Begin Damage Control" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Turkey, Armenia to Hold Talks in Russia on Normalizing Ties**

Envoys from Turkey and Armenia will hold a first round of talks aimed at normalizing ties in Moscow, in a move Armenia expects will lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations and reopening borders after decades of animosity. Turkey and Armenia have had no diplomatic or commercial ties for three decades and the talks are the first attempt to restore links since a 2009 peace accord. That deal was never ratified, and ties have remained tense. The neighbors are at odds over various issues, primarily the 1915 massacre of 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Armenia says the 1915 killings constitute a genocide. Turkey accepts that many Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire were killed in clashes with Ottoman forces during World War One, but contests the figures and denies the killings were systematically orchestrated or constitute a genocide. During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Ankara supported Azerbaijan and accused ethnic Armenian forces of occupying Azeri territory. Turkey began calling for a rapprochement after the conflict, as it sought greater influence in the region.

## **Continuous Riots**

By Hassan Shaalan

- **Despite the compromise that was reached this week on the issue of the Jewish National Fund planting trees in the Negev, Bedouins continued to demonstrate against the government and clashed with security forces. About 2,000 Bedouins demonstrated at the Mulada intersection, on Route 31 between Shoket and Arad. They blocked the road and threw stones at police. While dispersing the disturbance, 12 people were injured, and three were taken to Soroka Hospital in Beer Sheva. Seven demonstrators were arrested. In an unusual step, the police used tear gas that was sprayed from a drone to disperse the demonstrators. The demonstrators also protested that the police had demanded that they end their protest quickly. “That is unacceptable,” they said, “the outcry of all the Bedouins must be heard.**
- **We will continue our fight to the end.” There were also calls in the Galilee and, in the Triangle, to hold demonstrations. The police announced that saplings that had been planted had been uprooted, even though the JNF had posted guards. Two nights ago, there were riots in Tel Sheva, Segev Shalom and Rahat, and stones were thrown at police stations. The police arrested 21 people for causing disturbances. In an interview to Ynet, JNF Chairman Avraham Duvdevani said that the planting had been approved and that this was not a provocation against the Bedouins. “The work has been taking place consistently in keeping with the decisions of an inter-ministerial committee since 2018. It was examined from all aspects and only then was an orderly work plan made.” Duvdevani said that the work was stopped at the government’s instructions.**
- **With the help of Welfare Minister Meir Cohen, who is charge of the Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin in the Negev, a compromise was reached to resolve the political crisis caused by the Negev riots and the tree-planting. It was decided to stop the planting and remove the JNF’s heavy machinery. The Bedouins claimed that the planting was on private property. Even before the compromise was reached, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid called to stop the planting until a “reassessment is made.” He also pointed out that the Netanyahu government had also stopped tree planting. The opposition chairman said, “Nobody will stop tree planting in the Land of Israel.” United Arab List Chairman Mansour Abbas replied, “Abu Yair, not only did you agree to stop the planting in the Negev, you also agreed to recognize three Negev villages, and also acceded to my request in one of our meetings in Balfour to postpone the eviction of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah. Take a deep breath, internalize, and then maybe you’ll move on.”**

## **Nides: We Restored Trust**

By Nahum Barnea

- [The following interview was conducted in English therefore, Nides' words do not appear in quotes] The US embassy is located in Arnona, a neighborhood on the edge of Jerusalem, facing the Judean Desert. Beyond the concrete security wall that surrounds the compound are the occupied territories. They are present absentees. Thomas Richard Nides, Tom for short, is the new ambassador, the liaison between the Biden administration and Israel and its government. We met in his Jerusalem office for a first interview to the Israeli media. Nides, 61, belongs to the inner circle that has the president's ear. Secretary of State Tony Blinken and I are close friends, he said. I've known Ron Klain, the White House chief of staff, for 35 years. His deputy, Steve Ricchetti, is a close friend. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and I worked together in the State Department. The CIA director, Bill Burns, is also a friend.
- This is not empty boasting. Not the slightest. The intimacy, the attentiveness, the personal trust decides the position of the ambassador on the axis that links Washington to Jerusalem. David Friedman, the last ambassador, was the lawyer who saved Trump from bankruptcy. The president's ear was open to his counsel. Nides is a friend and partner to the Biden bunch. That is why Bennett views him as a key figure, a major station to the White House. These are new times with new rules of the game. Nides is as different from Friedman as Biden is from Trump. He was born in Duluth, a town of 90,000 in distant Minnesota. Nides: I'm Reform, we were not Orthodox; we were raised on Judaism as a culture, not a religion. We lit candles on Friday night, we celebrated the holidays, and every child had a bar or bat mitzvah.
- When he presented his credentials to President Herzog, there was an awkward moment. I have a special gift for you, Herzog said. I've invited the teacher who prepared you for your bar mitzvah. She made aliya to Israel. Nides: She got up. I thought to myself, what if she starts asking me questions in Hebrew, what if she asks me to repeat my haftorah [selections from the Prophets read after the Torah reading by the bar or bat mitzvah]. I'll start panicking, before everyone. Luckily, she didn't ask. A year or two after his bar mitzvah, he flew to Israel, his first trip overseas. The experience was formative. Nides: I visited Kibbutz Ein Hashofet, I slept with the Bedouins in Sinai, I climbed Masada at 3:00 in the morning. The trip opened my eyes. I learned how important the kibbutz movement was in Israel's history.
- I realized how special Israel was and how vulnerable. Years later, when I lived in Washington, I would tell friends, imagine how different your lives would be if your neighbors in Maryland and Virginia thought that you had no right to exist. At a young age, he became active in the Democratic Party. His wife is a vice president at CNN. She works in Washington, he in Jerusalem. Nides: My wife was supposed to come for Christmas but had to cancel because of Covid. She will visit in two weeks and then once a month.

