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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 2, 2017

Associated Press

Palestinian Reconciliation Faces Perilous Road Ahead

The Palestinian Authority prime minister on Monday led a large delegation of Fatah officials traveling from the West Bank to Gaza in the most ambitious attempt to reconcile with the rival Hamas after a 10-year rift. In a significant concession, Hamas has offered to turn over all governing responsibilities to Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. But key sticking points, primarily the terror group's refusal to disarm its powerful military wing, are likely to complicate or even derail the reconciliation efforts in the coming weeks. In another positive sign, a team of Egyptian mediators arrived and went immediately for meetings with Hamas' leadership. It was the first time an Egyptian delegation has visited Gaza since 2007.

See also, [*"Palestinian unity visit to Gaza: Rebirth or another false dawn?" \(AFP\)*](#)

Ha'aretz

Hamas and Fatah Officials Scheduled to Meet in Cairo

Delegations from Hamas and Fatah are scheduled to travel to Cairo next week for talks on implementing a reconciliation agreement between the two Palestinian factions. In conversations with Haaretz, senior figures of both factions said that the talks in Egypt's capital will address issues at the heart of disagreements between Fatah and Hamas, including control of border crossings, future leadership and Hamas' military wing.

Ma'ariv

Netanyahu Opposed to Separation Plan for Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a blow yesterday to the plan that was drafted by MK Anat Berko (Likud) for separation from the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. At a meeting of Likud ministers yesterday the prime minister said: "She submitted a few papers to me. I don't support that and that isn't the Likud's position." The plan calls for separation from the Arab neighborhoods and refugee camps that were annexed to Jerusalem immediately after the Six-Day War in 1967, including Kafr Aqeb and the Shuafat refugee camp.

Israel Hayom

'Key Goal of Palestinian Interpol Bid is to Prosecute Dahlan'

Palestinian media reported over the weekend that the Palestinian Authority, on the heels of being accepted as a member state to the international police agency Interpol, will pursue arrest warrants against former high-ranking Fatah official Mohammed Dahlan and several of his associates. A senior PA official was quoted as saying that "Dahlan and his associates Mohammad Rashid and Walid Najab will be placed on our Interpol list of fugitives.

Ha'aretz

Israel Announces 11-day Closure of West Bank, Gaza

In a departure from the custom in recent years, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman has ordered an 11-day closure of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, from the start of the Sukkot holiday through the following Shabbat. Temporary closures for Jewish holidays are common, but for week-long religious festivals such as Sukkot they are usually imposed only for the holidays that bookend the week. During these closures, Palestinians are prohibited from entering Israel except for medical or other emergencies, and only with permission from the office of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories.

See also, [*"Collective punishment' enacted on West Bank Palestinians for 6th day running" \(Ma'an\)*](#)

NRG

Civil Administration to Begin Infrastructure Work in Hebron

The Israeli Civil Administration is slated to begin infrastructure maintenance work this week in the Tomb of the Patriarchs and in the Jewish settlement in Hebron. In response to the Hebron municipality's refusal, Deputy Defense Minister Eliyahu Ben-Dahan and Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai decided to have the infrastructure work carried out by the Civil Administration, in violation of the Hebron agreement. Last month the Justice Ministry and the Defense Ministry began to work on a plan to regulate the municipal status of the Jewish settlement in Hebron.

Times of Israel

Hezbollah Chief: Israel Will Be Devastated By War

The leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah terror group on Sunday warned Jews living in Israel to leave the country as soon as possible before a destructive war between the Jewish state and his organization takes place. Hassan Nasrallah, speaking to mark the Shiite holy day of Ashura, said that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was leading the region toward a devastating war. Israeli officials have warned Hezbollah that it would be devastated if it tests Israel in a war, as tensions have risen over the group establishing a foothold in southern Lebanon and southern Syria along with Iran.

See also, [*"Hezbollah's Nasrallah tells followers that Israel pushing region to war" \(Ma'an\)*](#)

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu Denies Israeli Role in Kurdish Referendum

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that Israel was not involved in the Kurdish referendum, hours after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed the Mossad interfered in the September 25 independence vote. Netanyahu was the only leader to endorse an independent Kurdistan. Ahead of the independence vote, Netanyahu said that Israel "supports the legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to achieve a state of their own."

