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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 12, 2017

Associated Press

Israel PM Netanyahu visits Argentina Seeking to Bolster Ties

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in Argentina on Monday for a two-day visit seeking to strengthen ties with the country that has Latin America's largest Jewish community. Netanyahu's arrival marked the first visit by an Israeli leader since the creation of Israel in 1948. He is also scheduled to visit Colombia and Mexico before going to New York, where he will address the U.N. General Assembly on Sept. 26. Netanyahu will meet with President Mauricio Macri on Tuesday and is also expected to press for answers on two unsolved terror attacks in Argentina.

See also, [*"Netanyahu warns against Iranian threat during Argentina visit" \(Ynet\)*](#)

Ha'aretz

Africa-Israel Summit Is Canceled

Togo's President Faure Gnassingbé, who has been facing mass demonstrations against his regime recently, has informed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he has canceled the Africa-Israel Summit slated for next month. The gathering was due to take place from October 23-27 in the capital of Lomé. Gnassingbé's decision comes in the midst of a political crisis in Togo. However, South Africa and some Arab countries had also applied pressure to call off the summit, to which dozens of countries had been invited.

See also, [*"Landmark Israel-Africa summit canceled following boycott threats" \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

Defense News

Iron Dome Poised for First US-Based Intercept Test

Israel is readying its Iron Dome for its first intercept test in the United States as part of the U.S. Army's demonstration aimed at selecting an interim solution for a medium- and short-range air defense system. The U.S. Army kicked off its SHORAD demonstration on Sept. 4 at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, which allows the industry with available capabilities to test solutions that could be ready for fielding in the near term, the service has told Defense News. The demonstration will close out on Sept. 16.

Ma'ariv

Smotrich Presents "Plan for Decisive Action"

The central committee of the National Union, a national-Haredi party led by Minister Uri Ariel that ran as part of the Jewish Home in the last election, is due to meet today in Jerusalem. The party will launch a new peace plan that was initiated by MK Bezalel Smotrich and centers on encouraging the Arabs of Judea and Samaria and Arab Israelis to emigrate in exchange for financial compensation, which will "extirpate hopes for a Palestinian state," as he put it. Officials from the Joint List said it was a "call for [forcible population] transfer and genocide."

See also, ["Israeli Right-wing Party Wants to Pay Palestinians to Leave Israel" \(Haaretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Did the Saudi Crown Prince Make a Covert Visit to Israel?

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman made a discreet visit to Israel despite the fact that the Jewish state and Saudi Arabia do not have official diplomatic ties, Israeli and Arab media speculated earlier in the week. Israel Radio's Arabic-language broadcast reported that the senior figure was a "Saudi prince" who met with senior Israelis to discuss regional peace. According to the report, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry refused to comment on the news.

Ha'aretz

After Egypt Meetings, Hamas Says Open to Reconciliation

Ismail Haniyeh, the head of the Hamas political bureau in Gaza, said after meetings with senior Egyptian officials that the organization is willing to begin reconciliation talks to advance the establishment of a Palestinian unity government with Fatah in the West Bank. Haniyeh and a delegation of Hamas senior leadership left the Gaza Strip on Saturday for meetings in Cairo with Egyptian intelligence officials, including head of Egyptian intelligence general Khaled Fawzy. This was the first time since being appointed to his position in May that Haniyeh has left the Hamas-controlled territory.

See also, ["Hamas says ready to reconcile with Fatah with no conditions" \(Associated Press\)](#)

JTA

Trump Admin Okay with Israel Keeping Aid Boost

The Trump administration will not stand in the way of defense assistance funding to Israel added by the US Congress and won't hold Israel to its pledge to ensure such funds are returned. "The administration is committed to ensuring Israel receive the assistance that has been appropriated by Congress," R.C. Hammond, a State Department spokesman, told Fox News on Monday. Hammond was responding to reports in conservative media that the State Department was considering demanding that Israel return the money.

Ha'aretz

Hezbollah Sends Reassuring Messages to Israel

Hezbollah has sent reassuring messages to Israel in wake of the bombing of the Syrian weapons plant attributed to Israel and the IDF's large military exercise up north. The number two man in the organization, deputy secretary general Sheikh Naim Qassem, said in a television interview broadcast on Sunday that the attack on the Syrian facility was not a reason for war against Israel and there were other ways to respond to the attack.