- **My wife has her own big career. Being away is harder for me than for her. Always, in all my travels overseas, I insisted that we not be apart more than three-four nights. We are a very close family. His son Max, a law student, joined him during his first month. Max's mother is not Jewish. Nides: As far as I'm concerned, and also as far as he's concerned, he's Jewish. He calls himself a Jew and believes he is a Jew. Others can disagree. You're not a diplomat, I said. The Middle East is not your field of expertise. You could have asked for a lot of other top positions in the Biden administration. Why ambassador, why Israel? Nides: I had a senior position in a very large investment bank. I thought that if I were to leave it, I would only do that for something interesting. Israel is different for me, firstly as a Jew, but also because there are real issues to promote here. I didn't come to attend cocktail parties.**
- **The most charged issue at the moment in relations with the Biden administration is Iran, I said. You attended all of the meetings that National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan held when he was here. Nides: That's correct. President Biden wanted to ensure that on such an important issue, there be no gaps of trust between Israel and the administration. We know what we think and what we are doing, and we know what you think and what you are doing. I want to make it clear: at the end of the day, we want to work together with Israel. And most importantly, the president has made it clear that he is committed to keeping the Iranians from having a bomb, that all the options will be on the table. Your national security adviser, Eyal Hulata, talks to Jake Sullivan a few times a week. US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley talks. I talk every day. Some of the talks are meant to dispel your anxiety. If I were an Israeli, I would also feel anxiety. I respect that with all my heart. At the moment, the media headlines have subsided. But an abyss separates the two governments.**
- **Nides: We made it very clear, in public and not in public, that we want a diplomatic solution. But if we don't reach a diplomatic solution, there are other options that we discuss. The media headlines died down because trust was established: we believe you and you believe us. if you're Israeli, you're viewed as paranoid when you suspect that things are taking place behind your back. The Russians are there. The Chinese are there. The US understands this. Nides: Look, I think that I know 97% of what is happening. I don't know three percent. The good news is that we're making a real effort to maintain the alliance between us.**
- **I was in all of Sullivan's meetings here, 13 straight hours of meetings, from the prime minister to the foreign minister to the defense minister. There was complete transparency. Nobody played games. It's nice that there is trust, I said. Is there agreement? Nides: We'll see how it ends. The US is withdrawing from the Middle East, I said. You left Syria and Afghanistan and you're leaving Iraq. In what situation does that leave Israel, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan? Nides: I'm not sure that I agree with your assumption. We are a major player on the Iranian issue, which is the most important issue in the region today. Furthermore, we support the Abraham Accords with all our might. We will promote economic relations between Israel and the Emirates and bring other countries on board. After Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel asked the administration for special aid of a billion dollars to replenish Iron Dome stocks.**