Hamas May Be Aiming to Switch to a Hezbollah-Style Role

By Avi Issacharoff

- It's hard to keep track of the number of times Hamas and Fatah have purportedly been on the threshold of reconciliation. And it's near impossible to keep track of the number of words that have been written in the Palestinian press and the wider Arab media by high-ranking officials in both movements about the imperative for national reconciliation and unity between Gaza and the West Bank.
- Now Palestinian unity is back in the headlines again. A huge, 460-member delegation from the Palestinian Authority government in Ramallah, headed by Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and comprising officials, security personnel, and experts on water and electricity and who knows what else, is due in Gaza on Monday to emblemize the "return of the PA government to the Gaza Strip." Some pioneering members of the delegation actually arrived on Thursday.
- Slightly more than ten years after the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, when Hamas bloodily overthrew the PA's regime there, a historic moment of unity is supposedly upon us. The delegation, which has rented rooms in some of Gaza's hotels, plans to hold various talks and discussions, mainly for the protocol and the cameras, in order to give at least the appearance of reconciliation.
- One cannot avoid a sense of déjà vu. Didn't we see something rather like this unfolding back in April 2014, with a unity agreement and the establishment of a "national consensus government"? Unity did not ensue. After the "consensus" government was established, PA President Mahmoud Abbas firmly refused to fund the salaries of Hamas's officials in Gaza. Then came the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli teenagers, and the Hamas-Israel war in the shape of Operation Protective Edge.
- So how is this situation any different? It may not be. The details of the understandings between the parties are not clear. It is hard to imagine either one backing down on issues of substance, such as Hamas's retention of its weaponry and the issue of who will control the Gaza borders. We may see another repeat of the familiar pattern: a festival of unity followed by difficulties in the talks and, finally, a widening of the rift and a worsening of the rivalries.
- But some things really have shifted. First, Hamas's leadership changed in recent months. Khaled Mashaal and his gang of leaders living abroad are no longer in charge. Hamas is now led by two men who live in the Gaza Strip and were born in its refugee camps. Ismail Haniyeh, from the Shati camp, who heads the political wing, and Yahya Sinwar, born in the Khan Younis refugee camp, who is the leader of Hamas in Gaza.

- Haniyeh and Sinwar endorse Palestinian unity even though it is not exactly clear what they have in mind. They speak constantly about the imperative, and have tried taking several confidence-building measures with Fatah and its leader, Abbas. Abbas has spoken several times in recent weeks with Haniyeh; a channel of dialogue has opened.
- Officials in charge of the security forces of each group are also talking, for a start on coordinating the arrival of the enormous delegation on Monday. Hamas officials have announced the dismantling of the “management committee” they had established in the Gaza Strip to replace Hamdallah’s government. The committee was ditched without preconditions, even though Hamas had set quite a few conditions in the past, notably including a demand for the lifting of the PA’s sanctions on Gaza.
- Heed should be taken, too, of statements made Thursday by Sinwar, who was until fairly recently the most radical of Hamas’s leaders, to a group of young people in Gaza. “I will break the neck of anyone who is against the reconciliation, be he from Hamas or from any other group,” Sinwar declared. “The decision to end the split is a strategic one. There is no way back from it.” He also said that Mohammed Deif — the Hamas terror chief and commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades — is in favor of reconciliation.
- “The leaders of the Palestinian Authority must end this period of the split and turn toward the future in order to build a national plan,” he said. “Hamas will make painful concessions, each more difficult than the one before it, in order to achieve reconciliation.” The cherry on top: “Hamas dismantled the management committee even before Abu Mazen [Abbas] got up to speak at the UN [General Assembly last week] because Hamas believes that a strong president is in the interest of the nation and the Palestinians.” Sinwar said that Hamas was maintaining full coordination with the many rival groups in the Gaza Strip, and “we hope to integrate all of them into the Palestinian national army.”
- The change in personnel and tone in the Hamas leadership connects to an uncomfortable reality for the Islamist terror group: Hamas has been forced to acknowledge its failure of governance on the civilian level — life in Gaza is unremittingly grim under its rule — and the consequent danger that the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip will rise up against it. The willingness to dismantle the management committee unconditionally, and to hand over the keys to Hamdallah’s government where civilian matters are concerned, is tantamount to an open public admission of failure. Hamas tried in every way possible for a decade to hold on to its control of Gaza, but now is showing clear signs of willingness to step aside, at least in the civic sphere.
- The appalling electricity shortage (Gaza’s inhabitants currently receive only five hours of electricity per day), the shut-offs in the water supply (they have running water only once every four days on average), the sky-high unemployment rate (approximately 44 percent), the slow rebuilding of the Gaza Strip after the 2014 conflict with Israel, the Egyptian closure of the Rafah border crossing — all these have combined to cause Hamas, and primarily Sinwar and Haniyeh, to rethink the matter of controlling the coastal enclave. This is dramatic, indeed. Hamas was

