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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, February 5*

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# News Excerpts

February 5, 2018

Times of Israel

## **PLO Reconsidering Israel Recognition, Security Cooperation**

The Palestine Liberation Organization's top leadership opened the way to suspending its recognition of Israel on Saturday, but stopped short of ordering the drastic measure immediately. Withdrawing the PLO's 1988 recognition would threaten decades of Israeli relations with the moderate Palestinian leadership and raise doubts over security coordination between the two. The Executive Committee released a statement after a three-hour meeting saying it would set up a committee to study the derecognition move. The body also called for the Palestinian Authority to cut off all ties with Israel, including security coordination in the West Bank.

See also, [\*"Erekat says US is pushing a Palestinian 'coup,'" \(Times of Israel\)\*](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Report: Hamas 'Prepares for Imminent War' in Gaza**

The Gaza Strip is preparing for confrontation with Israel within the next few days, the London-based Arabic daily Al Hayat reported on Sunday. Hamas reportedly assesses the chances of war "at 95 percent" and assumes it could erupt within hours or days. The report further said that the military wing of Hamas has declared a state of high alert, evacuating sites and headquarters and even deploying road blocks across the Strip. Political and human rights activists in Gaza said that the atmosphere in the Strip is very grim in light of the humanitarian crisis, some of which involves the non-implementation of the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and the PA.

Times of Israel

## **Israel Said to Consider Direct Aid to Deteriorating Gaza**

Israeli security officials are weighing sending food and medicine to the Gaza Strip for the first time, in an effort to prevent the deteriorating conditions from spiraling into violence, Hadashot news reported Saturday. In a security assessment handed recently to the prime minister, the defense establishment reiterated its belief that the Hamas terror group currently ruling Gaza is not interested in another conflict with Israel. However, an economic collapse would make such a scenario inevitable.

Ha'aretz

## **Gabbay Endorses West Bank Withdrawal if Talks Fail**

Israeli Labor Party Chair Avi Gabbay said Saturday that if talks with the Palestinians fail, Israel will have to withdraw from the West Bank unilaterally. "I believe we have to do everything possible to get to the negotiations stage and to build genuine mutual trust between the two sides so that we can make progress," Gabbay said. Gabby plans to submit a resolution at the next party convention calling for "separating from the Palestinians on the basis of the principle of two states for two peoples."

Associated Press

## **Israel to Legalize Settlement Outpost Deep in West Bank**

Israel on Sunday said it plans to legalize an isolated West Bank outpost in response to the murder of one of its residents in a shooting attack last month. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his weekly Cabinet meeting that his government will legalize Havat Gilad to “allow the continuing of normal life there.” Last month, Rabbi Raziel Shevah, 35, was shot dead from a passing vehicle as he drove near his home in the unauthorized settlement outpost near the Palestinian city of Nablus. The Israeli military is still searching the area for suspects.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Issues Deportation Notices to African Asylum Seekers**

Israel began issuing deportation notices on Sunday to asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan who are not held in the Holot detention facility. In the first stage the notices will be issued to men without children who come to renew their residence visa. Authority personnel will suggest that they leave for either Rwanda or their native countries. Dabsai, a 47-year-old from Eritrea is a resident of Netanya. "I don't want to go to Rwanda," he said. "I'm from Eritrea, and I don't want to return to Eritrea. I'm going to jail, without fear."

The New York Times

## **Secret Alliance: Israel Strikes in Sinai With Cairo's O.K.**

The jihadists in Egypt's Northern Sinai had killed hundreds of soldiers and police officers, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, briefly seized a major town and begun setting up armed checkpoints to claim territory. In late 2015, they brought down a Russian passenger jet. Egypt appeared unable to stop them, so Israel, alarmed at the threat just over the border, took action. For more than two years, unmarked Israeli drones, helicopters and jets have carried out a covert air campaign, conducting more than 100 airstrikes inside Egypt, frequently more than once a week — and all with the approval of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The remarkable cooperation marks a new stage in the evolution of their singularly fraught relationship.

Ha'aretz

## **Civil Administration Razes Classrooms in West Bank Village**

Due to a bureaucratic mix-up, the the Israeli Civil Administration in the West Bank demolished two classrooms on Sunday that were used by children living in the Bedouin village of Abu Nuwar near the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim. The Civil Administration had ruled that the classrooms were built illegally without permits. However, the High Court of Justice last year ordered the Civil Administration to postpone the demolition until the legal status of the classrooms could be examined more thoroughly and all other administrative appeals had been exhausted. On Friday residents of Abu Nuwar filed an appeal with the Civil Administration, extending the legal process, but due to miscommunication, the Civil Administration staff said they were unaware of the appeal.

