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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 1, 2017

Ha'aretz

Hamas Hands Over Gaza Border Crossings to PA

The Palestinian Authority assumed full control of the border crossings between the Gaza Strip and Egypt on Wednesday morning in a handover that is considered to be the first real test of the reconciliation agreement signed a few weeks ago in Cairo between the PA and Hamas. The next stage will be for Hamas to grant the PA full control of all the government ministries in Gaza, and at a later stage, the security forces will be unified.

The New York Times

Israelis Debate the Future of Their Democracy

Israel's left wing has long challenged as undemocratic the right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But now that criticism is being leveled by former security officials and members of the right-wing establishment itself, including veterans of Netanyahu's own political party and his Justice Department. They say that the government's efforts to control the news media, curtail the authority of the Supreme Court and undermine the military threaten the future of Israeli democracy. Their warnings have thrown Israel into an impassioned debate over what kind of country it is becoming, and if its democracy — now in its 70th year — can survive.

Times of Israel

Hamas Rages After Tunnel Bombing But Unity Sticks

Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh on Tuesday said the terror group intends to respond with violence to the deaths of seven Gaza terrorists Monday after Israel blew up an attack tunnel that stretched into Israeli territory, but suggested the response would be delayed as Palestinian factions work toward reconciliation. Five of the dead belonged to PIJ, two of whom were senior leaders, while two members of Hamas's military wing were also killed during a rescue operation in the exploded tunnel, according to the group.

See also, [*“Senior Palestinian militant says detonated tunnel intended to kidnap Israelis” \(Ynet\)*](#)

Jerusalem Post

Bennett Slams IDF ‘Apology’ for Tunnel Strike

The IDF was wrong to apologize for killing terrorists, Education Minister Naftali Bennett said Tuesday morning, after the military said the deaths were not intentional, drawing sharp criticism from Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman. On Monday night, IDF Spokesman Brig.-Gen. Ronen Manelis said “there was no intention to harm any senior officials. The action was in our territory, and the people died in their territory.” Bennett, like Netanyahu and Liberman before him, said Israel does not want an escalation.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Investigates Soldiers Who Shot Palestinian

The Israeli army has opened an official investigation into the lethal shooting of a Palestinian whose vehicle approached Israeli soldiers near a West Bank settlement. According to the army, soldiers opened fire on the car after the driver refused to heed their calls to stop. Initially, the army had said the soldiers opened fire because they thought it was an attempted car-ramming attack. Sources in the army described the event as very problematic. The Palestinian driver, 26-year-old Muhammad Abdallah Mussa from the West Bank village of Deir Ballut, was seriously wounded and later died of his wounds. The passenger, Mussa's sister, Latifa Abdallah, 33, was wounded by the gunfire.

Ynet

Hundreds Rally in Tel Aviv to Mark Rabin Assassination

Hundreds of people participated Tuesday evening in the memorial ceremony for slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the 22nd anniversary of his assassination. Among those participating in the event were former Mossad chief Danny Yatom, who also gave a speech, Army Radio Commander Shimon Elkabetz and Head of the Menashe Regional Council Ilan Sade. The state ceremony marking the beginning of the Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day will take place Wednesday at 12 pm at the President's Residence in Jerusalem. At 3 pm, the state memorial ceremony for Yitzhak and Leah Rabin will take place in the capital's Mount Herzl, with a special Knesset session taking place at 5 pm in the slain prime minister's memory.

Ha'aretz

Ex-Settler Leader to Address Annual Rabin Rally

The organizers of the main rally marking 22 years since the assassination of Rabin have informed leftist parties and movements that they will not be allowed to erect booths at the event as they have done in previous years. The rally, scheduled for Saturday night at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, is being organized this year for the first time by the organizations Commanders for Israel's Security and Darkenu. Because the sponsors want to attract right-wingers to the rally as well, they decided to refrain from conveying messages identified with the left. The keynote speaker at the rally will be former Mossad chief Shabtai Shavit. Oded Ravivi, head of the Efrat Local Council and Yehuda Meshi Zahav, head of the first aid service Zaka, is scheduled to speak, as is a resident of the settlement of Ofra, Esther Brot.

Ynet

MK Yogev Threatens Coalition Break over West Bank Budget

MK Moti Yogev (Bayit Yehudi) visited the Samaria Regional Council's protest tent erected opposite the Prime Minister's Residence Monday and announced he will refrain from voting with the coalition starting next week and until a solution is found to the issue of funding West Bank bypass roads and other security measures. Yogev's announcement came following a similar message from MK Oren Hazan (Likud).

