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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, October 4*

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# News Excerpts

October 4, 2017

Times of Israel

## **Trump Said Netanyahu 'Bigger Problem' than Abbas**

President Donald Trump reportedly told United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres that in his efforts to mediate a Middle East peace deal, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been a "bigger problem" than Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Guterres agreed with Trump's assertion that the combination of an aging PA leader looking to leave behind a legacy coupled with Netanyahu's understanding that he'll never have a more friendly White House has presented a unique opportunity for peace.

*See also, ["Trump to UN Chief: Netanyahu Proving More Difficult Than Abbas in Peace Efforts" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)*

Ha'aretz

## **Netanyahu Slams Palestinian Unity**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came out against Hamas and the Palestinian Authority's continued reconciliation efforts on Tuesday. Netanyahu told a Likud meeting in the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim that Israel would not accept "imaginary appeasement where the Palestinian side is reconciling at the expense of our existence," adding that anyone who discusses a peace process must recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

*See also, ["Netanyahu: Faux Palestinian reconciliation risks 'our existence'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)*

Reuters

## **Palestinian Cabinet Convenes in Gaza**

Prime Minister Rami al-Hamdallah chaired the first meeting of the Palestinian cabinet in the Gaza Strip for three years on Tuesday, in a move toward reconciliation between the mainstream Fatah party and Islamist group Hamas. Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh echoed the optimism, saying: "There might be some difficulties on the road, but we will conclude reconciliation, regardless of the cost." On Tuesday, Hamas criticized Abbas's decision to await the outcome of talks Fatah plans to hold with the group on Oct. 10 before lifting sanctions.

Ha'aretz

## **Minister Bennett Calls to Cut Funds to PA**

Education Minister Naftali Bennett called for Israel to halt the transfer of tax revenue to Palestinians on Tuesday, in response to both Interpol's unilateral induction of the Palestinian Authority, and the current reconciliation process between Hamas and the PA. Bennett said that three conditions would be set as stipulations for continuing to transfer funds to the PA: return the bodies of two soldiers killed in the 2014 conflict with Gaza; official Hamas recognition of Israel; and an end to incitement and government pay-outs to terrorists imprisoned in Israel by the Palestinian Authority.

Associated Press

## **PA Slams Netanyahu's Pledge to Develop Ma'ale Adumim**

Nabil Shaath, a senior adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Tuesday said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was trying to "destroy" the two-state solution by pledging to further develop and even effectively annex one of the biggest Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Earlier Netanyahu, visited the city of Ma'ale Adumim where he vowed to build thousands of new homes and threw his support behind a bill to redraw Jerusalem's municipal borders to include the settlement.

Times of Israel

## **UN Special Envoy Says Israel Not Halting Settlements**

Israel is not complying with a UN Security Council resolution demanding a halt to all settlement activity and instead is continuing to expand settlements, making a two-state solution "increasingly unattainable," the United Nations envoy for the Mideast said Monday. Nickolay Mladenov told the council that in the three months since June 20 Israel's settlement activity "continued at a high rate, a consistent pattern over the course of this year."

AFP

## **Israeli Defense Minister: Syria's Assad Has Won the Civil War**

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said on Tuesday that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been "victorious" in Syria's civil war and was now being courted by former enemies. "Assad has emerged victorious in the battle," Lieberman told Hebrew media news website Walla!. Israel has accused Assad-backer Iran of transferring sophisticated weapons to Lebanon's Hezbollah and has sporadically struck weapons convoys to the Shiite movement inside the war-ravaged country, as well as Syrian government forces.

Ma'an

## **Palestinian Family Faces Home Demolition**

A Palestinian family faces imminent displacement after the Israeli army ordered that their home in the village of Beit Surik in the occupied West Bank be punitively demolished. Nimr Jamal, a 37-year-old father of four, was shot dead last week after he shot and killed an Israeli border police officer and two Israeli security guards at the illegal Israeli settlement Har Adar, adjacent to Beit Surik. An Israeli army spokesperson told Ma'an that the "pre-demolition notice" delivered during an overnight raid before dawn on Tuesday said the family would have to evacuate within 72 hours or submit an appeal before the demolition.

