



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 18, 2017

New York Times

Over 1,000 Pal' Prisoners in Israel Stage Hunger Strike

More than 1,000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons joined in a hunger strike on Monday, demanding better conditions in an unusually large protest led by Marwan Barghouti, the most prominent prisoner and a figure often seen as a future Palestinian leader. Later Monday, there were unconfirmed reports by both Israeli and Palestinian news outlets that Mr. Barghouti had been moved from his usual prison, Hadarim, near Haifa, and placed in solitary confinement at another prison. The reports said his offenses were the strike and the act of smuggling out of prison an essay that he wrote, which was published as an Op-Ed article on Sunday in The New York Times. The essay asserted that "Israel has established a dual legal regime, a form of judicial apartheid, that provides virtual impunity for Israelis who commit crimes against Palestinians, while criminalizing Palestinian presence and resistance."

See also, ["Why We Are on Hunger Strike in Israel's Prisons" \(New York Times\)](#)

See also, ["Yair Lapid: What the NY Times didn't say about Barghouti" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

CNN

Gaza Crippled by Elec' Crisis as P. Plant Runs out of Fuel

Gaza's only power plant has run out of fuel, leaving 2 million residents of the coastal enclave with only four hours of electricity a day in what the UN cautions could be the tipping point to making Gaza "unlivable." The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza blame each other for the energy shortage. The power generating authority in Gaza says it cannot afford to buy more fuel for the plant -- mostly because of taxes imposed by the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority claims that the Hamas officials in Gaza are simply incapable of running the plant efficiently. In January, as wide-scale protests erupted in Gaza sparked by the lack of electricity, Qatar and Turkey agreed to provide a 3-month supply of fuel for the power plant, enough for 6-12 hours of electricity a day. See also, ["UN OFFICIAL: GAZA COULD SOON BE UNLIVABLE" \(Jerusalem post\)](#)

Washington Post

Trump Calls Erdogan to Congratulate him on Referendum

President Trump called to congratulate Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday after a referendum greatly expanding his powers, despite a more circumspect State Department response to Sunday's vote, which international election observers declared unfair. According to accounts by both Trump and Erdogan, the two also discussed the U.S. missile strike on a Syrian air base in response to the April 4 chemical weapons attack on civilians in Idlib province. Trump thanked Erdogan for Turkey's support of the retaliatory action. The leaders agreed that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should be held accountable for the chemical attack that killed at least 70 people, and they talked about the ongoing campaign to counter the Islamic State. Trump's comments differed in tone from those of the State Department, which urged Turkey to respect the basic rights of its citizens and noted the election irregularities witnessed by monitors with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. See also, ["Know Nothing Will Rob Erdogan of His Win" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Times of Israel

Abbas: World Must Intervene on Hunger-Striking Prisoners

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Monday called on the international community to “intervene quickly to save the lives” of the hundreds of Palestinian prisoners who earlier in the day launched a mass hunger strike to protest their conditions of imprisonment. At a rally marking the annual Palestinian “Prisoner’s Day” in the West Bank, Abbas sent his support to the hunger-strikers and said Israel was being “stubborn” for refusing to “accept the just humanitarian demands of the prisoners.” According to the Ynet news website, Abbas made no mention of the strike’s initiator and leader Marwan Barghouti. [See also, Hundreds of Palestinians in Israeli jails begin hunger strike” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Azerbaijan Envoy: We Seek Pan-Arab Summit with Israel

A US-led summit gathering Israel’s prime minister and the Palestinian Authority president on one stage with Levant and Gulf leaders would greatly benefit the region, and likely advance a stalled peace process, Azerbaijan’s envoy said in an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*. Israeli officials told the Post last month that the Trump administration is exploring the feasibility of such a summit, which would bring Israel and Sunni leaders from Saudi Arabia and neighboring nations together for the first time. Egypt and Jordan are reportedly on board with the initiative, as long as Israel informally freezes settlement activity outside of established blocs, the officials said. Elin Suleymanov, acknowledged Baku’s limited role in the storied Middle East peace process.

Ha’aretz

IL & Germany Agree to Kill Submarine Deal if Graft Found

Israel and Germany agreed a few weeks ago to call off the proposed purchase of submarines from a German company in the event that an Israeli police investigation substantiates allegations of graft related to the deal. Officials from both countries say the recent agreement was added as a new clause to the draft memorandum of understanding on the purchase at the insistence of the German government. The purchase memorandum is expected to be signed within a few weeks. On October 31, Netanyahu announced in the Knesset that Israel was close to signing a memorandum of understanding with Germany to buy three new submarines. Two weeks later, journalist Raviv Drucker revealed on Channel 10 that David Shimron, Netanyahu’s personal lawyer, was also the attorney of an Israeli representative of ThyssenKrupp, the German company supplying Israel with submarines.

