



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, November 30*

### Headlines:

- On Eve of Gaza Deadline, Hamas-Fatah Rift Widens
- White House: Jerusalem Embassy Move Report 'Premature'
- Democratic Senators Urge PM: Do Not Demolish Sussia
- 'Huge Effort' to Include Israel in Saudi Chess Tournament
- Ministers Uneasy about Police Bill, but Won't Block It
- Israel Eases Restrictions on US-Bound Gazan Travelers
- After Embassy Shooting, Israel to Appoint Jordan Envoy
- Report: PM Asked Mubarak to Settle Palestinians in Sinai

### Commentary:

- **Washington Post "70 Years after Partition, a Two-state Solution is Still Possible"**
  - By David Makovsky
- **AI Monitor: "Will Israel Launch a Preemptive Strike Against Assad?"**
  - By Ben Caspit

# News Excerpts

November 30, 2017

Ha'aretz

## **On Eve of Gaza Deadline, Hamas-Fatah Rift Widens**

The day before the full responsibility for governance in Gaza is to pass from Hamas' hands, the rift between Hamas and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority appears to be only widening. On Wednesday afternoon, Hamas officials barred PA officials from entering their offices in the Strip out of opposition to a decision made by the PA government – that all officials should return to work, even if no solution to their salary dispute had been found for them. An Egyptian delegation that arrived in Gaza two days ago has been meeting to resolve the disputes. But sources on both sides say the distance remains large despite statements of commitment to the reconciliation.

AFP

## **White House: Jerusalem Embassy Move Report 'Premature'**

The White House on Wednesday said reports that it is poised to move the US embassy to Jerusalem were "premature," ahead of a decision deadline. The White House urged caution after an Israeli TV report suggested a decision would come as soon as Sunday and that the US president would declare that he recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Trump has so far decided not to fulfill his campaign pledge to shift the embassy from Tel Aviv. But the US president faces a December 4 deadline to publicly restate US policy.

See also, ["Report: Trump to recognize Jerusalem as capital." \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Democratic Senators Urge PM: Do Not Demolish Sussia**

Ten U.S. senators sent a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu on Wednesday urging him to stop the demolition of Sussia and Khan al-Ahmar, two Palestinian villages in the West Bank that Israeli authorities say were built illegally. Among those who signed the letter are two prominent Jewish members of the Senate, Senators Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA). All members who signed the letter are affiliated with the Democratic Party. The Israeli High Court ordered to halt Sussia's demolition and allow residents, among the poorest in the West Bank, to remain in the village.

Ha'aretz

## **'Huge Effort' to Include Israel in Saudi Chess Tournament**

The World Chess Federation is undertaking a "huge effort" to include Israeli players in a speed chess championship hosted by Saudi Arabia next month, the federation said on Monday. Should their visas be granted, it would mark the first time Saudi Arabia has publicly hosted Israelis. Saudi Arabia does not recognize Israel and there are no formal ties between the two countries.

Times of Israel

## **Ministers Uneasy about Police Bill, but Won't Block It**

Several cabinet ministers voiced reservations about the so-called police recommendations bill, as a Knesset committee convened Thursday to fine-tune the legislation for its final votes next week and a rights group took the fight to the High Court of Justice. The bill by Likud MK David Amsalem has widely been seen as an attempt by lawmakers to shield Netanyahu, who is under investigation in two ongoing corruption probes, from public fallout should police find sufficient evidence against him to warrant criminal charges.

Times of Israel

## **Israel Eases Restrictions on US-Bound Gazan Travelers**

Israel on Wednesday launched a program to provide shuttle service for Gazans who need to travel to the US Consulate in Jerusalem — an operation that could ease one of the many restrictions it places on Palestinians who want to exit the blockaded territory. Israel allows only a small number of Gazans to travel through Israel, mostly for medical care or other humanitarian grounds. It cites security considerations for the tight restrictions.

Ynet

## **After Embassy Shooting, Israel to Appoint Jordan Envoy**

Israel reportedly plans to appoint a new ambassador to Jordan in a bid to calm Amman's anger over the current envoy's handling of a shooting by an embassy guard in July. During July's incident, an Israeli security guard shot and killed a Jordanian teenager who stabbed him with a screwdriver in the Amman mission compound, as well as the Jordanian landlord, who was killed by stray bullets. Mossad Head Yossi Cohen has been reported to be carrying out negotiations on Israel's behalf with Jordan, to return an Israeli ambassador to Amman.