Strike on Gaza Tunnel May Have Been Too Successful

By Amos Harel

- Monday's destruction by the Israeli army of a tunnel dug by Islamic Jihad into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip is raising tensions along the border to a level unseen since the end of Operation Protective Edge in August 2014. The fact that at least seven Palestinian militants were killed in the operation, including senior commanders of Islamic Jihad (and a Hamas commander), could spur the extremist group to retaliate. During the evening and through the night, considerable efforts were being made through Egyptian mediators to calm the situation. But the Israeli army is preparing for the possibility of rocket fire on Gaza border communities, if not further north. The critical hours will be on Tuesday morning, when people go off to work and school.
- According to reports from Gaza, two of those killed were the commander of the Islamic Jihad central district brigade and his deputy. Some of the dead were killed when they entered the tunnel to try to rescue people after the Israeli attack, apparently suffocated by smoke, dust or possibly toxic fumes. Military sources denied that the operation was an assassination attempt on senior terror operatives and said no toxic substance was streamed into the tunnel after it was blown up.
- But even if the major hit was coincidental and not the result of intelligence information, it seems that the Israeli operation succeeded beyond expectations. The many casualties are liable to spur the Palestinians to respond in a way that could escalate the tension or impact on the intra-Palestinian rapprochement. The attack tunnel was recently discovered, not far from the border fence, some 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from Kibbutz Kissufim. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman told the Knesset Monday afternoon that the tunnel was found "due to a significant technological breakthrough." The army did not elaborate on how the tunnel was destroyed. Palestinian sources, however, say it was bombed by the Israel Air Force.
- Lieberman said Israel has no interest in an escalation, but added that despite the reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, "The Strip is still the terror kingdom." Israel Defense Forces Spokesman Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis also told reporters – in a message that seemed coordinated with political leaders – that Israel wasn't seeking an escalation, and that the army has no plans to increase tensions along the Gaza border. Manelis added that the tunnel was destroyed at this time for operational reasons. It did not pose an immediate threat to the security of the Israelis living near the border, he said, but the fact it was dug constituted "a gross violation of Israeli sovereignty" that Israel had no intention of permitting.
- The IDF spokesman stressed that Israel sees the Hamas regime as exclusively responsible for anything happening in the Strip, and assumes that its leaders were aware of the tunnel. The decision to blow up the tunnel was made after recent consultations by government and security officials. The timing is considered sensitive for two reasons: the reconciliation agreement

between Hamas and the PA, which was achieved through Egyptian mediation; and the construction of the Israeli anti-tunnel barrier along the border with the Gaza Strip, which is being worked on north of the site of the tunnel. Although the Israeli government has expressed official disapproval of the reconciliation between the PA and Hamas, it does not want to appear to be actively sabotaging the agreement because of its own close relations with Egypt.

- A worsening of the security situation between Israel and Hamas could lead to the collapse of the intra-Palestinian understandings. On Wednesday, as part of the agreement, Egypt is supposed to reopen its Rafah crossing with Gaza, with members of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' presidential guard present for the first time. Hamas very much needs this achievement, but to get there it will need to restrain Islamic Jihad and prevent it from acting. Any escalation with Israel now will highlight the flaws in the reconciliation agreement, which avoided dealing with dismantling the "weapons of the resistance" – from the Hamas-Islamic Jihad tunnels to the rockets that both groups possess.
- Islamic Jihad, as opposed to Hamas, isn't even a signatory to the reconciliation agreement, and it has 12,000 fighters and thousands of rockets. At the same time, Israel will need nearly a year to finish building the barrier, which is meant to block the construction of additional tunnels and use sensors to identify existing tunnels or tunnels in the process of being dug. Before the tunnel was blown up, the IDF deployed Iron Dome batteries in the south and took other security measures. Security officials said Monday that Israel is prepared for any eventuality, and that it is still too early to assess how Hamas or Islamic Jihad will respond.
- The resolute Israeli position combines with the tension on the northern border, particularly regarding Iran's entrenchment in southern Syria. Lieberman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have publicly warned on several occasions that Israel will not allow Iran to expand its military foothold in Syria, and certainly will not allow Shi'ite militias that operate under its influence, or Hezbollah, to get close to the border between Syria and Israel in the Golan Heights. What happened Monday is pretty similar to the way things started to spiral in 2014. In retrospect, the IDF Military Intelligence branch believes the clash three years ago stemmed from a series of misunderstandings and erroneous calculations by both sides, neither of which was aiming for such a broad confrontation. If the present situation deteriorates further, Israel could find itself facing a repeat of the 2014 scenario.
- Israel, as it did then, has enough good tactical reasons to do what it is doing. What it's missing with regard to Gaza is a strategy. The years-long delay in approving projects that would help alleviate the enormous civilian distress in the Strip also contributes to the possibility that another eruption will occur in the end.

Is Israel Really Implementing Economic Aid to Palestinians?

