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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, November 29*

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# News Excerpts

November 27, 2019

## Times of Israel

### **Bill to Prevent East Jerusalem Withdrawal Cleared for Vote**

The Knesset's Constitution, Justice and Law Committee on Tuesday green-lighted for its final votes a bill requiring the support of two-thirds of the Knesset to hand over any part of Jerusalem to the Palestinians under a future peace deal. As part of the revised bill passed on Tuesday, the Israeli government would also be able to remove the Shuafat refugee camp and Kafr Aqab from the control of the Jerusalem Municipality and transfer them to a yet-to-be established local council. No date has been set for the final votes.

## Israel Hayom

### **Egypt Ups Pressure on PA to Resume Peace Talks**

Egypt and other moderate Arab countries are pressuring Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to resume peace negotiations with Israel, a senior Egyptian official told Israel Hayom on Monday. A senior official in Abbas' office in Ramallah confirmed the report, telling Israel Hayom: "The PA is under immense pressures from countries in the region to return to the negotiating table with Israel and renew, fully and comprehensively, security coordination with Israel, in an attempt to build a regional front against Iran's influence in the region and the fight against terror."

## Washington Post

### **Pence: Trump 'Actively Considering' Embassy Move**

President Trump is "actively considering" how to follow through on his pledge to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, Vice President Pence said Tuesday, reopening a divisive question that puts the president at odds with military and diplomatic advisers and close allies. Pence drew whoops and applause at an event marking the 70th anniversary of the United Nations vote paving the way for establishing the state of Israel when he contrasted the Trump administration's stance on the embassy to that of past U.S. administrations.

## Ha'aretz

### **King Abdullah: Lack of Peace Progress Fueling Extremism**

Jordan's King Abdullah II met on Tuesday with senior White House officials to urge the Trump administration to promote a plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace based on the two-state solution. The king warned the officials that a lack of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue could fuel extremism and terrorism in the Middle East. Since arriving in Washington this week, King Abdullah has met with Vice President Mike Pence, as well as with National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster; President Donald Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, Trump's special envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

AFP

## **Hamas, Fatah Spar over Fate of Gaza Employees**

The two leading Palestinian factions sparred Tuesday over the fate of tens of thousands of employees in Gaza ahead of a key deadline, the latest sign that a landmark reconciliation accord was faltering. A key sticking point has been the fate of tens of thousands of PA employees who stopped working when Hamas seized Gaza in a 2007 quasi-civil war. Hamas hired its own employees afterwards and the future of the two sets of staff is a key issue to resolve. In a statement Tuesday the PA government based in the West Bank stressed the “necessity of all old employees returning to work,” instructing ministers to arrange for the transition. Hamas called the decision a “violation” of pre-existing agreements between the two sides.

See also, [“Palestinian popular movement to press Hamas, Fatah on reconciliation.” \(Al Monitor\)](#)

Ynet

## **Kahlon Told: Support 'Police Bill' or Face New Elections**

Despite being the head of his own Kulanu party, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon was allegedly given an ultimatum on Tuesday by the Likud party: either vote with the coalition in favor of the recommendations bill or face new elections. The recommendations bill would prevent the police from offering its opinion in instances when the investigation includes an attorney, with the official reason being that they would be the best authority to decide the case's chance of winning an indictment. Most notably, the recommendations bill would apply to the current investigations against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, thus preventing the police from issuing a recommendation to indict him, in the chance that their investigations lead to that conclusion.

Ha'aretz

## **AG Seeks to Save Buildings in Outpost From Demolition**

As a March demolition deadline approaches against 15 buildings in Netiv Ha'avot, an outpost of the West Bank settlement of Elazar, Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit is considering the issue of building permits that would spare portions of six of the buildings. Nine of the structures subject to the demolition order issued by the High Court of Justice were built on privately owned Palestinian land, but six are mostly on state-owned land. The portions of these buildings that are on Palestinian land would still have to be demolished.

Jerusalem Post

## **Hamas: Weapons to Fight Israel to be Sent to West Bank**

Weapons used by Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip to fight Israel will be transferred to the West Bank, Hamas deputy chief in Gaza Khalil al-Hayya said on Monday. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other armed Palestinian groups are thought to possess very few weapons in the West Bank. “It is our right to resist the occupation until it ends,” Hayya told a press conference in Gaza on Monday, without elaborating on how such a plan would be fulfilled.

