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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, January 31*

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# News Excerpts

January 31, 2018

Associated Press

## **11 Countries Accelerate UNRWA Funding After US Cuts**

The head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees said Tuesday that Russia, Kuwait and nine European countries have agreed to speed up their contributions to help fill a shortfall left by the Trump administration's decision to greatly reduce crucial U.S. funding. The U.N. Relief and Works Agency, which serves some 5 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants, had a budget of over \$1 billion last year. This covered long-running programs, including education, as well as emergency funds for crises such as the war in Syria. The U.S. has been the largest donor, giving one-third of the total budget. The Trump administration withheld half of the first installment of payments this year, demanding reforms as a condition for future aid.

See also, ["Trump asks Congress to cut aid to US 'enemies' who opposed Jerusalem recognition" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Israel to Present International Plan to Rebuild Gaza**

Israel will submit a \$1-billion dollar plan for easing the Gaza Strip's humanitarian crisis, which it will ask the international community to fund, at an emergency meeting on Wednesday of donor states. The plan's centerpiece will be Israeli assistance in building infrastructure projects, including desalination plants, electricity lines and a gas pipeline. Both Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and U.S. envoy to the peace process Jason Greenblatt will attend the emergency meeting in Brussels. Israel will be represented by Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi and the coordinator of government activities in the territories, Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai.

Times of Israel

## **US May Reject Palestinian Refugee Status for Descendants**

Amid its deepening standoff with the Palestinians, the Trump administration is considering halting all of its financial aid to UNRWA, and declaring that it rejects the UN criteria under which refugee status is extended to millions of descendants of the original Palestinian refugees, a TV news report said Tuesday. Hadashot TV news said this "new ultimatum" under consideration by the Trump administration is one of the avenues being considered as the US seeks to press the Palestinian Authority into returning to peace talks with Israel.

Ha'aretz

## **PM Summons Irish Ambassador About Settlements Bill**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu condemned Tuesday new legislation in Ireland that could forbid the import and sale of products from Israeli settlements. Netanyahu also instructed the Foreign Ministry to summon the Irish ambassador in Israel to clarify the matter and express Israel's dissatisfaction on the matter. The Irish senate debated the bill on Tuesday.

Washington Post

## **US Delegation Chased Out of Bethlehem**

Angry protesters chased a group of U.S. diplomats out of the Palestinian town of Bethlehem on Tuesday amid frustration over President Trump's Jerusalem recognition. "You are not welcome anymore!" shouted one of the demonstrators as they broke into a training session organized by the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem and held at Bethlehem's chamber of commerce and industry. The event aimed to educate local businesses on the benefits of social media, and an American expert had been scheduled to speak.

Times of Israel

## **PM Inaugurates West Bank Bypass Road, Vows More**

Netanyahu inaugurated a new bypass road for Israeli settlers in the northern West Bank on Tuesday and pledged to continue developing the Israeli-held territory. The Nebi Elias road will connect the West Bank settlements of Tzufim, Alfei Menashe, Ma'ale Shomron, Karnei Shomron, Nofim, Yakir, Emanuel, and Kedumim with the Israeli cities of Kfar Saba and Herzliya through Route 55. The completion of the bypass road, at a cost of some \$18 million, followed a vocal campaign by settler leaders against Netanyahu's government, which they argued was stalling efforts to complete such projects.

Ynet

## **IDF Chief Warns of Calm Before Storm on Northern Frontier**

IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot warned Tuesday evening that despite the relative quiet on Israel's northern border, "many challenges" were awaiting the army stemming from the Hezbollah terror movement's increasingly "powerful capabilities." Delivering remarks at a ceremony marking 21 years since a helicopter crash in Har VaGai High School near kibbutz Dafna which claimed the lives of 73 Israeli military personnel, Eisenkot accused Hezbollah of violating UN Security Council resolutions. Israel has warned in recent days against renewed efforts by Iran to establish a network of factories for manufacturing precision missiles intended for Hezbollah on Lebanese soil that would radically upgrade what are commonly known as "stupid missiles" by equipping them with sophisticated navigation mechanisms.

Ha'aretz

## **Palestinians Claim Teen Killed in Clashes With Israel**

A Palestinian teen has reportedly died after being shot during clashes with the Israeli army in the West Bank, Palestinian health services said. The 16-year-old reportedly suffered serious head wounds during the clashes, which took place north of Ramallah. According to Palestinian eye witnesses present at the Almugayer village, an Israeli force entered the village in the early afternoon, most likely as part of raid in which arrests were supposed to take place. Clashes then broke out, with dozens of Palestinian youths attacking soldiers with stones and firebombs.

