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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, September 27*

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# News Excerpts

September 27, 2017

## Associated Press

### **Interpol Approves Palestinian Membership in Blow to Israel**

International police agency Interpol voted Wednesday to include Palestine as a member state, in a new boost to Palestinian efforts for international recognition and influence amid long-stalled negotiations with Israel for full statehood. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki hailed the vote as a “voice of confidence in the capacity of law enforcement in Palestine.” Opponents say recognizing Palestine in international organizations undermines negotiations with Israel for full statehood.

See also, [“Interpol Votes to Accept ‘State of Palestine’ as Member Country” \(Ha’aretz\)](#)

## Ha’aretz

### **Netanyahu Blames PA Incitement for Terror Attack**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blamed Palestinian Authority incitement for the West Bank terror attack that killed three Israelis Tuesday. The prime minister added that Israel will demolish the terrorist's house, impose a closure on his village and revoke the work permits of his extended family. The terrorist attack is also a clear message to Donald Trump’s envoy to the peace process, Jason Greenblatt, who arrived in Israel on Tuesday.

See also, [“Right-wing MKs: Call off US peace push over terror attack” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Erdan: Slain Guard was Symbol of Coexistence**

With security guard Youssef Othman’s relatives reeling following his death just hours earlier during an attack in Har Adar that killed two other people, Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan sought to comfort them by elevating the 25-year-old to the status of a national hero and symbol of coexistence. Osama Othman, Youssef’s relative, told Erdan, “With all due respect to [the] ministers, it is the citizens who are suffering, Arabs and Jews. What is needed is to take responsibility and solve this conflict once and for all.”

## Ha’aretz

### **Beit Surik Mayor Accuses Israel of 'Collective Punishment'**

The mayor of the hometown of the Palestinian assailant who killed three Israelis on Tuesday near a West Bank settlement has accused Israel of “collective punishment” against the town. The Israeli military arrested three Palestinians in the village of Beit Sourik. The attack will likely prompt the Shin Bet security service to reevaluate its process of vetting Palestinians who apply for work permits and reopen the larger political discussion of Israel's policy granting work permits to Palestinians who seek jobs in Israel and in West Bank Jewish settlements.

See also, [“Israeli forces seal hometown of Palestinian attacker, declare village-wide curfew” \(Ma’an\)](#)

## **Some in Har Adar Rethink Palestinian Hires**

Residents in this leafy settlement outside Jerusalem tried to maintain a sense of normalcy hours after a deadly attack by a Palestinian laborer at an entrance used for workers Tuesday, but many admitted that a “reassessment” regarding the employment of Palestinian workers would need to be considered. The town of some 4,000 is mostly over the Green Line, though unlike many other settlements, most who live there are not ideologically connected to the West Bank and do not consider themselves settlers. In the 2015 Knesset elections, the dovish Zionist Union party was the clear winner here, taking almost 40 percent of the vote.

Jerusalem Post

## **UN: Israeli, PA Incitement Violates Resolution 2334**

Israelis and Palestinians have engaged in inflammatory rhetoric that violates UN Resolution 2334, which condemns settlement activity, UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process Nikolay Mladenov said on Monday. He presented the UN Security Council with his third report on the resolution since its approval last December, in which he gave both Israelis and Palestinians a failing grade.

Ha'aretz

## **Supreme Court Bars Justice From West Bank Anniversary**

The Supreme Court announced Tuesday it was cancelling its participation in a government ceremony marking 50 years since Israel conquered the West Bank and would not be sending one of its justices as previously planned. Supreme Court President Miriam Naor decided it was “inappropriate for a representative of the judicial branch to participate in the event,” scheduled to be held in the Gush Etzion bloc, one of her advisors said. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other ministers will participate in the official event named, “50 years of settlement in Judea and Samaria.” Representatives of all branches of the government were invited.

Ha'aretz

## **Arab Women Are Joining Jewish Activists in Fight for Peace**

To be able to have an impact on decision-makers, the founders of Women Wage Peace understood they would need a critical mass of supporters. To achieve that, they knew they would have to appeal to women way outside their natural base: right-wing Israelis (think Zakut), religious Israelis, even settlers. The organization's message is this: We will not stop until there is a peace agreement. But how exactly this agreement will look – will it include, for example, an independent Palestinian state and the evacuation of settlements, or alternatively, a binational Jewish-Arab state? – these are questions for Israel's elected leaders to decide.