## **Abbas Under Pressure to Accept Trump's 'Ultimate' Deal**

By Ismail Abdel Hadi

- As all attempts to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict faltered over the past years, the current US administration seems adamant about making efforts to reach a peaceful solution. On Nov. 6, President Mahmoud Abbas was summoned to make an urgent visit to Saudi Arabia, where he was told that the US administration has started developing a new blueprint to end the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis through an “ultimate deal” offered by US President Donald Trump and his team based on the peaceful principle of the two-state solution.
- According to Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, leaks from well-informed Palestinian sources revealed that during his visit to Saudi Arabia, Abbas received from Saudi mediator Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman a US offer to establish a Palestinian state “on paper” only, without such a state being sovereign or having the ability to make decisions of any kind. In return, the Israeli settlements would be frozen, economic incentives in Area C set out by the Oslo agreement would be provided and circulation at the Karameh crossing with Jordan and the Rafah crossing with Egypt would be facilitated. The newspaper showed that the US proposal is the only viable option for the United States and that if Abbas and the Palestinian leadership reject it, they won’t be provided with another solution — meaning that the US administration may renege on its commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Abdel Sattar Qassem, a political science professor at An-Najah National University in Nablus, told Al-Monitor, “The way President Abbas was summoned to visit Saudi Arabia is unfathomable and raises several question marks, especially as it coincided with the resignation of Saad Hariri from the premiership of the Lebanese government.” He said, “What was put forward during the meeting held between Abu Mazen [Abbas] and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was serious, as the latter briefed Abu Mazen on the future of the region and the fate of the Palestinian cause through the US offer and other decisive decisions aimed at ending the existing conflict.”
- Qassem added, “The US administration will put forth plans aimed at solving the outstanding issue of the Palestinian refugees by settling them in the countries they reside in. Through the Saudi crown prince, the United States is seeking to get President Abbas’ forced approval on such a step, especially at a time when the [Palestinian] president is taking tougher stances on the peace process and the two-state solution principle. Add to this his refusal to renounce the legitimate Palestinian constants that include the right of return and the need to put an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Also, [Abbas] refuses to take part in the increasingly tense regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.”
- He noted, “There are Arab parties firmly working to topple Abbas and find a suitable alternative, as President Abbas will not accept the US offer easily. There is a deeply entrenched national

partnership working on finding satisfactory solutions to the issue, and it might take Abbas a while to respond to the offer given the lack of a suitable alternative to replace him. But if he does not accept the US demands aimed at bringing about peace and finding a two-state solution, then he would be forced to resign, and this would put the region in a complicated situation that would lead to bad repercussions.” Saudi Arabia had told Abbas to accept the US peace plan or resign.

- Saleh al-Naami, an independent researcher focusing on Israeli affairs, told the PalToday website that Hamas’ handover of the Gaza Strip to the national consensus government and the movement’s subsequent visit to Iran, which is Saudi Arabia’s enemy, were two factors behind Saudi Arabia’s summoning of Abbas. Naami noted in a Facebook post published by the same website, “According to the Israeli leaks, the summoning of Abbas came following prolonged contacts between the Saudi crown prince and the US president two days before the visit, and Abbas is required to be very careful and keep a watchful eye on all developments.” In turn, Yusuf Ibrahim, an independent writer and political analyst, told Al-Monitor that Abbas’ visit came against the background of the secret visit paid to Saudi Arabia weeks ago by Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and special envoy to the peace process, in an attempt to push the settlement process forward.
- Abbas received several dictates as part of the US plan to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such a plan would grant full citizenship and rights to the Palestinians in the diaspora and would witness the return of direct negotiations with Israel. This comes at a time when the number of Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon is on the rise amid attempts to find a solution through a potential settlement process. Ibrahim said, “The ultimate deal that is being drafted by the US administration is based on many principles and conditions that Abbas alone does not have the right to decide on, as there are Palestinian rights and constants that cannot be easily relinquished.” He added, “This step came at an inconvenient and very difficult time during which the Palestinian reconciliation is facing outstanding issues such as the security issue in Gaza and the issue of the Gazan employees.”
- According to Masr al-Arabia, the ultimate deal includes many articles, which, according to the United States, provide solutions based on the two-state principle, in return for generous financial Arab support, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to the Palestinian Authority. In his September speech at the United Nations, Abbas announced that Israel had rejected all international initiatives aimed at finding a solution, including the Arab peace initiative, and said that the two-state solution is in jeopardy and that Palestinians cannot stand still in the face of this threat. “We will have to take steps or look for alternatives to preserve our national existence,” he said. The US president is trying to take advantage of Abbas’ presence to make the deal happen before Abbas suddenly disappears and plunges the region in a state of chaos and instability. Add to this the good relationship between Abbas and Saudi Arabia, which may lead Abbas to approve the US demands under Saudi pressure.