## **Netanyahu and Abbas in Rare Harmony on Hamas**

By Dov Lieber

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday came out forcefully against the current round of Palestinian unity talks between rival factions Hamas and Fatah. As the Palestinian Authority cabinet was holding a meeting in Gaza, its first since 2014, he took the opportunity to shatter any doubt over whether Israel was in favor of the developments.
- “We expect anyone talking about a peace process to recognize Israel and, of course, recognize a Jewish state, and we won’t accept faux reconciliations under which the Palestinian side reconciles at the expense of our existence,” he said, speaking from the settlement of Ma’ale Adumim. “We have a very straightforward attitude toward anyone who wants to effect such a reconciliation: Recognize the State of Israel, dismantle Hamas’s military wing, sever the relationship with Iran, which calls for our destruction, etc,” he added.
- Netanyahu was either unaware of — or more likely ignoring — comments by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in interviews to the Egyptian press on Monday night. Otherwise he might have noted that the PA leader’s demands for forming a unity government are closely aligned with Israel’s.
- Let’s go down the list. Abbas demanded the PA control the border, ministries, and security in Gaza, and said he would not allow Hamas to keep its military wing. “I won’t accept the reproduction of the Hezbollah experience of Lebanon” in Gaza, he said. Check “dismantle Hamas’s military wing.” Abbas also demanded that Hamas come under the control of the Palestine Liberation Organization — the largest Palestinian umbrella group. The PLO has recognized the State of Israel since the late 1980s, largely thanks to Abbas. Check “recognize the State of Israel.”
- True, while Netanyahu stated only in his demands that the Palestinian government recognize the State of Israel, a moment earlier the prime minister had specifically mentioned recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Abbas and his government have sworn never to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, yet Netanyahu’s government continues to co-exist with the PA and has sat down twice with it at the negotiating table for peace talks. Abbas said that absolutely no country would be allowed to interfere in internal Palestinian affairs, except for Egypt, which is facilitating the current unity talks.
- Should the reconciliation talks succeed and the PA assume control of the Strip — however unlikely that outcome — politically speaking, Iran’s influence in Palestinian affairs would be greatly reduced as the Sunni powerhouse Egypt, aligned with Tehran’s nemesis Saudi Arabia, becomes the kingmaker.

- Moreover, Iran is currently Hamas's most important military backer, according to the terror group. Yet it is the United States that mostly bankrolls and trains the PA's forces. It's hard to imagine a situation in which the PA would give up its military support from the US in favor of Iran's weapons, if facing an ultimatum by Washington. Therefore, should a PA unity government be formed, and Hamas's military wing be disbanded — an unlikely scenario — Iran's relationship with and influence over the Islamist group and the Palestinians in general would be greatly diminished. Check "sever the relationship with Iran," with the caveat that a more symbolic relationship could still continue.
- As the Palestinians launch negotiations, Israel fears Hamas, the terror organization committed to its destruction, is using the reconciliation to gain international legitimacy as part of the Palestinian Authority, while still retaining the goal of destroying Israel and seeking to retain the armed forces and weaponry to serve that goal. A senior Israel official told The Times of Israel on Tuesday that "Hamas is trying to gain international legitimacy without accepting Israel's right to exist, without disarming and without accepting the Quartet principles. Hamas remains a ruthless, mass-murdering terrorist organization that seeks Israel's destruction."
- Yet Abbas has said he intends to rule "Gaza the same as the West Bank." Israel seems to be of not comfortable with, then resigned to the situation in the West Bank, in which the Palestinian security forces and IDF work together to stamp out terrorism. Additionally, the so-called Middle East Quartet — the United States, Russia, European Union, and the United Nations — has said it won't afford Hamas legitimacy until it renounces terrorism and agrees to accept past agreements between Israel and the PLO.
- In a separate statement, on Monday, Jason Greenblatt, US President Donald Trump's envoy to the Middle East, reiterated this sentiment, saying that while Washington welcomed the effort to put the PA back in control of Gaza, any resulting unity government "must unambiguously and explicitly commit to nonviolence, recognition of the State of Israel, acceptance of previous agreements and obligations between the parties, and peaceful negotiations." Abbas and the international community would appear then to be on the same page: no legitimacy for Hamas without it giving up its weapons and recognizing Israel.
- Currently, the unity talks seem at a fatal impasse, as Hamas has said it won't give up its arms, and Abbas said that until the PA is in full control of Gaza, he won't reverse deep financial cuts to Gaza that have worsened preexisting electricity and water crises. These cuts, along with international isolation and pressure from Egypt, are what led Hamas to dismantle its own shadow government and start the reconciliation process. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said on Tuesday that his group is "ready to pay any price for the success of Palestinian national reconciliation." Except, that is, for meeting those key demands including disarmament.
- Meanwhile, Israel's security establishment has repeatedly emphasized that Gaza is a powder keg, and a fourth round of conflict with Hamas could break out at any moment. Rather than the

reconciliation coming “at the expense” of Israel’s existence, it could be a chance to avoid another round of war. But that would require Abbas getting what he, and Netanyahu, say they want. And that prospect, for all the fanfare and headlines about Palestinian reconciliation, is remote indeed.