## **Is Trump about to Reveal his Mideast Peace Plan?**

By Shlomi Eldar

- The Palestinians were sure all was lost. All the promises of an American diplomatic initiative on the part of President Donald Trump for a viable solution to the conflict that no one before him had managed to resolve seemed to have gone down the drain. It appeared the dream of a Palestinian state would not come true in the period of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' term. But something happened on Abbas' way to New York to address the UN General Assembly on Sept. 20. Trump's Mideast envoy Jason Greenblatt indicated to him that the president would meet with him during the General Assembly session and might bring a positive message.
- Trump's message and also a private meeting with him shortly before Abbas' UN address may have changed something in the speech, which was prepared ahead of time. Nonetheless, Abbas still sounded grim. On the other hand, Palestinian sources now express cautious optimism. As mentioned, the two leaders met just hours before Abbas' speech. Trump asked the Palestinian leader to be patient a while longer because Greenblatt and senior White House adviser Jared Kushner were putting the final touches on the diplomatic initiative that has been discussed since Trump took office in January. Trump urged Abbas not to make hasty, unilateral moves that would hamper diplomatic progress, such as applying for membership in UN committees, until the American plan could be unveiled.
- "It was a good talk, perhaps the best President Abbas has had with Trump," a top Palestinian source told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. According to the source, although the conversation on the sidelines of the General Assembly was short, lasting less than 30 minutes, Abbas was persuaded to give the American channel a chance. The Americans explained that Trump's envoys believed setting a deadline for publication of the plan could torpedo the blueprint, which is being drawn up in great secrecy "but calculated with great precision as a complex puzzle in a bid to overcome all the obstacles," the source said.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu received a similar message from Trump. At the Sept. 24 session of the foreign affairs and defense Cabinet, Netanyahu briefed ministers on his meeting with Trump in New York last week. According to ministers present at the meeting, as quoted by Haaretz, the president "conveyed his seriousness about this. The Americans are preparing a plan. ... Trump is very determined and wants to reach the ultimate deal."

- Unlike the positive Palestinian assessment that Trump appears more serious than they had thought, Netanyahu's comments at the Cabinet meeting conveyed a sense of concern. The Palestinian source believes that when Netanyahu understood that Trump meant business, he convened his ministers to prepare for what he foresees as a diplomatic offensive that must be foiled. Netanyahu's laconic, matter-of-fact report appeared designed to inform his top ministers to get ready for a diplomatic initiative that Israel's right-wing government is unlikely to be able to accept and that Netanyahu will likely be unable to oppose. "Netanyahu surely knows much more than he's letting on to his ministers," the Palestinian official told Al-Monitor. He added that most of the details in the plan under preparation are still being concealed from both sides, but the principles are already known and clear to both Abbas and Netanyahu. "That's why [Netanyahu is] worried," said the official.
- For months the Palestinians have been trying to extract from Trump's two envoys a promise that an American blueprint for a resolution of the conflict, or as the president likes to call it, "the ultimate deal," would be based on the principle they hold sacred of two states for two people. Thus far, the Americans have refused to issue such a declaration, and the Palestinians are still smarting from Trump's comment at a February news conference with Netanyahu that "I'm looking at two states and one state, and I like the one both parties like. ... I can live with either one." "So far there has not been a public declaration [about two states]," the source said. "But we know the American plan will result in Palestinian independence, in a state within the 1967 borders, and that means the Americans understand the importance of this hallowed principle."
- This is probably what set Abbas' mind at rest and what set Netanyahu's teeth on edge, according to the assessment of the top official. He believes Netanyahu fully understands that an independent Palestinian state invariably means Israeli withdrawal from the areas of the West Bank it captured in 1967. Right now, the Palestinians and Israelis have no idea what exact territories are involved in the plan. Although the Palestinians were not told so in so many words, the Palestinian official believes that once unveiled, the American plan will not include detailed moves, either, to prevent it from falling through at the outset.
- "They intend to go for confidence-building measures," said the source, adding that this is the first principle reiterated by the Americans at every meeting with the Palestinian brass. The father of the confidence-building approach is Greenblatt, who, according to the Palestinians, is convinced that a positive climate must be fostered between the sides before they can discuss the cost and compromises involved in reaching an agreement. Greenblatt feels the first step must be economic confidence-building measures, to be followed by the crucial diplomatic stage that could take several years.
- Netanyahu and his right-wing government tried in the past to promote an "economic peace" with the Palestinian Authority, which would obviously absolve it of commitments to painful territorial compromises. It may even have been Netanyahu who convinced the Americans of the importance of economic peace, but the Palestinians believe the Americans only view it as a first stage to be followed by additional and more-binding moves.