## **Israel Doesn't Have A PR Problem. It Has An Occupation**

By Jeremy Ben-Ami, President, J Street

- Last week, Michael Oren shared some thoughts on Israel and the US. Reacting to a new Pew study showing Israel has become increasingly a partisan issue in America, Oren said, “We have to make a decision to set a strategic goal of bringing the Democratic party back on our side.” I share the concern of MK Michael Oren, Israel’s Deputy Minister for Public Diplomacy, over the data. I think we both agree that broad-based bipartisan support for Israel is an essential component of the country’s national security. Ensuring that support is a core mission of the organization I run. A second concern Oren and I share is that support for Israel among younger Jewish Americans is deteriorating rapidly. A survey released Tuesday by the Jewish Agency showed a 32-point drop in support for Israel among college-aged Jewish Americans between 2010 and 2016.
- Helping young Jews see that they can support Israel and at the same time support freedom and self-determination for the Palestinian people is another core element of J Street’s work. We don’t buy into a zero-sum formula requiring people to choose one side over another; we seek a win-win resolution of the conflict in which both sides can find peace and security. And this is where I depart from Oren. Oren believes the way to fix the problem is with “a team of serious people with a serious budget to work on this in a very serious manner.” But Oren’s analysis of the fix misses an underlying truth: Israel is bleeding support among liberals and young Jews in the United States not because it doesn’t have good public relations, but because it is entrenching an unjust occupation, obsessively expanding settlements, deporting asylum seekers and passing laws that undermine its democratic principles and religious pluralism.
- Support for settlements has turned into a litmus test for support for Israel. Critics of the occupation are treated like traitors. Civil society organizations, human rights activists and even artists who warn that the country is headed down the wrong path are scorned. Palestinians are treated less like people with rights and aspirations, and more like a problem to be crushed with force or explained away with hasbara. I know Oren and I agree that the US-Israel relationship is rooted in our shared democratic values. While polling consistently shows that majorities of Israelis share those values, liberal Americans are coming to believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government increasingly do not. They see Israeli government policies exacerbating conflict and injustice, not working to end them.
- What are these American audiences supposed to think when they see the Israeli government’s warm embrace of the person whose ideas and agenda most threaten our core democratic and Jewish values at home: Donald Trump. How should they react when representatives of the Israeli government defend and befriend Islamophobes and bigots like Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka? Or when Oren’s successor as ambassador acts as a partisan Republican operative? Israel’s public relations efforts are actually pretty successful. Americans know all

about the country's high-tech miracle and openness on gay rights. And we appreciate the tremendous threats Israel faces in a dangerous region. We know too that the Palestinians bear a large share of the responsibility for the ongoing conflict.

- But we also know that it's wrong to perpetuate occupation, undermine democracy and restrict human rights. Neither a new ministry or millions in hasbara will change that view. Oren's advocacy for the rights of non-Orthodox Jews and for greater religious pluralism reassures Jewish Americans that there are leaders in government who share some of our values and concerns. There would be similar dividends for Israel were he to speak out as well on the need to end occupation, reject settler extremism, defend the right to dissent and pursue separate states for Jews and Palestinians. During his time as Ambassador, I appreciated Oren's willingness to meet with J Street and other pro-Israel voices with whom he did not see eye to eye. I urge him now to consider with an open mind whether it's possible that the concerning decline in support we see today is being caused by the policies that his own government is pursuing.
- Over the long run, many good friends of Israel in this country believe that the Israeli government's policies are making Israel less secure, less moral, less democratic and far less popular in key sectors of American society. It's not too late to address these underlying problems or to reverse these troubling declines in support for Israel by reversing the course toward annexation and permanent occupation down which the government is presently leading the state of Israel.

