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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, November 2

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News Excerpts

November 2, 2017

Ha'aretz

Rabin's Son: My Father Didn't Try to Silence Opponents

The incitement against Yitzhak Rabin continues to this day, said the son of the prime minister who was assassinated 22 years ago this week. Yuval Rabin said his father was never treated with kid gloves by the media, yet his father did not initiate legislation or act to silence his opponents. After the official ceremony at Mount Herzl, another ceremony was held in the Knesset, in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to Yuval Rabin's remarks, calling for "national reconciliation and unity."

AFP

Gabbay Reiterates Support for Two-State Solution

The leader of Israel's opposition Labor party, Avi Gabbay, expressed strong support for a two-state solution with the Palestinians on Wednesday after his recent comments on settlements drew controversy. He added that any resolution with the Palestinians must also involve regional countries. Last month, Gabbay appeared to shift to the right by saying that Israeli settlements could be retained in a future peace deal with the Palestinians, statements that were criticized by some of members of his traditionally dovish party.

Ynet

Polls: Likud Largest Party, but Right Bloc Loses Power

Likud would remain the largest party the next elections, but the right-wing-Haredi bloc that makes up the current coalition government would lose power, two recent polls showed on Wednesday evening. According to a poll by the Israeli News Company, if the elections were held today, Likud would have won 24 out of the 120 Knesset seats—six spots less than what it currently holds. However, this would still put Netanyahu's party ahead of the Zionist Union, led by Labor leader Gabbay, which would've received 21 seats. Overall, the right-Haredi bloc, which currently holds power, would hold 62 seats, while the center-left bloc would have 58 seats.

Mako

Jordan Demands Israel Replace its Ambassador

Three months after an Israeli security guard shot two Jordanians to death, Jordan has presented a new ultimatum: Jordanian officials are not only demanding that the security guard be prosecuted and have refused to let Israeli officials interview eyewitnesses, they have now made ending the crisis contingent upon Israel appointing a new ambassador to replace Einat Shlain. The Jordanians now say that they are unwilling to allow Shlain, who had her picture taken along with the security guard at a public reception, return to Jordan.

Ha'aretz

IDF: Islamic Jihad Will Have Trouble Ignoring Israeli Strike

A senior officer in the Israeli army's Southern Command said Wednesday that it would be difficult for Islamic Jihad to restrain itself and not retaliate after Israel blew up the attack tunnel on the Gaza border on Monday. Nevertheless, the army's assessment is that, if there is a reaction to the destruction of the tunnel, its won't be on a scale that will lead to an escalation, the officer said, adding that Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, isn't interested in a confrontation now and won't allow Islamic Jihad to "run wild."

See also, [*"Rocket alert siren in Greater Tel Aviv area was false alarm," \(Ynet\)*](#)

Ha'aretz

Hamas Deputy Chief Meets Hezbollah Leader in Lebanon

Hamas's new deputy leader Salah al-Aruri recently met with Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The conversation reportedly focused on the current reconciliation process between Hamas and its rival Fatah and its implications for internal Palestinian politics and the region. In a statement, Hezbollah said the two groups had common cause as resistance organizations and who cooperate against Israeli aggression. The warming of ties between Hamas and Hezbollah began about a year ago, and was strengthened recently by the visit of a Hamas delegation to Tehran.

See also, [*"Hundreds of Israelis Are Flocking to Lebanon as Tourists - via Jordan, With a Palestinian ID," \(Ha'aretz\)*](#)

Ynet

IAF Strikes Syrian Arms Factory, Syria Retaliates

The Israeli Air Force reportedly attacked an armament factory in the area surrounding the Syrian city of Homs on Wednesday. The factory that was attacked was allegedly affiliated with Lebanon-based terrorist group Hezbollah. Earlier on Wednesday, Israeli planes were reported to have flown in the commercial mountain range over the Lebanese Mountains, before a massive explosion was heard on the Lebanese-Syrian border.

Times of Israel

UN Plan Calls for \$18M to Aid Palestinian Legal Efforts

In a recently released plan that outlines the world body's support for the Palestinian Authority from 2018-2022, the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) includes a budgetary blueprint that would allocate millions of dollars to specifically help Palestinians pursue international legal avenues against Israel. Those funds would be deployed to a conglomerate of different UN agencies, and will be used to "strengthen the capacity of Palestinian organizations to advocate effectively for the rights of Palestinians in the occupied territory" and help the UN with "its own advocacy on the impact of Israeli violations on Palestine's development prospects."