See also, ["Hezbollah raises alert level along border with Israel" \(Ynet\)](#)

Will Abbas Confront Trump?

By Shlomi Eldar

- The UN General Assembly will convene on Sept. 19, and the Palestinians have less than two weeks to formulate the tone of President Mahmoud Abbas' speech, to be delivered Sept. 20. The speech has been piquing interest, not only because it might be the last UN speech of the Palestinian leader, who will be 83 years old next year, but also because of the possibility that he will declare a divorce from US President Donald Trump's administration despite the heavy price such a move appears to entail.
- The Palestinians are disappointed in Trump, his special envoy Jason Greenblatt and senior White House adviser Jared Kushner. At times during the last few months, it seemed to the Palestinians that the Americans might surprise them and pressure Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu into a diplomatic process, but no longer. "After we talked in circles together, we've realized that [good] won't come from them," a senior Palestinian official told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "Now the moment of truth has arrived."
- According to the source, the Palestinians discovered from a Sept. 6 Haaretz report that Trump, indeed, intends to meet with Abbas in New York. It remains unclear whether Trump is planning on a one-on-one or a three-way meeting that includes Netanyahu. In any case, Abbas has already made his decision, and he plans an assertive speech, which, according to the source, will reveal the "real face of Netanyahu."
- "Netanyahu is a peace rejectionist, so there's no way of advancing the diplomatic process toward a permanent arrangement with the Israelis." This is what, according to the source, Abbas intends to say to the assembled representatives, even though it is clear to him and senior Palestinian officials that such a dramatic statement would bring an end to the honeymoon period with the Trump administration.
- The Palestinians never actually had a real honeymoon with Trump, although after his inauguration the Palestinians succeeded in blocking several measures planned by the new president that they saw as anti-Palestinian. This, in addition to the (ultimately incorrect) assessment that Trump was determined to force Netanyahu to make diplomatic advances, created a false impression of friendly relations among the various sides. Diplomatic efforts and brainstorming by the Palestinians have yielded nothing. Trump and his emissaries never said explicitly that a diplomatic arrangement with Israel would be based on the principle of two states for two peoples, and for several months, Trump's emissaries have come to Ramallah for talks that cannot even be described as feelers, according to the Palestinian source.
- "Mahmoud Abbas has little time left [for governing]," the Palestinian source said. "We now have to decide what's next." According to him, the Palestinian president's speech will call on member states to rally behind a diplomatic campaign that he plans to renew with full force to establish a

Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, because, he said, “We will never achieve that in negotiations with Netanyahu.”

- **A hint of this emerging Palestinian line can be seen in the conduct of Riyad Mansour, Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations, when the Palestinian Rights Committee adopted its annual report in advance of presenting it to the General Assembly. Mansour is pushing the Security Council and General Assembly to take a constructive role in fulfilling the various UN decisions on the Palestinian-Israeli front, especially regarding the illegality of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories conquered since 1967, as the 50th anniversary of the Six-Day War approaches, in October.**
- **Abbas — who promised the Americans that he would halt all moves to appeal to UN institutions — also plans to announce that he is considering renewing applications for Palestine to be accepted as a member of more than 20 international organizations, including an application to the International Court of Justice at the Hague. According to the Palestinian source, a fierce debate is bound to take place among the Palestinians until the last moment concerning whether Abbas should use the word “considering” or announce definitively that he has made the decision. Hussam Zumlut, the Palestinian ambassador in Washington, and Mansour are advocating maintaining an escape hatch and not angering the Americans too much.**
- **It is clear to the Palestinians that if Abbas takes a hard-line stance at the United Nations, it will lead to an open conflict with Trump that could close the door on the American channel, thus relinquishing US economic assistance (which even now is uncertain, given debate around the Taylor Force Act to limit support to the Palestinian Authority because of its aid to the families of Palestinians who have killed Israelis). Abbas wants, in one way or another, to recruit European nations to his struggle. Having viewed Trump’s conduct from the sidelines, they understand that they must take the diplomatic initiative.**
- **After Abbas halted security coordination with Israel following violence on the Temple Mount in July, Israel canceled civilian cooperation with the Palestinians. Security coordination was restarted without an official announcement, although senior officers from both sides have not met at this stage. The cancellation of civilian cooperation is also only for show. Thus, the Israeli response will be interesting when Abbas stands at the podium at the UN General Assembly gathering and declares what Israel too believes he will say: “Enough. We’re sick of it. My diplomatic offensive starts now.”**

