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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 27, 2017

Associated Press

Israel Races to Head Off UN Settlement 'Blacklist'

Weeks ahead of the expected completion of a U.N. database of companies that operate in Israel's West Bank settlements, Israel and the Trump Administration are working feverishly to prevent its publication. While Israel is usually quick to brush off U.N. criticism, officials say they are taking the so-called "blacklist" seriously, fearing its publication could have devastating consequences by driving companies away, deterring others from coming and prompting investors to dump shares of Israeli firms. Dozens of major Israeli companies, as well as multinationals that do business in Israel, are expected to appear on the list.

Ha'aretz

US: PLO Mission Will Remain Open For At Least 90 Days

The Trump administration has decided that the Palestinian diplomatic delegation in Washington, D.C. will remain open for at least the next 90 days, but its activity will be limited to actions that support efforts to renew the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The decision was announced on Friday night, a week after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent a letter to the Palestinian leadership warning that the delegation might be shut down as a result of statements made by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who called on the International Criminal Court to investigate Israel and prosecute actions by Israelis.

Jerusalem Post

PA: Hamas Preventing Government from Operating in Gaza

Despite the looming deadline for the Palestinian Authority to take full responsibility for the Gaza Strip on December 1, Hamas has barely empowered the PA government to operate in the small territory, PA Civil Affairs Minister Hussein al-Sheikh said. Fatah and Hamas signed an agreement on October 12 in Cairo to advance reconciliation efforts and restore the PA's governing authority in Gaza. According to Sheikh, Hamas has prevented the PA from collecting taxes and calling up its employees to work in its ministries in Gaza and stifled discussions on the future of the Strip's security.

Jerusalem Post

Barkat Opposes Plan to Cut Arab Districts from Jerusalem

A plan to cut off Arab neighborhoods located behind the security barrier is not an acceptable solution, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat said on Wednesday. The plan to cut off neighborhoods located behind the security barrier is being promoted by Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage Minister Ze'ev Elkin, who has suggested the establishment a separate municipal entity to govern these areas. These areas, which include Kafr Akab in the north and the Shuafat Refugee Camp, were physically cut off the capital when the security barrier was erected in 2004.

Times of Israel

Israel Says it will 'Lend a Hand' in Egypt's Fight Against IS

Israel has reportedly assisted Egypt throughout its fight against the Islamic State insurgency in the northern Sinai Peninsula, including intelligence sharing and even allegedly carrying out drone strikes against the terrorists. But in the wake of the deadliest terror attack ever on Egyptian soil, Israeli officials were evasive on specific actions being taken by Israel following the devastating mosque massacre on Friday that killed over 300 people, including at least 27 children.

Ha'aretz

High Court Denies Palestinian Petition to Recover Lands

The Israeli High Court of Justice on Thursday denied a petition filed by Palestinians who were demanding that lands they own in the Jordan Valley that are being cultivated by settlers be returned to them. During the hearing, the court tried to persuade the Palestinians to accept financial compensation rather than the land, which is officially in a closed military zone. But when they refused, the justices ruled against them. The petition was filed in 2013 by a group of Palestinians following a Haaretz report that settlers were cultivating land that had been seized by military order in the late 1960s. The land is situated between a security fence and the actual Jordanian border.

Ha'aretz

Poll: Yesh Atid Tied With Netanyahu's Likud

Israeli opposition party Yesh Atid is running neck and neck with the ruling Likud party in an electoral poll that Israel's Channel 10 announced on Sunday. Each party received 24 seats in the Knesset poll. Meanwhile, Zionist Union, the traditional opposition leader, slid two seats relative to the previous poll to 17 seats as the gap with Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid continued to widen. The overall trend indicates a slight weakening of the right in contrast to a small gain for the center-left, compared to two previous polls. However, the center-left still lacks the ability to block the right from maintaining its hold on the government according to the latest poll.

Ynet

Haredi Parties Say it's Up to PM to Maintain Coalition

The political system showed cautious signs of optimism after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced on Sunday he had reached an agreement with the Haredi parties to pass the Shabbat bills. The agreement ended a coalition crisis that had reached its apex with the resignation of Health Minister Yaakov Litzman (United Torah Judaism) earlier Sunday. As a sign of trust, the Likud party promised to pass the Shabbat bills by next week.

