



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 6, 2017

Times of Israel

Abbas Summoned to Meet Saudi Rulers in Riyadh

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas traveled to Saudi Arabia unexpectedly on Monday to meet with King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman, with the Gulf kingdom at the height of a major crackdown on members of the royal family. Abbas had been in Egypt, where he was scheduled to meet with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, when he was summoned to Riyadh. The Palestinian ambassador in Riyadh said the meeting would address efforts to strengthen relations, as well as “developments on the Palestinian issue.”

Jerusalem Post

Police to Question Netanyahu Confidants Again Today

Two lawyers deemed to be very close to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are set to return to the police interrogation room on Monday, following a full day of questioning on Sunday. Netanyahu's lawyer, Attorney David Shimron, and another very close advisor whose name is under a gag order, are being questioned regarding their alleged illicit involvement in the purchase of German-made submarines by Israel, a purchase deemed unnecessary by the military and which netted substantial sums for the go-betweens. The two men were released after nearly 14 hours of questioning Sunday and were instructed not to leave the country.

The New York Times

Hezbollah Urges Patience Amid Lebanon's Political Crisis

Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah called on Sunday for “patience and calm” in Lebanon, a day after the surprise resignation of the prime minister, Saad Hariri. Fears for Lebanon's stability were running high after Hariri declared his resignation in the Saudi capital of Riyadh, attacking Iran and its ally Hezbollah. The move was widely seen as having been orchestrated by the Saudis to isolate Hezbollah by collapsing Lebanon's national unity government, which included both it and Hariri's faction. Saudi Arabia has been taking increasingly aggressive steps to curb Iran's growing dominance in the region.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Army Calls for Gaza 'Marshall Plan'

Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of government activities in the territories, has called for the implementation of a Gazan version of the Marshall Plan through which the international community would direct large amounts of assistance to improve the economy in the Gaza Strip. Mordechai said he believes there is an inseparable link between the conditions the residents of Gaza are enduring including its struggling economy and the security situation.

Jerusalem Post

Israel Says it's Holding Bodies from Gaza Tunnel Strike

The IDF on Sunday said it was in possession of the remains of five of the 12 Islamic Jihad terrorists who died in last week's tunnel explosion, after finding their bodies inside Israel. The IDF Southern Command and Gaza Division found the missing bodies while carrying out additional operations on the tunnel, an IDF statement said. The tunnel was detected using newly implemented advanced technology and destroyed last week in a controlled explosion inside Israeli territory.

See also, ["Netanyahu: Israel won't return dead militants as 'free gift,'" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Times of Israel

PM Rejects One-State Solution But Questions Two States

Netanyahu on Sunday resolutely rejected a one-state solution but stopped short, however, of explicitly endorsing Palestinian statehood. "No, I don't want a one-state solution, I'll be clear about that," he said. "But I want to make sure that what we have next to us is something that will not threaten our lives... "The other state, if it's not demilitarized, if it doesn't recognize the State of Israel, which the Palestinians still refuse to do, then it merely becomes a platform for continuing the war against the one Jewish state."

See also, ["Netanyahu Suggests a Sovereign State Might Not Work for Palestinians." \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Crossing Handover Brings Relief for Israel-Bound Gazans

As a part of the Palestinian reconciliation deal, Hamas transferred control of Gaza's border crossings to the Palestinian Authority on Wednesday. On Thursday, the PA took control of Checkpoint 44, which is located about a kilometer from the Erez Crossing and had previously been run by Hamas. The PA doubted that it would actually happen. But, so far, the handover has gone exactly as planned. Gazans who entered Israel on Thursday said they were pleased with the change, because unlike in the past, they weren't interrogated before even entering the crossing.

Ha'aretz

Tens of Thousands Attend 'Depoliticized' Rabin Rally

Tens of thousands attended Saturday night's memorial rally for slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, despite harsh criticism of the event by those on the left. Left-wingers objected to the lack of any messages about peace at the rally and to organizers' refusal to mention the incitement that leftists believe led to Rabin's murder 22 years ago. Organizers also refused to let any national politicians address the crowd, in an effort to draw people from outside the left to the annual rally in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square.

US Optimistic about Mideast Peace Deal

By Uri Savir

- A surprising disagreement seems to be emerging between the United States and Israel over the interpretation of the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement. Israel reacted in an almost-Pavlovian way, halting most of its contacts with the Palestinian Authority government, except for urgent security and humanitarian issues. The United States, on the other hand, both on the level of the White House and the level of the State Department, continued its ongoing dialogue with Ramallah. US peace envoy Jason Greenblatt is leading these contacts together with US Ambassador in Tel Aviv David Friedman and the US consul general team in Jerusalem. The motto of the US administration seems to be “give the reconciliation agreement a chance.”
- According to a senior US diplomat, the administration conveyed to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that it will not intervene against the new Palestinian agreement and that it demands the disarming of Hamas, yet not overnight. The US diplomat does not rule out that once the dust has settled between the two rival Palestinian factions, Washington might outline guidelines for peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians (without Hamas being included). US Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit the region in December to meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Abbas and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The vice president is considered a foreign policy hawk, but with the virtual elimination of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson from regional peace efforts, this visit could turn into a significant one.
- In the meantime, Greenblatt is carrying out the president’s instructions to keep the hope for peace negotiations alive. According to the American source, the US administration goal is to keep on one side a very pro-Israel line, and on the other to advance rapprochement with Egypt (and Saudi Arabia) as a counterbalance to Iran. President Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner is scheduled to visit Riyadh again in the coming days.
- Trump must still decide if he will issue guiding principles for the opening of negotiations, despite Netanyahu’s opposition to such a move. The main motivation to go ahead — something Trump has said he would do during the election campaign — is the administration’s desire for cooperation with Egypt in the ongoing struggle against radical Islam. Trump, according to the US diplomat, attaches great importance to his Riyadh declaration of May 21 at the Arab-Islamic-American summit. He may want to match it with a Washington declaration on Middle East peace. The US diplomat explained that such guiding principles could include a series of elements. For instance, peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would be conducted without Hamas, with a two-state solution as part of the parameters. Hamas would have to dismantle its military wing, and Israel will be recognized as a Jewish state.