Distress of Gaza's Civilians Forces Hamas to Evolve

By Amos Harel

- Hamas' latest moves in the Gaza Strip, coupled with its rapprochement with Egypt, may indicate that it's trying to ensure that the calm in Gaza continues. A delegation of senior Hamas officials is in Cairo this week for talks, mainly about easing Egypt's blockade of Gaza. And, in a very unusual move, Hamas has actually agreed to pay for some of the fuel Gaza's power plant needs.
- Gaza's power crisis worsened this spring, when the Palestinian Authority stopped financing some of Gaza's electricity needs as a punitive measure against Hamas. This week, Hamas agreed for the first time to pick up part of the tab, with the goal of increasing Gaza's average daily power supply to about six hours. But so far, the average hasn't risen as expected, because the power lines from Egypt still aren't at full capacity.
- Altogether, Israel believes Hamas will spend about 90 million shekels (\$26 million) over the next few months to increase the power supply. Until now, Hamas had refused to pay for any of Gaza's power, due to its own financial constraints and its desire to continue shifting this responsibility to the PA and international aid.
- Last month, Haaretz reported that Hamas was talking with Cairo about permanently reopening the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. That would make it significantly easier to enter or exit Gaza, which today is very difficult. But so far, this hasn't happened.
- According to Arab media reports, the Hamas delegates in Cairo include the organization's new leader, Ismail Haniyeh; its leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar; senior Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouk; and Marwan Issa, the head of Hamas' military wing.
- Both the talks with Egypt and its decision to pay for electricity reflect a shift in Hamas' policy. Sinwar, who rose to power through Hamas' military wing and spent more than 20 years in Israeli jails, evidently wants to improve life for Gaza residents, ease security tensions and stabilize the situation a bit.
- Shin Bet security service head Nadav Argaman told the cabinet on Sunday that Hamas is preparing for a future military conflict with Israel and described the situation in Gaza as "a deceptive calm." He said the organization is in strategic distress, since it's finding it difficult either to produce diplomatic achievements or to supply effective solutions to the problems of Gaza's civilian population. He also said that senior military wing officials have been operating in Lebanon recently.
- The Hamas operatives, led by Saleh Arouri, moved to Lebanon a few months ago. This is their third base in the last two years. First they were in Turkey, but they were expelled under American pressure and moved to Qatar. They then moved to Lebanon because similar pressure was

applied to Qatar. In Lebanon, Arouri runs a command that tries to foment terror against both Israel and the PA in the West Bank. The command also has a branch in Gaza.

- In Gaza itself, an economic battle has been raging recently between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Qatar has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Gaza's reconstruction since the Hamas-Israel war of 2014 ended. Now, partly due to Qatar's tensions with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the UAE is trying to push it out of Gaza by spending its own money there. It recently donated \$15 million for infrastructure projects in Gaza via senior Fatah official Mohammed Dahlan, a rival of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.
- Dahlan, who spends part of each year in the Gulf, is trying to liaise between Egypt and the UAE in an effort to coordinate their moves with Hamas and secure himself and his people a renewed foothold in Gaza. His energetic activity in Gaza has greatly worried Abbas.
- In Israel, there are mixed opinions of Dahlan. At one time, Dahlan was reportedly friendly with Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman. But other senior defense officials and other senior politicians have reservations about Dahlan. They believe his efforts to increase his involvement in Gaza are doomed to failure, just as his forces were defeated by Hamas during the latter's military takeover of Gaza in June 2007.
- Israel also isn't eager to completely end Qatar's involvement in Gaza, despite the diplomatic and economic siege imposed on Doha by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Israel has an interest in the continued existence of two parallel channels to Hamas' leadership, Egyptian and Qatari, especially in times of crisis.
- In early August, at the height of the Saudi-Qatari crisis, Israel threatened harsh measures against the Qatari television network Al Jazeera, up to and including closing its office in Israel on the grounds that it incites to terror. It then retreated to merely threatening to take away the press card of Al Jazeera reporter Elias Karram. And in the end, after the Government Press Office held a hearing for Karram, even that move was put on hold. But more than reflecting Israel's attitude toward Karram, these reversals seem to reflect its complex attitude toward Qatar and Israel's desire to avoid burning all its bridges with Doha.