See also, [*"Government reaches compromise over Sabbath work impasse," \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

Three Problems With Trump's 'Ultimate' Peace Plan

By Ami Ayalon, Gilead Sher and Orni Petruschka

- According to recent reports, President Donald Trump is going to unveil a Middle East peace plan early next year. Last month's unannounced visit to Saudi Arabia by three top White House aides -- Jared Kushner, Jason Greenblatt and Dina Powell -- to discuss this plan, along with Vice President Mike Pence's announcement that he will visit Jerusalem, Ramallah and Cairo next month, give the reports credence.
- As Israelis who have served at the forefront of our country's security, diplomatic and economic ventures, we want the Trump administration to succeed in this effort. The absence of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, or at least genuine progress toward one, jeopardizes Israel's security and its status as the democratic nation-state of the Jewish people. Moreover, a coalition of moderate Arab countries and Israel, which would be the most effective regional vehicle to counter Iran, is simply not possible without advancement on the Israeli-Palestinian track. To make this happen, the White House needs to understand the failures of the past and the counterproductive steps it has taken so far. Three of these stand out.
- First, Trump's refusal to declare his administration's support for a two-state solution -- starting with his dismissive comment in February that "I'm looking at two state and one state, and I like what both parties like" -- is counterproductive and needs to be rectified. We Israelis cannot accept a one-state future. That "solution," whereby all inhabitants of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River live together in one political entity, can lead only to civil war, as in Syria, or to a Middle Eastern version of South African apartheid. Either outcome will spell the end of Israel as the democratic Jewish homeland and intensify Muslim-Jewish violence, which will metastasize beyond the Israeli-Palestinian arena, becoming another crisis the Trump administration will have to confront. In addition, the majority of Israel's Knesset and Israelis (and Palestinians) favor a two-state future, even though Washington focuses on the rejectionists in Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's coalition.
- Second, past attempts to attain an agreement failed primarily because of their nearly exclusive reliance on bilateral negotiations. The goal somehow became just getting the two sides to the negotiating table. Instead, the Trump team must acknowledge that a comprehensive peace agreement is not possible in the near future, and use an incremental approach: moving the parties toward a reality of two states for two peoples, without shutting the door on negotiations aimed at reaching an accord. This entails pressing Israelis and Palestinians to take constructive steps independently to preserve conditions for a two-state solution and gradually create a two-state reality, arresting the slide toward one-state. Israel, for example, should declare it has no sovereignty claims over areas east of the security barrier it built in the West Bank, although it requires a security presence, such as along the Jordan River. And the Palestinians should do

more to counter terror and incitement against Israelis and end their campaign for a global boycott of Israel.

- Third, contrary to Netanyahu's assertions, settlements pose a major obstacle to progress. Trump should learn from one of his predecessors how to overcome this hurdle: Identify the main settlement blocs adjacent to the 1949 armistice lines (the so-called Green Line) and the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, where some 80 percent of the settlers live, and then differentiate these areas from the isolated settlements. President George W. Bush made this distinction in his 2004 letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Regrettably, the current Israeli government is trying to erase this differentiation. The Trump administration should resist this attempt and make sure that Israel will demarcate its future borders based on the June 4, 1967, lines, along with territorial swaps, keeping the main settlement blocs under Israel's sovereignty; halt all settlement construction in areas east of the West Bank security fence; provide full equal rights for all residents within these borders, and allow sufficient space for creating a state for the millions of Palestinians outside its borders.
- This approach will require the eventual relocation of some 100,000 settlers to areas within the future borders. This is not insurmountable, as settlement supporters claim. Rather, a comprehensive survey of settlers commissioned by the nonpartisan organization we founded, Blue White Future, and released in 2014 found that, if compensated, nearly 30 percent of these settlers would voluntarily relocate even without a peace agreement, and many others would follow after one was signed. In addition, the administration's proposal should allow Israel to keep its military forces in the Palestinian territories until an agreement is reached. And finally, the U.S. will need to marshal regional support for this plan.
- As every U.S. president since Richard Nixon has found, this peace process is a difficult undertaking. But Trump and his team must also recognize that the Israeli-Palestinian status quo is untenable. He needs to set his sights on a clear, stated objective -- two states for two peoples -- and aim to move both sides closer to that reality. This approach is the best chance for bringing some stability to Middle East, enabling a strong regional coalition to thwart Iran, and assuring Israel's future as a secure, Jewish and democratic state with a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside it. That might not be the "ultimate deal" Trump craves, but it would constitute a historic achievement.