- As for Israel, its settlement construction would be limited to the strict needs of actual growth. The final border must provide security for Israel and freedom for the Palestinians. In that respect, stringent security and anti-terror measures must be agreed upon, with an Israeli presence along the Jordanian river. Security cooperation would be developed between the United States, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, based on the Riyadh declaration. Another important element would be that the solution to the Palestinian refugee problem will be allowing these refugees to settle in Palestinian territories or receive international compensation (not from Israel). And last, the guidelines would include normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states, based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.
- These ideas are being explored at the US National Security Council, under the guidance of national security adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster. The US diplomat told Al-Monitor that the purpose of these guidelines is to make it difficult for Netanyahu to say no to someone he perceives as the most pro-Israeli US president in recent memory. A senior Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs official who spoke to Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity said that the possibility of guidelines for peace negotiations has indeed been discussed between Greenblatt and Jerusalem. According to the Israeli source, Netanyahu objects qualifying Hamas disarmament as a goal of negotiations, as in the US possible proposals; this must be a precondition to negotiations.
- On the Palestinian side, a senior PLO official reacted to the US ideas with skepticism. Abbas is indeed encouraged by US-Egyptian cooperation on the reconciliation agreement and on eventual peace talks, but the content of this US position is unacceptable to him. Still, the PLO source emphasized that Ramallah was told by the administration it was free to express its positions on all permanent status talks. Be that as it may, predicting that such proposals would soon be made public or lead to an opening session of negotiations, is predicting Trump, which is impossible.

With Hariri Resignation, Lebanon Now an Iranian Proxy

By Avi Issacharoff

- Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation announcement in Saudi Arabia on Saturday came as a huge surprise, but perhaps it shouldn't have. Nor his condemnations of Iran's involvement in Lebanon through its proxy Hezbollah. Lebanon became an Iranian protectorate a number of years ago, a client state for all intents and purposes controlled by Iran through Hezbollah, the most powerful terror group in the entire Middle East.
- Iran, together with Bashar Assad's Syria and Hezbollah, were responsible for the assassination of Saad Hariri's father Rafik Hariri, who was killed in February 2005 only a few months after stepping down as prime minister. His son would like to avoid the same fate. The only truly surprising aspect of Saad Hariri's resignation was that he agreed to be appointed prime minister last December. It is difficult to know what was going through Hariri's head when he consented to the request of Michel Aoun, Lebanon's pro-Hezbollah president, to take on the task of forming a government. Hariri knew full well who was responsible for the murder of his father and that his own life was in danger if he did not do as Hezbollah said. He also understood that the Shiite terror group controls nearly every aspect of the Lebanese state and that his own political camp, the March 14 Alliance, was becoming a persecuted minority within a system entirely dependent on Iran's grace.
- It is not entirely clear what prompted Hariri to step down now. Following his resignation announcement, Saudi Arabia's Al-Arabiya news station reported that just days ago a plot was thwarted to assassinate Hariri. According to these reports, the fear he was being targeted for assassination prompted Hariri to leave Beirut on Friday and move to his home away from home in Saudi Arabia, where he was born. The claims about the plot to assassinate Hariri and Iran's involvement in it were, as expected, denied by Iran. At a press conference he held Saturday in Riyadh, Hariri launched a fierce attack against Iran and Hezbollah, accusing them of blatant interference in Lebanon's affairs and forcibly taking over the country. In the current Lebanese political reality, the last thing that should come as a surprise is the notion that Hezbollah was planning another political assassination.
- Over the last 11 months, Hariri became a fig-leaf for Hezbollah. As one of the main leaders of the opposition, his appointment as prime minister ostensibly proved Lebanon was maintaining its independence vis-a-vis Iran. Now, however, the charade is over, and Lebanon remains as it was without the disguise — pro-Iranian, pro-Syrian, and with Hezbollah firmly in control. The Lebanese president is considered to be an Iranian and Hezbollah appointment, the Lebanese army is cooperating and coordinating with Hezbollah, and the Shiite terror group does whatever it likes in Lebanon.

- It is likely that the Saudis had an influential role in Hariri's decision to resign. To put it mildly, the Saudis were not enamored with Hariri's choice to accept the post of prime minister less than a year ago. It is also very likely that the report on the plot to assassinate Hariri, whether real or not, came from the direction of Riyadh, although perhaps — and only perhaps — it came from a few Western intelligence services.
- Hezbollah is not remotely likely to change its ways following Hariri's resignation. Indeed, it may do the opposite. The Shiite organization has long abandoned the pretense that it is not heavily influenced by Iran, and does not try to hide the fact that it receives its financial support and its marching orders from Tehran. The only inconvenience Hezbollah is likely to face is in the case of a renewed escalation between Israel and Lebanon/Hezbollah.
- With Lebanon/Hezbollah stripped of its Hariri fig leaf, Israel is likely to enjoy a greater degree of international legitimacy to wage an uncompromising campaign in a future conflict against what is, again, now rightly recognized as the Middle East's strongest terror group. Today's thoroughly unmasked Hezbollah, after all, is a state-backed (Iran), state-dominating (Lebanon), terrorist army that makes the Islamic State look like a bunch of Boy Scouts.