



Much Ado in Israeli Politics

By Simon Novak

The Israeli media has been full of political intrigue and allegations surrounding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in recent days.

In September it was reported by Israel's Channel 2 that there was an inquiry into claims that Netanyahu had solicited a bribe, something which he vehemently denies.

According to an article in Israel's oldest newspaper Haaretz this week, the country's High Court has instructed the attorney general, the heads of the State Prosecution and Israel Police to explain within 30 days why they have not opened an investigation into the suspicions against the PM.

There have also been other claims that one of Netanyahu's advisers was funded by a US non-profit organisation.

According to Israeli media, the Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit blocked the investigation, despite senior police officers believing that fraud was involved.

Reports claim that 20 witnesses have already testified in preliminary inquiries over corruption and fraud, although unless solid evidence is produced, there will be no official police investigation and the inquiry will be stopped.

Separately it was also reported by AFP last week that Israeli police plan to question US billionaire and World Jewish Congress president Ronald Lauder as part of an inquiry into gifts for Netanyahu.

According to the French news agency, Lauder "refused to be questioned after arriving in the country for the funeral of ex-president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shimon Peres, Channel 2 television reported."

The report stated that an agreement had been reached so that investigators will either travel to New York in the next few weeks or Lauder would return to Israel.

"I am coming from a commemoration for the Babi Yar massacre (the execution of more than 34,000 Jews by the Nazis in Ukraine), and I arrive for the funeral of a good friend ... and you arrest me?" he said, according to Channel 2.

AFP said that an Israeli police spokeswoman declined to comment on the reports.

The agency said that authorities "have been investigating spending and gifts related to Netanyahu, though Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit has stressed that a formal investigation has not been opened.

"Israeli newspaper Haaretz claimed that police want to question Lauder over gifts he allegedly gave Netanyahu and alleged spending on trips for him.



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“Lauder, whose family founded the Estee Lauder cosmetics giant, has long been seen as an ally of Netanyahu, who in the late 1990s put him in charge of negotiating with then Syrian president Hafez al-Assad.

“Their relationship however is said to have taken a downturn after Israel's Channel 10 carried a report on the financing of Netanyahu's travel in 2011. Lauder was part owner of the channel at the time.

“Netanyahu and his aides have repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.” The AFP story was also followed up by the UK's influential newspaper the Daily Mail.