By Shlomi Eldar

- Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon traveled to the seat of the Palestinian government in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Oct. 29 to meet with Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. According to reports of the meeting, the two discussed advancing civic administration and economic measures and Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. This is the second time within five months that Kahlon has gone to Palestinian Authority (PA) territory to meet with Hamdallah, and this time, too, the meeting was the result of US pressure on Israel to offer the Palestinians goodwill economic gestures.
- The previous meeting, held late in the evening of May 31, was ostensibly to brief the Palestinians about a series of economic measures approved by the Israeli defense Cabinet 10 days earlier in a bid to curry favor with President Donald Trump on the eve of his visit to Israel and the Palestinian town of Bethlehem. The economic package was approved by majority vote despite the objections of the HaBayit HaYehudi party, which is part of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government. At the time, Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of government activities in the territories, accompanied Kahlon to Ramallah. The two informed the Palestinians about the Cabinet decision, which they had already heard in detail from Israeli media in real time 10 days before the presidential visit.
- And what has happened since? "Not much," a senior source in the office of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told Al-Monitor, speaking on condition of anonymity. At the May 31 meeting, he said, the main issue on the agenda was the Palestinian housing crisis in the Israeli-controlled Area C of the West Bank, "but the Cabinet's decision [on the issue] was deliberately vague so that nothing came of it." The source added that the only change since that meeting was progress on the construction of a new Palestinian industrial zone in the village of Tarkumiyeh near Hebron. "Although the deal had been pretty much sewn up before that meeting, the plans were ready and what was left was to remove some red tape, which would not have happened to this day were it not for US pressure," the source said.
- A month after the Kahlon-Hamdallah meeting, Israel gave the green light for the industrial zone project, the Palestinian government approved the plans and construction went ahead. It is scheduled to be complete in three years. The zone will include a PA customs office, grain silos and a fuel depot, providing some 20,000 future jobs. Although significant for the Palestinians, Israel "has not budged an inch" on the most burning issue for the Palestinians — permits for the construction of Palestinian homes in Area C, according to the source.
- It would appear that the position taken by the HaBayit HaYehudi ministers did influence the government: Progress was made on the industrial park that would provide jobs for the Palestinians, but no progress was made on allowing Palestinians to build homes. The Israeli West Bank settlers perceive such a move as changing the Jewish-Palestinian balance. And

now, the Americans applied pressure once again, and Kahlon and Mordechai drove to Ramallah. The US team seems to have a well-ordered plan. First, Israel must provide significant economic benefits in order to create a conducive atmosphere of trust between the two sides that would also strengthen Abbas' rule. Only then will the sides start talking about diplomatic negotiations, according to the American scenario.

- “The Americans have time. They’re working without hurrying,” said the Palestinian source. Every time the Palestinians think the Americans are about to unveil the blueprint for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, it turns out that there’s still a ways to go, the official added. Trump’s envoy to the Middle East appears, indeed, to be in no rush. In the wake of this week’s meeting in Ramallah, Jason Greenblatt posted on his Twitter account a photo of Kahlon, Hamdallah, Mordechai and the head of Palestinian intelligence Majid Freij, all smiling. “Important progress last night between Israeli & Palestinian sides,” he tweeted in satisfaction. “Meaningful steps forward on key economic issues — revenues, customs, and investment — that help support the search for peace.”
- The Kahlon-Hamdallah meeting proves the extent of the American envoy’s influence and his ability to advance measures that Israel would have rejected were it not afraid of the US reaction to its refusal. Netanyahu’s concerns are also evident in his decision to suspend voting on proposed legislation that would annex Israeli settlements to Jerusalem’s municipality. Netanyahu actually conceded to his ministers that even on an issue so close to his heart — Jerusalem — “we must coordinate with the Americans.”
- The timing of Greenblatt’s pressure on Netanyahu to send Kahlon to Ramallah is somewhat inconvenient for the Israeli leader. Unlike the first Hamdallah-Kahlon meeting that took place in the shadow of the Trump visit, the current political-diplomatic reality is very different. Hamas and Fatah, the two main Palestinian factions, are conducting talks within the framework of their recent reconciliation agreement on the formation of a unity government of which Hamas will be a member. Netanyahu has already made his views on the subject clear in a Cabinet decision, the thrust of which is that Israel will not negotiate with any Palestinian government that relies on Hamas.
- Despite it all, Netanyahu instructed Kahlon to set out for a public meeting in Ramallah with a Palestinian prime minister who will probably head a future unity government if one is established because that is what Greenblatt asked Netanyahu to do as instructed by Trump. Kahlon explained to his fellow legislators in the center-right Kulanu Party, which he heads, that despite the Cabinet’s decision, “such meetings are important for us, important for the defense authorities and important to the Palestinians, too.” He noted that he had received permission from Netanyahu to conduct the meeting, which was also coordinated with the Trump administration. One is left to wonder to what extent Greenblatt can lean on the Israelis, and how long Netanyahu, who is fully aware of the objections of coalition partner HaBayit HaYehudi, can keep talking tough and then caving in.