Ynet

## **Report: PM Asked Mubarak to Settle Palestinians in Sinai**

Former Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, confirmed on Wednesday past reports that in 2010, Netanyahu made him an offer to resettle Palestinians in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, as part of a land swap with the PA. Mubarak claims to have refused the offer, while BBC reports he agreed to the resettlement plan, as long as it was part of a larger agreement aimed at ending the Israeli-Arab conflict.

## 70 Years after Partition, a Two-state Solution is Still Possible

By David Makovsky

- Vice President Pence went to the Queens Museum in New York yesterday to commemorate the site of the old United Nations, which 70 years ago today voted for partition to divide the land and establish Arab and Jewish states. The question 70 years later is, is West Bank partition still feasible? Analysts wonder if the various players such as President Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas have the will to successfully launch such an effort — or if the best-laid plans will run aground for lack of political resolve.
- Aside from the issue of political will, there are those on both the right and left who say there is no way to reconcile the territorial issue and point to the growing West Bank settlements. Critics on the right want Israel to annex much of the West Bank but fail to take into account the international reaction to such a unilateral move. On the left, critics even want Israel to be replaced in its entirety and become a bi-national Israeli-Palestine state.
- Both approaches are delusional. Israel is not about to commit national suicide. Given the paucity of options, partition is still feasible. Indeed, newest data suggests that territorial dimension is solvable. A new website launched by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy called Settlements and Solutions seeks to use civilian satellite imagery to provide a better understanding of settler trends. The interplay of geography and demography in the West Bank matters — for it helps to address whether it is too late for Israelis and Palestinians to reach a compromise on the territorial issues, as well as on matters of security, refugees and the fate of Jerusalem.
- If we want to parse out territorial solutions, we need to delineate between two groups of settlers, for they have vastly different implications for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both groups live beyond the Green Line, the boundaries before the 1967 war; one group lives west of (within) the Israeli security barrier (constructed by the Israeli government during the Second Intifada of 2000-2005 to stymie the flow of Palestinian suicide bombers from the West Bank). The second group lives beyond or east of the security barrier. According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, approximately 85 percent of Israelis living east of the Green Line but within the security barrier's delineated area live in approximately 8 percent of the West Bank, in areas largely adjacent to Israeli urban areas. This translates to just under 556,000 Israelis living inside, or west, of the security barrier and more than 97,000 living outside of the barrier.
- The above does not suggest that there are not demographic threats that could end a two-state option. While the ratio of 85 percent in 8 percent of the land has remained largely steady, the number of settlers has grown. In 2009 there were 70,000 settlers living beyond the barrier — as of June 2017, that number has increased by 27,000. If, in a two-state solution, there were an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians regarding the relocation of these settlers, the

prospect of relocation would become increasingly difficult. Case in point: In contrast, approximately 8,000 settlers were relocated during the 2005 Gaza withdrawal. Of course, parties could agree in negotiations for the settlers to stay for a period of time.

- The numbers also highlight the changing nature of the settlement movement. Two settlements out of 139 now account for almost 30 percent of all West Bank settlers and 46 percent of the growth over the last year. The two locations are ultra-Orthodox settlements, denoting a shift since the settlement movement was launched in the late 1960s, largely by religious Zionists who saw the West Bank as biblical patrimony and viewed themselves as political warriors in the struggle to retain the West Bank as part of the State of Israel. In contrast, the ultra-Orthodox are largely motivated by socioeconomic concerns, especially affordable housing. This is a major demand for an ultra-Orthodox community in which birth-rate averages are an astounding 6.9 per family.
- Israel needs to align its settlement policy with a two-state approach that enables Israeli-Palestinian compromise. This would be a strong signal to counter the belief, reflected in Palestinian polls, that Israel wants the entire West Bank. None of this suggests that the barrier would necessarily be the border in a final-status agreement. That border would remain to be negotiated by the parties. It is not too late. Those on both the right and the left that rush to proclaim the death of the two-state solution due to settlement population growth are too fatalistic. One cannot be certain about the political will to make it happen, but 70 years later, there is — at least for now — a way.