born of the Muslim Brotherhood as supposed proof that “Islam is the answer.” Now, it is recognizing its limitations. Perhaps it is mindful of Tunisia’s Ennahdha Party, which wisely realized that it could not be the sovereign or the government, and would be better off sitting in the opposition.

- But Hamas may prefer the Lebanese example: to operate as Hezbollah does, to the extent possible. It is a simple idea, at least in theory: Allow the Palestinian Authority to run ongoing affairs in the Gaza Strip, to worry about electricity, water, sewage, social welfare, unemployment, and so on, while making sure that Hamas’s military wing retains all its weaponry. That way, Hamas continues to be the powerhouse on the ground in the Gaza Strip, while the PA will have to deal with the dreary, thankless day-to-day affairs. For all the support for unity, Hamas officials have said explicitly that they do not intend to give up the “arms of the resistance” — the same term that Hezbollah uses in Lebanon.
- There are several key issues of dispute on which the two sides can potentially reach agreement. The problem of the Hamas government officials hired after the 2007 coup — approximately 45,000 of them — can be solved. If both sides are willing, a mechanism can be found (perhaps according to the “Swiss model” once proposed by a Swiss diplomat who visited Gaza a number of times). Close to 20,000 of them are members of the civilian police force, the civil defense force and agencies created to deal with the personal security of Gaza’s inhabitants. The PA could hire them for its official agencies, even though these are already terribly bloated.
- Another factor to bear in mind in this regard: the international community’s response. Reconciliation with Hamas, and an agreement that the PA is to pay the salaries of, say, 16,000 to 20,000 members of the security forces who were Hamas officials until moments earlier, would likely cause problems in the transfer of aid to the Palestinian Authority. The Taylor Force Act, which will limit American aid to the PA due to Abbas’s payments to the families of terrorists, is expected to pass in Congress in December. This may be one of the factors spurring Abbas to accelerate the process of reconciliation.
- Also potentially solvable is the issue of a PA presence at the Gaza border crossings. High-ranking Hamas officials have hinted that they would agree to have the PA’s security forces take formal control, and perhaps even deploy along the border with Israel and Egypt. This would lead to the permanent opening of the Rafah Border Crossing and an immediate improvement in the Gaza Strip’s economic situation. There would be a great deal of support for such a measure in Washington, and perhaps, to some extent, in Israel too. During a recent visit to the Gaza border, US Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt — who was accompanied by Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of government activities in the territories — said that the PA needed to return to the border crossings.
- The critical Fatah-Hamas unity question that Israel will be watching carefully — and that may determine the viability and seriousness of any reconciliation agreement — is what will happen to Hamas’s military wing. Abbas knows very well that an agreement that leaves Hamas’s military

wing intact will be a problem — for Israel, the international community, and his own interests — and it is hard to predict whether he would consent to it. In the past, Abbas had set the disarmament of Hamas as a firm prerequisite for any unity deal. Abbas is also a man not known for easily forgiving his rivals. High-ranking PA officials say that he is not about to rush into the embrace of Hamas in Gaza. There is still profound suspicion between Fatah and Hamas, as well as hard feelings among residents of the West Bank and Gaza toward both groups.