AP

25 Years After Accords: 'Oslo' Coming to the Big Screen

Prolific "La La Land" producer Marc Platt is to work on a film about the Oslo peace accords, 25 years after the accords were originally signed. According to a report by The Hollywood Reporter, the new movie will be an adaptation of the political Broadway play "Oslo," that the New York Times called “an against-the-odds story of international peacemaking, as expansive and ambitious as any in recent Broadway history.” Oslo is a political thriller that tells the story of two Norwegian diplomats, who coordinated the secret negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Ex Shin-Bet Chief Yoram Cohen Reflects the Soul of Religious Zionism

By Ben Caspit, Columnist at Ma'ariv

- Beyond the examples presented herein, [Klein's article](#) was given an impressive, triumphant response over the holiday from the newspaper *Makor Rishon*. The interview that former GSS director Yoram Cohen gave to Yishai Hollander is a fascinating document with far-reaching significance, a must-read. After all, Cohen is a classic creation of religious Zionism: a downtrodden family of immigrants from Afghanistan, the “Orthodox Israel Scouts,” a yeshiva high school, a knitted kippa. His five children are being educated in religious Zionist schools. If they turn out like their father, we're in good shape.
- Some of us journalists were afraid of him being appointed director of the GSS, as if an Iranian mole had been planted in the heart of the Israeli security establishment. Well, Yoram Cohen is retiring from a balanced, sane, pragmatic and exemplarily formulated year. If I had to place him on the political spectrum, he would be in the center. Sometimes center-left, sometimes center-right. I cannot help but bring a few examples:
- The picture that hung in his bureau, and now in his home, shows nine men and three women at the Western Wall at the start of the last century. Cohen said that there was no separation between men and women at the Western Wall at the time. He said that the Palestinian security services contributed to the safety of the residents of Israel and contributed to thwarting terror attacks. He thinks that every Israeli should long for a peace arrangement with the Palestinians. He personally is prepared to pay a high price for such an arrangement. On the other hand, he is sober-minded and aware that this is currently unfeasible. “It is highly desirable for Israel to reach a peace arrangement with the Palestinians,” he said. “It is a supreme interest for the current generation of Israelis and for those yet to come. There is a vast Palestinian population that is not going anywhere, and from a political standpoint, Israel already recognized, on one level or another, the fact that they are one people, and even declared that the two entities called Gaza and the Judea and Samaria region are in fact one entity.”
- Cohen criticized the film *The Gatekeepers*, in which several of his predecessors were interviewed. The large gaps vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the fact that Israel cannot transfer security powers to them at present precludes the possibility of reaching an arrangement but he said, “dialogue and negotiations are important [in order] to try to reach an arrangement, even a gradual one.”
- The interviewer, Hollander, asked him what he thought about the construction freeze in the territories. Pay attention to the stunning reply: “It is strategically, politically, and socially wrong to reach a situation wherein irreversible facts on the ground are created. If we create a situation where the regional map looks like the skin of a giraffe, with lots of little spots of intertwined Jewish and Palestinians settlements, it doesn't matter who the prime minister in 20 or 30 years will be and what decision on the peace process the Knesset wants to make, it will be impossible to see it through. It's liable to be a tragedy for both sides, because living for eternity in a

situation where millions of people live among us, and we among them, with incessant security tension, combined with international diplomatic pressure with potential for boycotts and various sanctions is unhealthy and hopeless.”

- But Hollander did not let up: If an arrangement is not possible in the next century, is it reasonable for Zeev (Zambish) Hever not to build settlements all that time?
- “Strategic and crucial decisions regarding the future of Judea and Samaria need to be made,” said Cohen. “Since we have had trouble coming to an agreement ourselves, we ought to at least define the bounds of consensus, whether we call it blocs or something else. Building everywhere without a plan just because we can, and afterwards leaving as part of an agreement, is liable to cost us blood, lots of money, heartache, social wounds and trauma. For that reason, we had better think ahead about which places we won’t withdraw from in any situation, and delineate where we are expanding and building. We should not remove anything in the other places for now, but we should not create an irreversible situation.”
- Cohen did not say it, and Hollander did not ask, but one can also learn from these statements the GSS director’s opinion on the Amona issue. I think it is very clear. Here is something else astonishing: “The statements made by rabbis on the issue of *din rodef* [the law of the “persecutor,” according to which one who is persecuting a Jew with murderous intent may be killed extrajudicially—INT] influenced Yigal Amir,” the GSS director said, “We should have punished these rabbis. I am convinced that Yigal Amir was influenced by certain rabbis who pronounced publicly that *din rodef* applied to the prime minister, Rabin. I would question them, charge them with incitement and cut off all their governmental funding and salaries. Rabbis who call for such things are inciters. Today too, there are rabbis who make use of all kinds of events from the Bible... we shouldn’t reach the point of Duma, but rather should take action beforehand so that such things do not happen.”
- Finally, according to Hollander, Cohen hinted gently that he does not share Netanyahu’s alarmism on security affairs in general, and with regard to Iran in particular. He said that this undermined national fortitude and caused unnecessary fears among the public. “Our enemies should be afraid of us, and not us of them. Their situation is more difficult than ours in every respect, including the Iranians, and I don’t want to expand on that.”
- Cohen voiced support for repealing the populist-fascist law (my definition, not his) also known as the “cooling law.” I hope that Avi Gabbai’s petition to the High Court of Justice on the matter will be accepted. Because if this happens, and Yoram Cohen goes into politics, I may vote for the party that he joins. One way or another, Yoram Cohen reflects the soul of religious Zionism much more than the hilltop lunatics or even people like Bezalel Smotrich. And after all that, Yossi Klein should be able and entitled to continue to express his opinion, even if it is annoying and foolish as it was expressed this week.