## **Will Israel Launch a Preemptive Strike Against Assad?**

By Ben Caspit

- As the war in Syria dies down and the dust starts to settle, the enormity of Israel's strategic mistake during the long years of conflict is becoming all the more apparent. The first person to point this out publicly was Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) chief of Military Intelligence from 2006 to 2010. Yadlin is now the executive director of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, the country's most important research institution. On Nov. 23, he declared resolutely, "Israel made a mistake when it adopted a position of neutrality during the Syrian war. It should have done everything it could to bring down President Bashar al-Assad's regime as early as 2012." According to Yadlin, the weakness shown by the United States and Israel is what led to a situation in which the new Syria is being shaped by "the Czar [Russian President Vladimir Putin], the Sultan [Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan] and the Supreme Leader [Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei]." At an attempt in Geneva to resolve the crisis several years ago, the United States dictated the list of participants. Now the United States has all but disappeared from the arena, while Israel is being excluded by Putin and Erdogan.
- As revealed in an earlier AI-Monitor article, behind closed doors, Israel is bemoaning having missed a historic opportunity to be done with Assad, and with him, the Shiite axis along the Golan Heights and its border with Lebanon, since this axis is only getting stronger. As one very senior Israeli military official told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "There was a full year during the civil war in Syria in which anyone who wanted to could have taken down Assad without any effort and without anyone signing off on it, without it being attributed to some operation or other. Car bombs were going off outside his presidential palace during that year, and mortars were landing just a few dozen meters away from the struggling Syrian president. All anyone had to do was give it another little nudge."
- Now Israel finds itself faced with dire strategic circumstances. While Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said this week, "Right now there is no Iranian military force on Syrian soil," no one in the Israeli defense establishment plans to relax. No one has stopped worrying that Syria could become a protectorate of Shiite Iran or that Iran could establish itself in Syria and Lebanon, turning them into a military arm of the ayatollahs' regime, under its direct control. Foreign news sources say that Israel used the last few years to launch a lengthy series of aerial attacks against Syrian targets. Most of these were directed at concentrations and convoys of arms intended for Hezbollah. Now Israel is considering the possibility of reconfiguring and strengthening its unwritten red lines, which have set the ground for its military activity in the region over the past few years. It is even investigating the possibility of launching a far-reaching preventive strike to interfere with future Iranian efforts to establish factories for the manufacture of precision rockets and missiles in Syria or Lebanon, as well as to prevent Iranian military bases from popping up there.

- As always, these concerns and the overall alarmism originates with the political leadership and decision-makers, chief among them Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and less from the military brass. "There's no need to exaggerate," one senior military source told Al-Monitor two weeks ago on condition of anonymity. "The Iranians aren't sitting on the border fence. Even if some Shiite militia or other establishes a base in Syrian territory, it would not be a real strategic threat." It is believed that Iran is planning to keep the Shiite militias, which fought during the civil war in Syria, under Iranian commanders drawn from officers and experts in its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. "Even if that does happen, it is not the kind of tiebreaker that would necessitate going to war," the source added.
- What disturbs the Israeli officers more is the Iranian "Precision [Missile] Project," intended to provide Assad and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah with the capability to manufacture their own rockets and missiles, which could strike within dozens of meters of strategic targets. As one top Israeli minister told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "For that, we would need to consider going to war. That should be a red line flashing brightly at us. All the regional decision-makers must then take into consideration that Israel will not blink, and that it will do everything it can to prevent its enemies from obtaining the capacity to harm it, its economy, its air force bases and other sites with precision strikes. Period." There are those in Israel who compare the current situation on the Syrian front with what the Egyptians did on the eve of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Back then, Egypt repositioned its Soviet anti-aircraft missiles so that they would be in range of the front lines during any future war. This is what enabled the Egyptian army to cross the Suez Canal and establish a bridgehead on its eastern bank, despite Israeli preventive efforts. This resulted in the loss of dozens of Israeli fighter jets.
- Today, Israel is stretching its intelligence capacities in an enormous effort to locate factories that are part of the "Precision Project," like the one on the outskirts of Damascus, which was bombed a few months ago (the Syrian SARS project). At the same time, Assad is getting stronger by the day, and his regime is successfully re-establishing itself. Jerusalem is aware that at some point, Syrian restraint will diminish. Assad will no longer be satisfied with sporadic anti-aircraft fire in the general direction of Israeli aircraft. He will strive to exact a steeper price. Sources in Israel are saying that over the next few months, every decision to launch an aerial attack against Syria, like the relatively frequent decisions over the last year, will have to take into consideration the growing risk of a war breaking out between Israel and the forces on the Syrian front (Hezbollah and Assad, backed by Iran). Both are getting stronger steadily. "What we mustn't forget," said one senior Israeli source on condition of anonymity, "is that the more time passes, the harder such a war will be for us. It is directly proportional to how strong Assad gets.
- Right now, Israeli military superiority is decisive, while Assad is still fragile and vulnerable. That is why we mustn't wink. We must make it clear to all the relevant parties that there are certain lines that Israel has no intention of abandoning." As usual, the mood in the IDF is much calmer. "Assad is still intimidated by Israel, as is Nasrallah," a senior Israeli military source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "We have to keep doing what we've been doing until now

in order to stop 'Project Precision' and to keep Iran from constructing an airport or naval port in Syria. What is true," he added, "is that we must do it quietly, without making a big show of it. Just do it, instead of talking about it."