- Yet Abbas's low standing, as reflected in public opinion polls conducted among the Palestinian population in the West Bank, together with near-despair over any peace process prospects, might conceivably lead him to allow the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades to retain its weapons. One indication that Abbas is pretty serious about unity this time is that the delegation he is sending to Gaza includes PA intelligence chief Majed Faraj, his close associate and confidant. Faraj is a kind of Palestinian combination of Yitzhak Molcho, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's personal diplomat, and Mossad director Yossi Cohen. It is Faraj, whose rigid and uncompromising policy regarding Hamas is well known, who is to lead the reconciliation process in Gaza.
- In the final analysis, Abbas will want to know precisely what Hamas is offering, and is unlikely to rush into an agreement before he knows what the American peace plan will be. If there is to be a genuine reconciliation, it will probably be a gradual process, unfolding after months of debate over the smallest details of many controversial topics. And the devil, as we all know, is in the details.

A Binational Delusion

By Salman Masalha

- In light of the civil wars in the Arab world, the Israeli right's demands for the annexation of Palestinian lands and the left's demands to establish a binational state in Israel-Palestine both sound delusional, akin to the ramblings of lunatics, detached from everything happening around them. The evidence presented to us in recent years about the fragility of the Arab "nation state" reduces Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' "warning" at the UN General Assembly – that in the absence of two states, the Palestinians will turn to the one-state solution – to something of ridicule. This is especially clear considering the inability to maintain one Palestinian rule in Gaza and the West Bank.
- If the Arabs, as regrettable as this may be, cannot maintain a single civilian nation-state worthy of the name, and these states fall apart into religious, ethnic and tribal factions while carrying out ethnic purges, it's easy to understand what the future holds for us here – unless both peoples' leaders act to shore up the country from future disasters. The fantasy of a Jewish state that maintains an apartheid regime should be abandoned completely. This delusion of the "binational" state must be postponed to the coming of the Messiah, when the Jews will become Swedes and the Arabs become Danes. Until this pipe dream is realized, we must look for ways to prevent an outbreak of the disaster.
- It seems that after decades wasted on futile wars, both peoples seem to have returned to the starting point. In the Promised and Secure-from-head-to-toe Land, we must build a dam to stop the destruction. The dam's construction begins with Jewish and Arab understanding that only dividing the country into two separate political, national entities will bring an end to the suffering. This will not happen without the restoration of courageous leaderships in both peoples. Any reasonable person understands that the Jews and Arabs aren't going away. We can continue spilling blood forever, but after all the blood, sweat and tears, sometime in the future everyone will tire and realize that the only way out is going back to the UN Partition Plan and the recognition of both peoples' right to self-determination in this land.
- In recent years, it has become fashionable – among both Arabs and Jews – to attack the left. We must again remind all those who are trying to make us forget that the "two states for two peoples" slogan, which was adopted across the political divide, was conceived by the true Jewish-Arab left. It is also worth revisiting what Dr. Emile Touma, leader and ideologue of the Israeli Communist Party (Maki), wrote in 1976. He stated that the most important thing in the attempt to solve the Palestinian problem is to recognize the right of both peoples – the Palestinians and the Israelis – to self-determination, and to establish two independent states. Although he made the statement in English, it also appeared in Hebrew in a booklet marking the Communist Party's 90th anniversary.

- Dr. Touma added that almost 50 percent of the Jews living in Israel were born here and that they didn't know any other language or culture but Hebrew. "So I say there is an Israeli people – with all the signs of a nation," he wrote. Jewish and Arab communists have adhered to these principles over the years, and still do. This is reflected in the Israeli Communist Party convention resolutions of 2007: "Israel is a Jewish state because it demonstrates the Jewish people's right to self-determination," as cited by MK Dov Khenin on his website. One side of the conflict's equation has already been realized. What remains is to end the occupation and implement the Palestinian people's right to self-determination in a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Without readopting the Partition Plan, this land and its residents will descend into chaos and devastation.