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Israel and Middle East News Update

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January 17, 2022

Times of Israel

Most Israelis Oppose Plea Deal in Netanyahu Trial, Polls Find

Most Israelis oppose a plea deal in former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's [graft trial](#), according to three separate television polls. Talks on a possible plea deal for Netanyahu in his criminal trial have progressed in recent weeks, with a potential solution found to the major sticking point left between his team and state prosecutors, Hebrew media reports said. Netanyahu has been resisting a deal primarily due to Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit's demand that his actions be designated as carrying "moral turpitude" — legally barring him from public service for seven years. In the polls, opposition to such a deal appeared to be in consensus among all Israelis, regardless of their political affiliation, though likely for different reasons. Right-wing Israelis are against a plea deal because they believe Netanyahu is innocent. On the left, people say a plea deal would send the wrong message and that Netanyahu should go to jail. [Dig Deeper "Will a Potential Netanyahu Plea Deal Bring Down the Government That Ousted Him?"](#) (Times of Israel)

Arutz Sheva

Netanyahu Decides to Move Forward with Plea Bargain

In a meeting held between [Likud](#) leader Netanyahu and his family and Netanyahu's lawyers, it was decided to move towards a plea bargain, Channel 12 News reported. According to the report, sources close to Netanyahu expressed concern about the harsh public criticism being leveled at AG Mandelblit, and also over the fact that he may have an "opposition" within the State Attorney's Office that would thwart an agreement. If Mandelblit succeeds in approving the deal before the end of his term at the end of the month, Netanyahu will probably go for the deal, which his lawyers have described as "excellent". A senior official in the State Attorney's Office said that the chances of Netanyahu reaching a [plea bargain](#) with Mandelblit are "slim" at best. [Dig Deeper "Likud Struggles for Unified Response Amid Reports That Netanyahu Seeks a Plea Deal"](#) (Times of Israel)

Ynet News

Jerusalem Orders Demolition of Dome of the Rock Replica

The Jerusalem Municipality ordered the demolition of a mosque in the Palestinian neighborhood Beit Safafa which is considered to be a replica of one of the Dome of the Rock. The Al-Rahman Mosque - built before [Israel's](#) founding in 1948 - reportedly drew criticism from several Israeli NGOs due to its striking similarity to the Temple Mount's/Haram Al-Sharif Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine and UNESCO World Heritage Site sacred to both Jews and Muslims. According to court documents, the municipality approved the demolition on the basis of a floor to the building that was built without a permit. Residents of Beit Safafa and other Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem say that they sometimes have no choice but to build illegally due to the difficulties in obtaining permits. [Dig Deeper "Israel Approves \\$35 million Plan to Upgrade Western Wall Infrastructure"](#) (I24 News)

Israeli Ministers Advance Stricter Version of Citizenship Law

A ministerial committee gave its approval to a bill introduced by an opposition Knesset member that would bar Palestinians who are married to Israeli citizens from gaining residency in Israel. The bill is more restrictive than one proposed by Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, which the committee voted last week to back. The bills are designed to replace similar controversial temporary legislation that expired in July after the Knesset failed to renew it. Although support for legislation by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation normally indicates the government's support for legislation, it was thought doubtful that Shaked's bill would pass the Knesset because two parties in the government coalition, Meretz and the United Arab List, opposed it. The committee's backing for the bill was an effort to leave an opening for negotiations on Shaked's version from the ranks of the opposition. [Dig Deeper "In Nod to Opposition, Ministers Advance New Bill to Renew 'Citizenship Law'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel, US Militaries Conduct Joint Exercise Over the Negev