Britain Must Aton for the Balfour Declaration

By Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas

- Many British people will not know of Sir Arthur James Balfour, an early 20th century foreign secretary. For 12 million Palestinians, his name is all too familiar. On the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, the British government should take the opportunity to make things right.
- At his desk in London, on 2 November 1917, Balfour signed a letter promising the land of Palestine to the Zionist Federation, a recently established political movement whose goal was the creation of a Jewish state. He promised a land that was not his to promise, disregarding the political rights of those who already lived there. For the Palestinian people – my people – the events this letter triggered have been as devastating as they have been far-reaching. This British policy, to support Jewish immigration into Palestine while negating the Arab-Palestinian right to self-determination, created severe tensions between European Jewish immigrants and the native Palestinian population. Palestine (the last item on the decolonisation agenda) and we, its people, who sought our inalienable right to self-determination, instead suffered our greatest catastrophe – in Arabic the Nakba.
- In 1948 Zionist militias forcibly expelled more than 800,000 men, women and children from their homeland, perpetrating horrific massacres and destroying hundreds of villages in the process. I was 13 years old at the time of our expulsion from Safad. The occasion on which Israel celebrates its creation as a state, we Palestinians mark as the darkest day in our history. The Balfour declaration is not something that can be forgotten. Today, Palestinians number more than 12 million, and are scattered throughout the world. Some were forced out of their homeland in 1948, with more than 6 million still living in exile to this day. Those who managed to remain in their homes number roughly 1.75 million, and live within a system of institutionalized discrimination in what is now the state of Israel.
- Approximately 2.9 million live in the West Bank under a draconian military occupation-turned-colonisation, with 300,000 of that number being the native inhabitants of Jerusalem, who have so far resisted policies to force them out of their city. Two million live in the Gaza Strip, an open prison subjected to regular destruction through the full force of Israel's military apparatus. The Balfour declaration is not something to be celebrated – certainly not while one of the peoples affected continues to suffer such injustice. The creation of a homeland for one people resulted in the dispossession and continuing persecution of another – now a deep imbalance between occupier and occupied. The balance must be redressed, and Britain bears a great deal of responsibility in leading the way. Celebrations must wait for the day when everyone in this land has freedom, dignity and equality.
- The physical act of the signing of the Balfour declaration is in the past – it is not something that can be changed. But it is something that can be made right. This will require humility and courage. It will require coming to terms with the past, recognising mistakes, and taking concrete

steps to correct those mistakes. I salute the integrity of those British people calling on their government to take such steps: the 274 MPs who voted in favour of recognising the state of Palestine; the thousands who have petitioned their government to apologise for the Balfour declaration; the NGOs and solidarity groups turning out on the streets, advocating tirelessly for our rights as Palestinians.

- Despite the horrors we have endured in the past century, the Palestinian people have remained steadfast. We are a proud nation with a rich heritage of ancient civilisations, and the cradle of the Abrahamic faiths. Over the years we have adapted to the realities around us – the chain of events triggered in 1917 – and made deeply painful compromises for the sake of peace, beginning with the decision to accept a state on only 22% of our historical homeland while recognising the state of Israel, without any reciprocation thus far. We have endorsed the two-state solution for the past 30 years, a solution that becomes increasingly impossible with every passing day. As long as the state of Israel continues to be celebrated and rewarded, rather than held accountable to universal standards for its continued violations of international law, it will have no incentive to end the occupation. This is short-sighted.
- Israel, and friends of Israel, must realise that the two-state solution may well disappear, but the Palestinian people will still be here. We will continue to strive for our freedom, whether that freedom comes through the two-state solution or ultimately through equal rights for all those inhabiting historic Palestine. It is time for the British government to do its part. Concrete steps towards ending the occupation on the basis of international law and resolutions, including the most recent UN security council resolution 2334, and recognising the state of Palestine on the 1967 border, with East Jerusalem as its capital, can go some way towards fulfilling the political rights of the Palestinian people. Only once this injustice is set right will we have the conditions for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East – for the sake of Palestinians, Israelis and the rest of the region.