- Despite the Palestinians' cautious optimism, reinforced by the Abbas-Trump conversation in New York, they do not give the "ultimate deal" much of a chance. Abbas and others in the Palestinian leadership have extensive experience with what they dub "the Netanyahu methods" designed to bury any and every initiative. They expect that Netanyahu will not come out immediately against whatever US plan is tabled, but will adopt devious methods to thwart it by foot-dragging and blaming the Palestinians as he always has in the past with every attempt to advance a diplomatic arrangement.

## **Experts Doubt Bahrain-Israel Ties Ready for Prime Time**

By Dov Lieber

- Reports this month have indicated the island kingdom of Bahrain will soon take steps to normalize ties with Israel, ending seven decades of a diplomatic boycott of the Jewish state. And some experts who spoke with The Times of Israel say they have noticed a tendency in recent years for Bahrain to speak publicly about its relations with Israel.
- However, at the same time, analysts argue it's unlikely Bahrain would normalize ties with the Jewish state without any serious developments in the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. By normalizing relations with Israel, Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy struggling to hold its grip over the Shiite majority populace, would bleed too much political capital, they said, while getting nothing in return that it can't get from Israel now, including business and security deals made under the table or through third parties.
- The current discussion over Bahrain-Israel ties improving revolves around statements made by Rabbi Marvin Hier, who is the dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, California, and by the associate director of the center Rabbi Abraham Cooper, both of whom met with the Bahraini king in Manama, the tiny Persian Gulf state's capital, on February 26. Hier told The Times of Israel last week that Bahraini monarch Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa expressed his opposition to the Arab boycott of Israel, and is ready to allow his citizens to visit the Jewish state freely.
- Since then, reports in Al-Monitor and the Qatari-owned Middle East Eye have said Bahrain plans to send business delegations to Israel before the year's end. On Saturday, the Times of London carried a statement from the Bahraini Embassy in London in what seemed to be the first public admission that Bahrainis are free, under Bahraini law, to visit the Jewish state. "The kingdom of Bahrain has no issue or problem with any of its citizens or residents practicing their religion or visiting family or friends wherever that may be — which, of course, includes the State of Israel," the statement said.
- According to a spokesperson for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Bahrainis are allowed to visit Israel after applying for a special visa. Bahrain has not denied the rabbis' statements. Israel has not commented on the reports. Should Bahrain-Israel ties come out into the open, it would represent a huge victory for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who frequently touts his government's unofficial ties with Sunni states. Bahrain, a country of around 1.4 million citizens, would presumably open the gates for other, more powerful Gulf countries to follow suit.