The Israeli army and the US military's Central Command held a joint air exercise over the Negev desert in southern Israel last week, simulating airstrikes and combat. The exercise, dubbed "Desert Falcon," is the latest to be conducted by the Israeli military and Middle East-based CENTCOM. Previously, Israel's military worked primarily with the US European Command, as Washington feared that Arab countries in the region would object to cooperation with CENTCOM if Israel did so as well. According to Israel's military, Israeli pilots from the 119th Squadron flying F-16 fighter jets and Gulfstream G550 intelligence-gathering aircraft flew alongside American pilots from the 55th Fighter Squadron flying F-16 aircraft. Including Israel in CENTCOM allows easier direct communications between Israel's military and American troops in the region. The Israeli Navy participated in a major CENTCOM maritime exercise in November led by the US 5th Fleet, alongside the [UAE](#) and Bahrain. [Dig Deeper "Democrats Seek Answers About Death of Elderly Palestinian-American" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Algeria Prepares for War with Morocco, Panics Due to Israel

Algeria is in a state of acute anxiety and paranoia over the growing military cooperation between Israel and the Moroccan military. "The tension rises every day a little more between Algeria and Morocco, to the point that we are now talking about war between the two Maghreb countries," according to a report in the Paris-based newspaper L'Opinion. What is upsetting the Algerian regime "is Israel's support for Morocco," the source said. According to a L'Opinion source, "the weapons that worry Algerians the most are those related to electronic warfare and drones." "For now, the Americans are telling the Israelis not to supply weapon systems that could cause an immediate military imbalance in favor of Morocco," a source told the paper. In November, Defense Minister Benny Gantz signed the first-ever defense and security memorandum of understanding with his Moroccan counterpart. [Dig Deeper "Palestinians Play Down Significance of Algeria 'Reconciliation' Talks" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Associated Press

Jordanian Officer Dead After Syria Border Clash

Jordan's military said that an army officer was killed in a shootout with smugglers on the country's northern border with Syria. A Jordanian military website said Capt. Muhammad Yassin Musa al-Khudayrat was killed, and three others were injured when a group of smugglers opened fire on border guards. It said the attackers fled into neighboring Syria and "large quantities of narcotics were seized and transferred to the competent authorities." The Jordanian military said that it would "deal with all force and firmness with any infiltration or smuggling attempt to protect the borders and prevent those who try to tamper with Jordan's national security." Jordan shares a long porous border with its northern neighbor, and is home to more than [650,000 Syrian refugees](#) who fled the civil war that has raged for more than a decade. In September, Syrian and Jordanian officials discussed border security after Syrian government forces captured rebel-held areas along the Jordanian frontier. In October, Jordan's King Abdullah II spoke with Syrian President Bashar Assad for the first time in a decade after the two countries reopened a key border crossing. [Dig Deeper "Killing of Jordanian Soldier Puts Amman, Damascus in a Bind" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Reuters

Hezbollah Ends Boycott of Lebanon's Cabinet Amid Crisis

Powerful Lebanese groups Hezbollah and Amal said they would end a boycott of cabinet sessions, opening the way for ministers to meet after a three-month gap that has seen the [economic crisis](#) deepen and currency collapse further. The groups, which back several ministers in a government made up of members from across the political and sectarian spectrum, said the decision was driven by a desire to approve the 2022 [budget](#) and to discuss an economic recovery. The groups had been refusing to attend cabinet sessions in a dispute over the handling of an investigation into the huge Beirut port blast in 2020. The failure to hold cabinet meetings has delayed talks on a recovery plan with the International Monetary Fund, seen as vital to unlocking international support to lift the country out of a crisis that has driven swathes of the nation into poverty. Hezbollah, an Iran-backed group that has a well-armed militia, and Amal, another Muslim Shi'ite group, have sought the removal of a judge who has been overseeing the blast probe. [Dig Deeper "US Denies Brokering Deal for Israel to Indirectly Pump Gas to Lebanon" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Too Little, Too Late