With Palestinian Prisoner Strike, Barghouti Challenges Abbas' Leadership

By Amos Harel, military commentator at Ha'aretz

- The hunger strike that nearly 1,200 Palestinian security prisoners in Israel began on Monday is expected to ratchet up the tensions between Israel and the Palestinians in the coming days. If complications occur and the strike lasts for an extended time, it is liable to take over the security and diplomatic agenda at a time when U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is declaring its intention to restart the peace process.
- However, like another crisis that escalated in recent days over the supply of electricity to the Gaza Strip, it appears that the background to the strike has to do with intra-Palestinian power struggles as much as it has to do with the struggle against Israel.
- The hunger strike is basically the initiative of a single person, Marwan Barghouti, the highest-ranking Fatah prisoner in Israel. The media attention from a prolonged strike will serve him in his moves vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority leadership, which is officially supporting the strike but in actuality is concerned about any outcome that could advance the standing of the imprisoned leader, who is not especially liked by President Mahmoud Abbas and his people. Barghouti already took credit for an initial success on Monday with an Op-Ed in The New York Times. (For some reason, the editors of the newspaper omitted from the publication the reason Barghouti is in prison: He was arrested and tried in 2002 for dispatching terrorists to carry out attacks at the height of the second intifada in which five Israeli civilians were killed. The piece has since been amended with an editor's note amid a wave of heavy criticism.)
- Abbas is slated to visit the White House at the beginning of next month. At the end of May, the month of Ramadan will begin. These are two target dates. If the strike continues until then, it could mean a serious crisis. The longer the strike lasts, the more likely it is that there will be complications: hospitalization of hunger strikers, dilemmas concerning force-feeding and the danger of prisoners dying, which could inflame the mood in the Palestinian territories.
- Barghouti has put together various prisoner demands – cancellation of administrative detentions, more family visitation hours, renewal of academic studies, more television channels – as a broad common denominator around which most of the prisoners and most of the Palestinian organizations can unite around. Hamas, whose top people are acting in close coordination with Barghouti, has announced its partial support. About one third of Fatah prisoners have joined the strike. On Monday, thousands of Palestinians in the West Bank participated in solidarity rallies marking Palestinian Prisoners Day. In both these cases, the numbers are quite high, but not yet extraordinarily so.
- On the Israeli side, there is Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan's declared intention not to conduct any negotiations with the prisoners and not to accede to any demand, which has the support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman. In

the past, such determination melted away as the strikes grew longer and things became complicated. However, it is possible that in the current political reality, Erdan does not have much real wiggle room and will have to demonstrate toughness. In any case, this is a crisis that will necessitate close management by top government officials and the defense establishment for fear of repercussions outside the prison walls.

- Nevertheless, it appears that Barghouti and other strike organizers will face two obstacles in their attempt to leverage the move. The first has to do with the level of international attention on the strike. With hundreds of people being slaughtered in horrific acts of terror in Syria's Aleppo and Idlib, it will be hard for the Palestinian prisoners to enlist the Arab world's empathy and even its attention for their struggle. Without belittling the difficulties the prisoners face, it cannot be ignored that there have been cases in recent years of youngsters from Gaza crossing into Israel with improvised weapons because they believe that conditions in Israeli prison are preferable to life in the Strip.

Abbas' threats

- Meanwhile, the electricity crisis in Gaza is back on. The Hamas government has once again limited the electricity supply, which is now available for only about six hours a day. The backdrop is an economic struggle with the Palestinian Authority over the question of who will pay the excise on the diesel fuel brought in from Israel to the Gaza power station, which the electricity supply depends on. Until the beginning of April the excise was funded by Qatari aid, but now the Palestinian Authority has announced that it refuses to continue funding the payment.
- This decision follows another move by Abbas: a 30 percent pay cut for PA employees who live in the Strip. The Palestinian leader has said recently that he is fed up with the 10 years of economic aid he has been giving the Hamas government in Gaza without getting anything in return. The PA is also threatening that if Hamas does not yield authority to it in the Gaza Strip, including responsibility for the border crossing points and security activity, it will entirely cease its monetary transfers to the enclave. It is doubtful that these threats will be carried out in full, but they do reflect an attempt by Abbas to take a more aggressive line towards Hamas and its new leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar.
- As in the Barghouti matter, this power struggle is far from ending. However, in this case too, both Palestinian sides are directing much of the blame at the Israeli occupation. The Gaza Strip is still managing to survive and function, even with the impossibility of electricity working only one quarter of the time. However, prolonging the crisis could once again contribute to tensions with Israel as well, even in a period when Hamas, for its own reasons, looks as though it is making a considerable effort to rein in the Salafist organizations' rocket fire at Israeli communities on Gaza's borders.