- Netanyahu earlier in September hailed Israel's "best-ever" ties with Arab states, but did not elaborate. The prime minister in the past has expressed his desire for normalization with the Arab states to precede peace with the Palestinians, arguing that peace with the Palestinians is presently untenable due to the current war-swept state of the Middle East. The stated Arab position for decades has demanded Israel make peace with Palestinians before normalization.
- Yoel Guzansky, a senior researcher for Iranian and Gulf affairs at the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, was keen to "pour cold water" on excitement over the reports. Guzansky, a former member of the National Security Council for prime ministers Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu, said "I'll eat my hat" if and when Bahraini delegations publicly come to Israel.
- So far, he said, he has seen "nothing new." "There's a lot of romanticism around relations with the Gulf for various reasons, political and others," he said, adding it was stoked by the prime minister, who wants to prove he can improve relations with Arab states. "There is some substance, with meetings and cooperation. But it's not the magnitude it seems sometimes," he added, saying he had seen the cooperation first-hand while serving in multiple governments. Bahrainis, he noted, have been coming into Israel for years, for business, pleasure or religious pilgrimage. Israelis too, have been traveling to Bahrain.
- Wikileaks documents showed that as far back as 2005, the Bahraini king was boasting of his ties with the Israeli espionage agency the Mossad. The development of "trade contacts," though, would have to wait for the implementation of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the king said in the cable. According to Guzansky, it's likely nothing has changed on that front. "For anything to come outside of the closet, something must move with the Palestinians," he said. Israel and the Palestinians haven't sat at the negotiating table since 2014.
- He noted that tensions in the Gulf now are high, as a Saudi-led coalition continues to boycott the powerful Gulf nation of Qatar, and Iran, Bahrain's neighbor and Israel's sworn enemy, continues to seek further influence in the region. Hier said the Bahraini king made it clear that shared opposition toward Iran was bringing his country closer to Israel. Guzansky argued that, regardless of whether that is true, Bahrain still has no reason to make its ties with Israel public, as such a move would not contribute to the joint struggle against the Islamic Republic.
- Guzansky said that there was a notable increase in the Bahrainis publicly talking about their ties with Israel, which he said it could be Manama trying to get the public used to the idea of sitting in a room with Israelis. However, he also said Bahrain might simply be airing its ties with Israel as a public relations stunt. In 2011, Bahrain, with the help of Saudi Arabia, violently suppressed its Arab Spring uprising. "From time to time, Bahraini leaders meet with Jews in Washington to show the Americans we get along. It shows they are moderate and pragmatic, and they talk to Jews and Israelis. I think this is the main thing. It's not new and it has been going for years now," he said.



- He pointed out that a member of the Bahraini royal family visits the country's small Hanukkah celebration every year, and the regime makes a point of treating the tiny Jewish community well. However, the kingdom has also come under fire for violently suppressing opposition, including putting down a brief Arab Spring uprising in 2011. Since then, Shiite groups have continued to protest the regime's powerful grip on the country, leading to perpetual low-level unrest.
- Hier revealed the king's alleged opposition to boycotting Israel seven months after their original meeting in Manama. Why did he take so long to get out the word? Hier told The Times of Israel that he was ready to talk about that discussion only after receiving "a clear signal" from the king that the royal meant business. In this case, the signal was Bahraini Prince Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa's presence at a large event for the Weisenthal Center earlier this month, and also his visit to the unabashedly pro-Israeli Museum of Tolerance, also located in Los Angeles. The king, with the help of the Wiesenthal Center, plans to build his own museum of tolerance in Bahrain. Hier, who has met with other Arab leaders, was full of praise for the Bahraini king, telling The Times of Israel that the monarch "is far advanced in his thinking from other leaders in the region. There is no comparison. The others are much more cautious."
- Miriam Goldman, an expert on the Arab Gulf countries with Britain-based security firm LE Beck International, agreed with Guzansky's assessment that Bahrain is still unlikely to normalize ties with Israel without a serious development in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. She said that the Palestinian issue is still very dear to Bahrain and it is unlikely the regime would risk so much political capital. "Even authoritarian governments need to consider their populations," she said. She noted Iran and Hezbollah use the Palestinian issue to legitimize their actions in the region and said Bahrain wouldn't want to hand them easy political leverage. "The really big question," she said, "is whether this will encourage the government of Israel to change its own possibilities."
- Some have put forward the idea that Bahrain's foot-dipping into the waters of naturalization with Israel is actually a test case ordered by Saudi Arabia. "I think it's plausible," said Goldman of the theory, noting that Saudi and Bahraini foreign policy "are very closely aligned." Yet, she added, "if it's a test case, it could be for relations with Israel post a deal [with the Palestinians]." And while she said it would be a "huge change" if Bahraini business delegations would openly come to Israel, she noted the decision could easily be reversed. Both Qatar and Oman once had Israeli trade offices in their territories, she noted, but each closed the Israeli offices in response to flareups between Palestinians and the Jewish state.