By Nahum Barnea

- Plea bargain agreements are a necessary evil. They save the state money, ease the workload on the courts and shorten the defendants' suffering. In Netanyahu's case, there is another, weighty argument in favor of a plea bargain agreement: a plea bargain agreement will suspend the violent campaign that the Bibi-ists have been mounting against law enforcement. Avichai Mandelblit will be able to take a leisurely stroll to services at his synagogue; Liat Ben Ari will be able to dispense with her bodyguards. Too little and too late. Those are the two fundamental flaws inherent in the deal that is currently on the table. But there has also been additional, incidental damage that was entirely unnecessary: the damage that Aharon Barak has done to the Supreme Court and his own legacy. Amit Hadad and Boaz Ben Zur, Netanyahu's two lawyers, began to look into the option of a plea bargain agreement a few months ago.
- They didn't tell their client that he was guilty; that isn't what lawyers say. They told him that to place his fate in the hands of the judges would be a gamble. You can't ever know how that is going to turn out. You need to limit your exposure to risk. When the late Jacob Weinroth made a similar argument to Netanyahu, he refused to listen. In the meantime, the situation has changed. He tried four times to form a coalition that might extricate him from his trial and failed. The polls don't bode well for him either. He finds the option of spending another few years in the opposition, playing the role of the glue that holds the Bennett-Lapid coalition together, to be anything but enchanting. He listened. The idea of using Aharon Barak as an envoy for a plea bargain agreement was Netanyahu's. He knows Barak very well—his strengths and his weaknesses.
- Netanyahu went to see him at his home in Tel Aviv, reminisced with him about their former cooperation, spoke about how he twice blocked legislation that Barak was opposed to, and gave him the feeling that everything was in his hands. He could save the justice system from destruction and the country from disaster. "We need to save the country," is what Barak said to Mandelblit. Barak continued to press Mandelblit this week, after his involvement came to light. One well-informed source said that no negotiations have been held in the time since Ben Caspit's report last Wednesday. Mandelblit is facing opposition within the establishment that he needs to deal with.
- The only one who reached out and advocated [on behalf of a plea bargain agreement] was Barak. Why is this deal too late? Because the campaign that Netanyahu mounted against the police and the State Attorney's Office created a reality that denies both sides a moral basis for signing a deal. The Israelis are divided into two camps on this issue, and it would be best, as President Rivlin once said, for the court to rule on disputes of this kind, and not to resolve them by means of a deal that gets sewn up behind closed doors. The campaign that Netanyahu mounted was without precedent. His decision to take the entire country hostage and to force it from one election to the next, without a state budget, was unprecedented.

- The accusations he made against the law enforcement system were without precedent either: political persecution, trumped up charges, a political coup. Other defendants in the past, including public officials, also attacked the State Attorney's Office. That was their prerogative, but none of them accused the entire establishment of hatching a political conspiracy, and they certainly didn't do this from the platform afforded to Netanyahu as prime minister, and definitely not in the foyer of the courthouse itself, while surrounded by his cabinet ministers. Mandelblit said that that incident in the Jerusalem District Court would be recorded in infamy forever. It won't be recorded in infamy forever if it gets wrapped in a lenient plea bargain agreement. Doing that may be a reasonable decision from a legal standpoint; but from a public and moral standpoint, Netanyahu has lost any right to expect leniency.
- Why is it too little? There are some people who are eager to see Netanyahu go to prison. I am not one of them. But the offenses that he needs to admit to committing should prevent him from returning to politics. There are a few fundamental components that are lacking in the deal that is currently being formulated. It lacks a demand that he repay the money and benefits that he and his wife received in the context of Case 1,000. Fining him several hundreds of thousands of shekels would send the right message. It lacks an unequivocal commitment by Netanyahu to stay out of the public arena for the coming seven years, his years of moral turpitude. It lacks the texts that Netanyahu will have to say in court. The latter two components are critical. Essentially, the only punishment Netanyahu will receive [in the proposed plea bargain agreement] will be the moral turpitude clause. He has ways of dodging that.
- And his allocution: Netanyahu will do everything in his power to refrain from admitting to the crimes he will be convicted of. He will signal to his supporters: I'm innocent. I paid lip service to the elites as a sacrifice on behalf of the homeland. That myth will continue to foment, to poison and to threaten. In what sense has Barak caused damage? His involvement did nothing to change the terms of the deal. Those terms had always been on the table. He was enlisted to serve two purposes: to suppress opposition within the State Attorney's Office and, more importantly, to soften public opinion. He hasn't saved the country, but he has tremendously damaged his own legacy.
- If this deal gets signed, the ball will then be in the president's court. Two former prime ministers, Ehud Olmert and Binyamin Netanyahu, will ask him to expunge their criminal records and, by so doing, to elide the moral turpitude clause. Olmert came out of prison five years ago. He has another two years to go. He probably doesn't have any political aspirations at present. But Netanyahu does. Netanyahu's lawyers may pitch the idea of a package deal to expunge both their criminal records. Will Herzog be able to say no? I'm not so sure.