Is Israel Shifting Stance on Trump's Peace Initiative?

By Uri Savir

- According to a senior Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs official who spoke to AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intends to react to a possible US peace plan "more positively than expected; perhaps even with a yes." Still, the official emphasized that Netanyahu does not want a two-state solution. The most he is ready to accept is a Palestinian state with limited sovereignty, providing that all of the West Bank remains under Israel's security control. Following developments in Kurdistan and Catalonia, Netanyahu told his inner circle that Israel will publicly question the notion of sovereignty for all; definitely the notion of full sovereignty. He is actually thinking of a Palestinian autonomy plan, according to parameters acceptable by his right-wing coalition, although obviously unacceptable by the Palestinians.
- The official said that intense deliberations are taking place between Jerusalem and Washington. On the Israeli side, it is the prime minister's office and Israel's Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer. On the American side, it is the Middle East peace team, with its two key players — White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt. Apparently, the administration is getting ready to announce a proposal for Israeli-Palestinian peace with a regional — mainly Saudi — component and with regional cooperation on the anti-fundamentalism front. Netanyahu is interested in the regional anti-Iran cooperation while paying a minimal "price" on the Palestinian issue, so that he would maintain his special relationship with US President Donald Trump. A senior US diplomat in Tel Aviv told AI-Monitor that the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, the Consulate General in Jerusalem and Greenblatt are all spending much time and effort to advance a rapprochement between the parties and agreement on general guidelines for a regional framework. The diplomat noted that these efforts are developed specifically according to the orders of the president, with a significant involvement of national security adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster.
- The administration would like to present a different approach to conflict resolution, compared with the Barack Obama and Bill Clinton administrations. While the previous Democratic Party administrations were under the impression that Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic progress would lead to regional cooperation, the Trump administration believes in an opposite dynamic, where regional cooperation based on the Riyadh declaration will lead to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Trump and his national security team believe there is a common interest on the pragmatic side of the region, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia (championed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman), to weaken the Iranian regional expansion ambition and to fight radical terror. Such a common interest could also bring about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. According to the American diplomat, ever since the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has become a key player in the process, alongside the Saudi crown prince. Egypt also sides with Saudi Arabia in its war in Yemen and its anti-Hezbollah policies.

- The American plan will most probably be made public in the weeks to come, and it will be of a regional nature. It will emphasize regional cooperation against radical Islamists and Iranian ambitions. The United States will lead cooperative measures and consultations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations should take place within this context to bring about regional peace. This is an ambitious plan, yet according to the American diplomat, a feasible one; it does not impose or rule out a two-state solution. The plan restrains settlement expansion and incitement to violence. It also includes rigid security and anti-terror measures for Israel for the long run and rejects the right of return for Palestinian refugees. The plan refers to Jerusalem only in a religious sense. A major emphasis will be placed on economic investments for the Palestinians, as well as regional cooperation, anti-terror measures and normalization of relations between the Arab states and Israel, on the basis of the 2002 Saudi peace initiative. A kind of Pax Americana a la Trump in the whole region. Iran is the common enemy and the United States is the common friend.
- As expected, the Palestinian leadership is still suspicious about the United States' intentions. A senior PLO official noted on condition of anonymity, "While Trump is clearly in Israel's camp, we will coordinate our reactions with Egypt and Saudi Arabia." Another Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs official told Al-Monitor that the Israeli reaction is expected to be more nuanced. He agreed with his colleague (at the beginning of this article) and confirmed that Netanyahu is ready to engage positively with an American initiative leading to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, provided that Israel's security control in the West Bank is maintained within a new agreement and that regional peace would strengthen Israel's security and anti-terror stance. Netanyahu, he noted, had said so to the American envoys. And so, Jerusalem seems to be refocusing its agenda — a shift that might be influenced by the prime minister's troubles in other areas.