## **US, Israel Stand By as Egypt pushes Palestinian Unity**

By Shlomi Eldar

- Israel facilitated the entry of Palestinian Authority (PA) Cabinet ministers into Gaza on Oct. 2 to attend a reconciliation meeting between Fatah and Hamas. It took Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a day to respond to the event. Speaking at a Likud meeting in the West Bank settlement of Ma'ale Adumim, Netanyahu said, "We expect everyone who talks about a peace process to recognize the State of Israel and, of course, to recognize a Jewish state." He added, "Whoever wants to make such a reconciliation, our understanding is very clear: Recognize the State of Israel, disband the Hamas military arm, sever the connection with Iran, which calls for our destruction."
- Contrary to past statements by Netanyahu opposing Palestinian reconciliation, his props this time did not include threats against Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas or warnings of sanctions. Most of all, his choice of words differed in expression from that in April 2014, when Hamas and Fatah announced the establishment of a national unity government. "Abbas would rather have unity with Hamas than peace with Israel," Netanyahu had tweeted.
- Netanyahu's foreign minister at the time, Avigdor Liberman, concurred, saying that Abbas had to decide whether he wanted to make peace with Israel or with Hamas. Liberman described the signing of the unity agreement as "tantamount to a signature on the end of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority." This time around, at least for the moment, Liberman is keeping quiet. In fact, it was the Defense Ministry, which he now heads, that was responsible for the Palestinian delegation getting into Gaza for talks.
- Indeed, Israeli military authorities oversaw the arrangements allowing the 350 Palestinians from the West Bank to cross quickly and efficiently through the Erez crossing into Gaza. The delegation included PA Cabinet members, advisers, officials and security teams. "It went over like a well-coordinated military operation," an Israeli military source told AI-Monitor, speaking on the condition of anonymity. Thus, on Oct. 3, a new Palestinian unity government convened in Gaza for a special session, and the previously estranged sides ceremoniously announced that the decade-long rift between them had ended and that a new chapter in their relationship had begun. As reported in AI-Monitor, however, true reconciliation is still far off.
- Despite the discernible difficulties clear to the leaders on both sides, a sense of heady optimism nonetheless prevails. On the evening prior to the festive meeting, news broadcasters in Gaza and the West Bank announced that this would be the last night of division, as both sides had chosen to restore the unity of the Palestinian people for the sake of the national interest. So why didn't Netanyahu threaten Abbas with sanctions or condemn him for an alliance with those who aspire to destroy Israel? Why did Liberman order Defense Ministry officials to arrange for the

efficient entry of the Palestinian delegation into Gaza? Why didn't Liberman condemn Abbas in his usual manner?

- "This time is different," a top Fatah official explained to Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity. "Israeli threats against the Palestinian Authority, sanctions or even just [verbal] attacks on the PA and Mahmoud Abbas would, in fact, constitute direct threats against Egypt and its president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is sponsoring the reconciliation talks." According to the Fatah source, Egypt notified the United States and Israel on the progress of the rapprochement, making it clear that a Palestinian unity government is not only in Egypt's interest, but has positive implications for Israel and the Palestinians as well. Egypt regards such an agreement as vital to a regional peace deal, in which it hopes to play a major role. From Cairo's perspective, the Palestinian split between the West Bank and Gaza is an obstacle that must be removed for a diplomatic breakthrough on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- The United States appears to share this view. President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy, Jason Greenblatt, who visited Israel and the West Bank at the end of September, updated Netanyahu on the American position on the reconciliation and the significance of such a move for a US peace blueprint soon to be unveiled. Trump had promised Abbas at their brief, Sept. 20 meeting in New York to present the principles of his blueprint within a few weeks. Yet it now seems clear that he will not do so until the fate of the internal Palestinian negotiations, due to continue in Cairo next week, becomes clearer. That means that as far as the Trump administration is concerned, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only be resolved under a regional umbrella, with Egypt playing a central role.
- Should the Palestinians actually reconcile, it remains unclear what the Americans might consider a good agreement. Meanwhile, one cannot ignore that the Americans, like the Israelis, have not issued an official response to the talks in Gaza, even with Hamas still on the Department of State's list of foreign terrorist organizations.
- As noted previously in Al-Monitor, Palestinian intelligence chief Majid Faraj enjoys a warm relationship with the Trump administration. CIA Director Mike Pompeo and Greenblatt see him as a moderating, calming influence that provides stability to Abbas' regime and serves the interests of the United States and Israel's security. Faraj is a pivotal participant in the Gaza talks. He is among those engaging with Hamas' leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar. The core issue on which everything depends is whether Hamas is willing to hand Abbas security control of Gaza. Israel would regard such an agreement by Hamas as a positive development, and the United States would see it as removing a major obstacle to launching Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. That is why Israel and the United State have decided to lay low, at least until they see whether Sisi's plan withstands the test of reality.
- Meanwhile Netanyahu, while careful not to threaten Abbas, is thinking several steps ahead. His words have been intended first and foremost for American ears. He is already trying to block whatever diplomatic initiative the Trump administration might present in the near future.