Up a Tree

By Afif Abu Much

- Residents of the Negev experienced a stormy week, Arabs and Jews both. It began ostensibly with JNF tree-planting (as the Hebrew media was careful to call it) and continued with a wave of protests by the Bedouin residents and included many incidents of violence and harsh pictures of police trying to dispel violent demonstrations, liable (or hopefully, depending on one's point of view) to end with a coalition crisis that would cause the government to unravel. First of all, the compromise that was brokered by Welfare Minister Meir Cohen, which is meant to include a large-scale government plan to legalize the situation [of the unrecognized villages] in the Negev, should be welcomed. But that said, let's call this for what it is: this was not really tree planting or forestation work, this was an attempt by all sorts of officials in one authority or another to establish facts on the ground, part of the never-ending battle between the state and Bedouin citizens over control of the land while also capitalizing on an opportunity to poke them in the eye in the ongoing attempt to show them who's boss, even when we're talking about some Arab guy's backyard.
- After all, it makes no sense, as some tried to shout, that the entire existence and future of the State of Israel depends on planting a tree in the desert in the just a few yards from the homes of the al-Atrash tribe, when there are millions of available dunams in the Negev where trees can be planted with no problem at all. Above all else, the attempts by the opposition to set the ground on fire no matter the price stood out. "You sold the Negev to the Bedouins," MK Yoav Kisch of the Likud wrote on Twitter. "Bennett and Elkin capitulated to the Islamic Movement," announced MK Miki Zohar, and the chairman of the Religious Zionist Party, Bezalel Smotrich described the compromise that was reached as "capitulation to the Hamas branch in Israel." Opposition Chairman Binyamin Netanyahu went further, when he called the talks to end the tree planting as "the continuation of the liquidation sale of the Negev to the Islamic Movement," even though his last government decided in December 2020 to stop the planting after a request by the economy and industry minister at the time, Amir Peretz, in his position as director of the Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin in the Negev.
- This is just further proof that the outcries of the opposition are no more than one big display of hypocrisy, reflecting how the word "right" has changed in our time—with Netanyahu's mediation and encouragement—into a synonym for hating Arabs and persecuting Arab citizens at every opportunity. Whereas in the past the political right-wing in Israel was identified with the slogan "the greater Land of Israel," the free market and economic liberalism and a tendency to conservatism on social-religious issues, under Netanyahu, it became the representative of the ideology of persecuting the Arab citizens. It all starts and ends with the inability of many of the Bibi-ist right-wing specifically, and Jewish society in general, to accept the fact that there are Arab citizens who wish to be a part of the political game and to take part in molding the face of the government.

- **Something that is fundamental and taken for granted in every democratic country in the world has become a “liquidation sale,” “the end of Judaism,” “the end of the State of Israel,” and all sorts of slogans whose one and only goal is to instill fear among the Jewish public, most of whom were raised and who live completely disconnected from their Arab neighbors. Is that the right wing that you want? A right wing whose entire essence and purpose is to stick a finger in the Arab public’s eye?**