## Netanyahu Working Hard to Woo Putin

By Cnaan Liphshiz, Columnist JTA

- The story behind the huge Victory Monument that was unveiled in 2012 in the Israeli city of Netanya is not exactly common knowledge even there. Featuring two stone slabs each 50 feet high and shaped like wings, the seaside statue honors the Russian Army's enormous contribution in defeating Nazism. It is known colloquially in Netanya as "the sharks" because the statue reminds many locals of dorsal fins.
- But if Israelis sometimes forget its symbolism, Russian President Vladimir Putin does not. Putin attended its unveiling, and in a speech Monday welcoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to this capital city, he referred to the statute as a significant sign in the renaissance of bilateral relations between Israel and Russia. "I remember going to the opening of the monument to the Red Army soldiers," Putin said. "It was a very touching event. We are grateful to the leadership of Israel and the people of Israel for their respect for history."
- Officially scheduled to discuss Israeli concerns about Iran and Syria — two allies, if not client states, of Russia — Netanyahu's latest visit to Moscow took place, unusually, at the city's Jewish museum and featured a Holocaust commemoration event. But the speeches at the event attested to how goodwill, symbolism and rhetoric is coinciding, and maybe even facilitating, horse trading on more practical things, including weapons deals and controversial military deployments by both countries. Russians know, Putin added in his address, "that Israel carefully maintains gratitude to the Soviet Army and our soldiers for saving Jews and Europe from total extermination. We appreciate the fact that a monument is planned in Jerusalem in honor of the feat of the defenders and residents of besieged Leningrad."
- His praise for Israel was aimed in part at former Soviet nations where revisionist state historians, backed by governments wary of Russia and its expansionist politics, are downplaying or denigrating Soviet contributions — what Putin in his speech at the Jewish museum made more explicit with references to what he termed "Russophobia." In Hungary, Ukraine and the Baltic states, displaying both Soviet and Nazi symbols is illegal due to laws against "totalitarian imagery." Monuments for Red Army saviors are routinely vandalized or removed in those countries.
- And even the commemoration of the Holocaust is at times eclipsed by Russia's narrative wars with its former client states. To punish Russia for its 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the following year Poland disinited Putin from the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The move infuriated even Holocaust scholars and commemoration professionals, who are not known for their sympathy to Russia. At the time, Poland's then-foreign minister, Grzegorz Schetyna, said that Ukrainians, not Russians, liberated the Nazi death camp in Poland. Appreciation for Israel's recognition of Russia's role in defeating Nazism "is especially important amid the destruction

and desecration of monuments to Soviet soldiers who gave their lives to liberate prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, and save Europe and the entire world from Nazism,” Putin said.

- The politics of memory, as they are called in this part of the world, command an importance that may surprise outsiders. Struggling with stagnant or ruined economies amid rampant corruption, some of these countries might seem to have more immediate challenges. But these issues are of major importance to millions of voters across Eastern Europe. Case in point: the international outcry that followed Poland’s passing Friday of a controversial bill to criminalize the term “Polish death camps” and frank discussions of Polish complicity in the Holocaust.
- By recognizing that such gestures are as important to Russia as, say, declarations about Jerusalem are to Israel, Netanyahu is leveraging Israel’s authoritative voice internationally on Holocaust commemoration issues to curry favor with Moscow. “We never forget the crucial role of the Red Army in halting the Nazi machine,” Netanyahu said in his speech at the Jewish museum, addressing Putin. “You mentioned the monument in Israel: I initiated its erection in Netanya as a symbol of the appreciation we think must be eternalized for the Red Army,” Netanyahu said.
- Under Netanyahu, Israel has done more for Russia than erect a monument. Almost alone among Western nations, the Jewish state has essentially maintained total radio silence, and therefore neutrality, on the invasion of Ukraine, which prompted the European Union to impose crippling sanctions on Russia. In fact, Israeli trade with Russia has only grown since, with an increase of 25 percent in the first six months of 2017 over the corresponding period the previous year. Russia has not quite returned the favor – at least not publicly.
- Maintaining its decades-long tradition of voting against Israel at the United Nations, Russia in recent years has supported some of the most blatantly anti-Israel resolutions passed to date, including language on Jerusalem that ignores Judaism’s tie to the holy city. And Russia continues to back Iran, including through massive arms deals. But behind the scenes Russia, whose army is notorious for its scare tactics against hostile entities, has not responded to repeated Israeli strikes in Syria and beyond – including in areas that are under the control of forces loyal to Bashar Assad, Syria’s beleaguered president, whose overthrow Russia prevented militarily in 2016.
- Netanyahu has traveled to Moscow six times over the past two years to coordinate this modus vivendi. He said it was his goal on Monday, too. The prime minister said he would talk to Putin about Iran’s involvement in Lebanon, which Netanyahu said Iran was turning into a “missile base” to be used against Israel. Putin is not the only one in the relationship who knows how to use historic symbols to drive home political messaging.
- Directly after their two-hour meeting, both men attended a ceremony at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center here honoring the 75th anniversary of the Sobibor Uprising, a prisoners’ rebellion at the death camp in northeastern Poland where 11 Nazis were killed and 300 Jews

escaped. It provided the perfect backdrop for Netanyahu's thinly veiled warnings of Israel's low tolerance for Iranian threats. "If you don't check hatred toward Jews, it will spread to other peoples quickly enough," Netanyahu said, invoking the lessons of the Holocaust. "Our mission is to fight extremist ideologies when they are still small, to hit them on time and forcefully, as part of our responsibility for the future."

- Sobibor, Netanyahu said, "was the turning point" in the Jewish people's history and led to their having "a strong country with considerable offensive capabilities that can defend itself against fanatics who openly say they aim to destroy us. They won't succeed. But we need to understand the danger they pose is not limited to us, but you, too." He ended his speech with these words: "There will not be another Holocaust."