## **Hamas' Survival Strategy**

By Shlomi Eldar

- The credibility crisis between Hamas and Fatah regarding the reconciliation agreement signed by both parties Oct. 12 can no longer be ignored. Differences of opinion have deepened, and in the last round of talks in Cairo on Nov. 21, the post-signing smiles were replaced by anger and open recriminations. It would seem that the gaps between the sides cannot be bridged. The first to express his frustration and announce that the reconciliation had reached a dead end was top Hamas official Salah Bardawil, the delegation member representing Hamas in the Cairo talks. In a video clip he disseminated (and then deleted shortly afterward, evidently under Egyptian pressure), Bardawil grumbled that Fatah is trying to sabotage the reconciliation. The Hamas official decisively declared that the talks had already failed, though his movement was determined not to adopt any drastic steps in the meantime.
- On the other hand, Hussein al-Sheikh, the Fatah delegation member to the talks, accused Hamas as the party guilty of placing obstacles in their path. Sheikh contended that the Palestinian government was not given responsibility for even 5% of the Palestinian Authority's (PA's) civil spheres of responsibility in the Strip, and that the weapons issue has not been resolved at all. Sheikh argued that Hamas does not really accept the "one weapon, one law" principle, where the PA is the sole governing and security authority. Israeli observers are keenly following the talks taking place between the sides. As my colleague Ben Caspit wrote in Al-Monitor, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made statements against the reconciliation, Israel has been actually trying to do what it can to make the reconciliation succeed, almost from the moment the plan was conceived. Israel supported the reconciliation due to Egyptian and American pressure. And there was probably also the component of Israel's clear interest in resolving the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.
- Members of Israel's security system hold that in spite of Egypt's efforts to promote the Palestinian reconciliation and in spite of Egypt's threats to both sides, both Hamas and Fatah are trying to stonewall the talks so as not to be blamed for the failure of the reconciliation. Beyond that, Hamas longs to maintain the breath of fresh air offered by Egypt to Gaza by opening the Rafah crossing on condition of reconciliation. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, for his part, desperately needs Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's support for his planned diplomatic actions at the end of his tenure. Therefore, despite the distrust between the sides and the clear understanding that neither side is really and truly ready to forfeit or compromise on its iron principles, Hamas and Fatah continue to go through the motions of discussions and debate.
- According to an Israeli security source who spoke to Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, Hamas' actions are especially interesting because it teaches us about its intentions on the ground over time. Research analysis, said the source, shows us that the central pillar of the



strategy adopted by the Hamas leadership is that of stalling for time in order to survive until the winds change direction. Hamas, said the source, is a movement whose DNA requires it to take a break when its situation deteriorates. Thus, for example, every time that Hamas was felled by the Israel Defense Forces and weakened almost existentially, it initiated a "tahidya" (calm) that allowed it to survive, rehabilitate itself and then strengthen itself.

- The source said Hamas leaders now seek an internal and regional tahidya that will allow the movement to survive the difficult days in the first stage and then consolidate its vision for the future in the second stage. The source said Hamas' goal is to conquer the central Palestinian government, which would enable the movement to maintain and preserve its important assets, mainly its military wing. In other words, it seems that the Hamas movement has its eyes fixed on conquering the West Bank. In October, it was publicized that Jordanian King Abdullah II rejected the request of Khaled Meshaal, the former head of Hamas' political bureau, to open a Hamas office in Amman, evidently as part of the plans of the former leader to conquer the PA presidency in the post-Abbas era.
- At the onset of the Cairo talks last week, both sides announced that they had come to an agreement on holding PA elections at the end of 2018. It was the Hamas delegation that had pushed to quickly set a date for elections, even before resolving the major issues. From Hamas' point of view, that is enough time for it to take advantage of the tahidya to organize itself and plan for the elections. According to the security source, Hamas' vision has adapted itself to the dead-end reality in which the movement finds itself, including Abbas' iron-clad demand that Hamas disarm itself as a precondition for reconciliation. As Hamas sees it, its only option is to conquer the PA, just like in 2006 when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip. At that time, Hamas also had its back to the wall and came to the conclusion that its only option left was elections, although Hamas at the time did not imagine it would achieve such a rousing victory.
- Toward the end of the second intifada (March-April 2004), Israel began a series of targeted killings of Hamas' diplomatic leadership. Within a month, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and his successor Abdel al-Rantisi were eliminated. The movement's leadership, headed by Meshaal, was forced to make a historic strategic agreement: to stop the suicide attacks against Israelis, stop the intifada (Hamas was one the intifada's prime leaders) and transform the movement's center of gravity to politics instead of terror. So in order to survive, Hamas decided to organize itself toward elections. Today, it may have come to the same conclusion for the very same reasons. A future victory in the 2018 elections, when the "one weapon, one law" option is on the table, will allow Hamas to retain its assets. Until then, all that remains for it to do is to play reconciliation games. "In this long time span, anything can happen," the source concluded. Like in the Yiddish tale, "either the nobleman will die or the dog will die." In other words: Either Abbas will resign or something else dramatic will take place that will cause the public to forget all about the dismantling of the military wing, Hamas' pride and joy and bastion of strength.