- The administration approved it. Why is this being delayed in Congress, I asked? Nides: Ask (Republican) Senator Rand Paul. All you need is one senator to delay legislation. But I can promise you, the money will come. There is zero chance that you won't get. When he was in the State Department, he was aware of the complicated—his word—relationship between President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Nides: I tried to lower the tension. Unlike his predecessor, he will not try to use his position to promote his personal ideology. Nides: when it comes to Israel, I have no ideology. All I care is that Israel be a strong, democratic and Jewish state. My support for the two-state solution, a solution that President Biden also supports, support for the welfare of the Palestinian people—all these are things that are based on my belief that Israel will be stronger this way.
- If you kept track of my visits since my arrival, you'll see that I met with people from Bnei Brak to Nazareth, from Uri Buri's restaurant in Acre to the most kosher Haredi restaurant in Jerusalem. Nides: I feel that I will have succeeded if we keep all the chances open for a peace process. What I mean is, if we persuade the sides not to take unilateral steps that will close the chances. My job is to talk about the vision, about the importance of the two-state solution, to ensure that both the Israelis and the residents of the West Bank believe that the Biden administration supports the idea of the two-state solution. And most importantly, it supports action, not just words. I want to persuade the Israelis that the Biden administration supports Israel unreservedly. Nides: The Biden administration believes that it must address the issue of the Palestinian people. That is the difference between us and the Trump administration.
- Immediately after the administration was formed, Secretary of State Blinken went to Congress and received money to help UNRWA, for water plants, for scholarships for the residents of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This is direct aid: as you know, the law forbids us from helping the Palestinian Authority (PA). We can use our checkbook and our rhetoric. I didn't come here to be a visionary. I'm here to do things. In the past, I said, you were very active in promising aid to UNRWA. Israel contends that UNRWA funds Palestinians who support terrorism. Nides: I may get myself in trouble here. In my view, this is not a story about the governments, this is a story about people. The majority of Palestinians get up in the morning and don't waste time with the question of what their leadership is doing. All they want is health, an opportunity, security. The majority of Israelis are no different. They also don't get up in the morning and ask what is happening in the Knesset today. They want health services, education, for the coronavirus to go away.
- We have to act for the sake of the two peoples. Nides: Does that mean that tomorrow we will resume the peace process? No. Of course we care about the fate of the region, but we are not fostering expectations that something will happen tomorrow. Did you meet with Netanyahu, I asked? Nides: Of course. For two and a half hours. Because I'm not ideological. I also met with Mansour Abbas. Did Abbas impress you, I asked. Nides: Very much. He reminds me of many of the politicians I met in the course of my career. His public, that is what he cares about. He wants to provide his voters with what they lack. Their problems are tough.

- He spent 20 minutes of our meeting talking about crime in the Arab sector. It breaks his heart that his voters are killing each other. I like people like that. Did you visit settlements in the territories, I asked? Nides: No, I didn't. Will you, I asked? Nides: Not under any circumstances. Just as I asked both Palestinians and Israelis not to do anything to set the situation on fire, I do the same myself. I don't wish to anger people. I know that I will make mistakes, that I will say things that will cause an outcry. I am certain that I will also say something in this interview that will upset someone. But upsetting people deliberately? That's not me. You don't talk to the PA, I said. Nides: That's correct. I have no direct connection with them. George Noll is the chief of the Palestinian Affairs Unit. A lot of people are working on this—USAID, the political department, the media. The entire staff that works out of the building on Agron Street is focused on the West Bank.
- I want to empower them. I will meet with anyone who wants to meet with me, but I have no interest in heating up the situation at the moment. Perhaps in a month ask me and I'll tell you that I traveled there. At the moment, I have no plans. Nor is there any need. Officially, I said, the consulate is closed. Trump closed it. How serious is your demand to resume its activity? Nides: We want to reopen the consulate. We told that to the Israeli government. Bennett and Lapid told you no, I said. They think that having the consulate weakens Jerusalem's position as the capital of Israel. Nides: Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. The American ambassador works and lives there. We hope that if direct negotiations resume, a decision on Jerusalem will be made by the sides.
- The progressive wing of the Democratic Party has shown a highly critical attitude towards Israel, I said. Are we losing the support of the party? Are we losing the support of young Jews? Nides: Granted, some are hostile to Israel, but they're few. You mustn't overshoot. My advice for Israelis and Jews who are working for the sake of [ties with] Israel is twofold: first, don't give unwarranted attention to a handful of people; second, you mustn't bury your heads in the sand. My children's friends don't have the same love for Israel and the same interest in it that my generation does. We have to work harder to educate them. What I'm not willing to accept is statements with a whiff of anti-Semitism. Israel and the US are coping with Omicron, each in their own way, I said. What have you learned here that you didn't know there? Nides: Immediately after I got here, I met Prime Minister Bennett for dinner. I told him that my closest friend is the White House's Covid-19 response coordinator. He's what we call the Covid czar. I asked him about Omicron, and he said he wasn't sure it was a big deal.
- Bennett, and I say this to his credit, told me that Omicron is a big deal. It's so contagious that it will be a big deal. Nides: In America, Israel is seen as a beacon of knowledge. I had a meeting with the CEOs of Pfizer and Moderna. Both of them consider Israel a model, because of your healthcare services and the response rate to the vaccines is relatively high. The US does have resources that you don't, but the Israelis are more disciplined, and because the population here is smaller, you can control the pandemic more easily. The TV in the ambassador's office is set to CNN all the time, muted. When David Friedman sat in that same chair, the TV was set to Fox News, the pro-Trump network. The description illustrates the domestic rift in America: there are those who only watch Fox, and there are those who only watch the competing network.

- **Two channels; two universes. Nides showed me a note that Friedman's secretary had left for him before he left. It said: note that Fox is on the remote control too. Sometimes they're fair and balanced, like their slogan.**