Hamas Pragmatism in Gaza Handover Hints at a New Future

By Avi Issacharoff

- History was made in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday. For the first time in a decade, control of all the border crossings was transferred by Hamas to the Palestinian Authority. This step could have dramatic implications for the future, primarily for those living in the coastal enclave, but also for Israel. This is the first concrete step of the reconciliation deal between Fatah, which runs the PA, and the Hamas terror organization which controls the Gaza Strip. Perhaps the tremendous skepticism over the chances of rapprochement between the two groups needs to be reexamined.
- For ten years the residents of the strip who wanted to leave through the Erez crossing had to pass through two checkpoints before they even reached the Israeli checkpoint. The southern-most checkpoint, known as four-four, was set up by Hamas shortly after it seized control in 2007's bloody coup. The next checkpoint, "five-five," was run by PA forces right at the entrance to the Erez crossing. The problem for the residents was not with the PA crossing, which was operated in coordination with the Israelis for entry to and from Israel. However, it was the Hamas checkpoint that caused them difficulties. Security personnel from the terror organization would check every person as they passed through, whether they were leaving for Israel or entering back into Gaza.
- Firstly, they did a routine examination of all belongings, partly to prevent alcohol or other banned substances entering the strip. Then there was a total security check; asking about the purpose of the visit, to or from the Gaza Strip. Those with various permits were nevertheless subject to full questioning to find out if they were Israeli agents, collaborators or received special treatment because they were associated with the PA. In other words people leaving the Strip were doubly suspect – as spies for Israel or spies for the PA. Hamas intelligence officers also operated at this checkpoint, applying unlimited pressure on those going through to try to persuade them to give information about what is going on in Israel, or to turn them into voluntary spies in Israeli territory. On Wednesday Hamas took down that checkpoint.
- One of the residents of Gaza speaking with the Times of Israel said, "This was a huge surprise for us. We didn't believe that they would take down four-four." Another resident who passed through the Erez crossing on Wednesday couldn't hide his happiness. "There is no more fear," he said. "No more four-four, no more security checks. It is finished." The same thing happened at Kerem Shalom crossing in the south. Hamas took down its checkpoint which was just outside the crossing and was there for both security and economic purposes. Every truck that passed through the crossing was forced to pay taxes to the Hamas coffers. This provided a huge financial boost to Hamas of tens of millions of shekels a year, if not more.
- Now Hamas removed its checkpoint and stopped collecting the taxes. Control of the crossings was transferred to the Palestinian Authority (which was already in the crossings, but had no

contact with the Hamas checkpoint). From now the PA is the sole authority that will collect taxes on imports. Another step which surprised many was that Hamas removed its officers from those crossings entirely. According to the first agreement signed in Cairo, the officers were to stay in their positions until a solution had been reached about the staff working for Hamas (almost 40,000 people including security forces).

- However, in discussions between Egyptian Hamas and PA representatives, Hamas agreed to remove its officers from the checkpoints immediately. Those officers who were removed are fuming at losing their jobs and don't know how they will earn a living. This concession came from the top of the organization in Gaza, and was not popular with many people, even within Hamas. Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook, former deputy chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, directly criticized the move and posted on Facebook that the way in which the officers were removed was not dignified. He hinted that the understandings from Tuesday night contradict those that were agreed upon in Cairo, and therefore, "are unlikely to succeed."
- True, there are still many reasons for skepticism and lots of question marks. The PA has not yet removed the sanctions it placed on the Strip. They are still in place. Additionally, security coordination between Israel and the PA in the West Bank were renewed and have returned to what they were in the past. The best proof of this was the public meeting between leaders of the PA and Israel's Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon along with Yoav Mordechai, head of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories.
- At the same time, the PA is continuing to make arrests of Islamic extremists. But it is very likely that we are at the beginning of a new era. In other words, reconciliation of a "Palestinian" kind — without forcing Hamas's Gazan troops to disarm, without stopping terror attacks in the West Bank, but with the PA ruling the citizens of Gaza and perhaps, in the slightly more distant future, elections.
- It must be admitted that Hamas has made dramatic concessions on the ground in the fields of security and finance. It also succeeded in containing the response to the harsh incident for the Palestinians — Israel's destruction of the Islamic Jihad terror tunnel on Monday, which killed nine terrorists with five still unaccounted for. Such an incident in the past would have most likely led to a massive escalation. All of this hints that perhaps, just perhaps, this time there has been a real change of goal by Hamas. Its leadership is interested in reconciliation, there is no doubt about that, and the question now is only what that will look like.
- What will Israel do with the new reality it faces? Will it continue to distinguish between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank with regard to allowing patients to enter Israel? What about letting workers into Israel? Will the number of permits to cross through Erez into Israel be increased as a result of this step? Already on Wednesday Mordechai instructed the head of Israel's Gaza District Coordination and Liaison Office to hold a meeting with representatives of the PA to discuss the operating of the crossings on the border with the Gaza Strip.

- It may be that this step of improving of the crossings and the promised reopening of the Rafah crossing to Egypt in a couple of weeks, will lead to a real economic improvement in the Strip. Yet Hamas and Islamic Jihad apparently continue to dig attack tunnels and build rockets. But at least it will ease the economic humanitarian crisis which could have led to another war with Israel.