## **Hamas Failures in Gaza are Changing Israel's Stance**

By David Makovsky and Lia Weiner, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

- The crisis in Gaza pervades all areas of life: residents have only six to seven hours of electricity a day; their sewage overflow problems are so severe that the Israeli Ministry of Health had to close the adjacent Ashkelon and Zikim beaches for several days last July; 95 percent of Gaza's water has been deemed undrinkable; unemployment hovers around 50 percent; and recently, local merchants went on strike due to the declining economy. Over the past year, the number of commercial trucks passing through the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza has dropped from over 1,000 daily to about 350, which Israeli security officials attribute to residents losing their purchasing power.
- In a statement to the UN Security Council last week, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov warned that "with the current funding available, the United Nations will not be able to provide fuel to hospitals and critical infrastructure [in Gaza] beyond the end of February." As Maher al-Taba, a spokesman for Gaza's trade ministry, put it earlier this month, "The economic situation...is on the brink of collapse."
- Across the political spectrum, Israeli policymakers and military officials agree that something must be done, and several solutions have been discussed. One option is to hook up the Northern Gaza Emergency Sewage Treatment Project (NGEST), a US-funded system that was just completed after years of work but is not operational due to the lack of electricity. The Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) is also advancing several infrastructure projects for Gaza, such as a large desalination plant that will provide 55 million cubic meters of water and a new high-voltage line that would double the amount of electricity (its completion was delayed for years but recently received a green light from the Israeli government). Some Israeli officials have also repeatedly mentioned the possibility of opening a Gaza harbor, including Uri Ariel, a member of the right-wing Jewish Home Party. Such statements indicate a major shift from the prevalent view when Hamas took over Gaza in 2007—namely, that if the situation there worsens, Israel should just let it happen so that residents throw the group out themselves.
- Another new development is that Hamas now confesses that it cannot govern Gaza's civil affairs. Yahya al-Sinwar, the group's leader, reportedly admitted as much to other officials at a December 20 meeting; as al-Monitor described it, "Today, over a decade after the coup, Sinwar admits wholeheartedly: We made a mistake. We lack the ability and means to govern almost 2 million people, and in our arrogance we cast them into a state of indigence, hunger, and desperation." Numerous Israeli and Palestinian officials assert that Sinwar genuinely believes Hamas failed. As for why he would make such an admission, a senior Israeli security official pointed out that Sinwar headed the group's military wing during most of Gaza's deterioration, not its civil affairs agencies. He is now the unified commander of both the military and political

wings, so “he has no problem admitting that his political predecessors have failed. Such an admission does not undermine him.”

- To be sure, Sinwar is no moderate; he rose within Hamas’s Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, spent twenty-two years in an Israeli jail, and was only released to fulfill the terms of an Israeli deal with Hamas. Still, he appears pragmatic when warranted. Unlike former Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, who seemed indifferent to the suffering because he was based in a Qatari hotel suite, Sinwar lives in Gaza and experiences its problems firsthand. He has also called for Palestinian youths to support reconciliation with the PA, according to the official Hamas website. His support is likely linked to the group’s major (and perhaps temporary) loss of support from backers such as Qatar and Turkey, who have been preoccupied with their own crises.
- At the same time, Hamas continues to be its own worst enemy. Many Gazans believe the group does not care for their economic well-being because it diverts resources to building tunnels under Israel and Egypt (including three reportedly destroyed by Israeli forces this past month alone) instead of building homes. Internal fissures are a problem as well – Sinwar’s rival, Saleh al-Aroui has been getting closer to the Hezbollah leadership in Beirut in the hope of increasing Iranian support for Hamas military activities.
- Until recently, many observers pinned their hopes on the PA taking over from Hamas through a process mediated by Egypt – a player who is valued by Israel as a steady partner, respected by the PA as a Sunni-majority country, and feared by Hamas ever since Cairo retaliated against the group for working with Islamic State terrorists in the Sinai. Some preliminary steps have already been taken toward that end (e.g., reestablishing PA control over certain Gaza crossing points), but negotiations for a full transfer of power are caught on two key sticking points. First, the PA has been asked to pick up the tab for the 26,000 additional civilian administrators and 12,000 civilian police Hamas has hired, not to mention the Hamas militia. PA officials will simply not agree to this – they want to install their own people in the civil administration, and they object to any integration of Hamas police within PA forces.
- Second, the disarmament of Hamas appears to be nonnegotiable on all sides. The PA stands firm on the matter, reiterating the slogan “one authority, one law, one gun.” Likewise, the Israeli military will not tolerate any arrangement that fails to address this issue. On the other side, Hamas has no desire to disband the Qassam Brigades. As an alternative, some have suggested that Hamas submit to a PA-run council that must authorize any use of force. Yet others dismiss the idea, doubting the group can be trusted to limit extremists’ access to and use of weapons. Whatever the case, PA president Mahmoud Abbas has essentially told Israel that returning to Gaza right now is a trap. Hamas is unwilling to compromise on its military power, and the PA does not want to be responsible for two million more Palestinians under the current conditions, when the economy is on the brink of collapse and Israel would surely hold Ramallah accountable for any rocket fired by any Gaza faction.

- As for Egypt, it has been phasing out of the reconciliation process since early December. While stabilizing Gaza is still a high priority for Cairo given its desire to sever the Sinai connection between Hamas and the Islamic State, Egyptian officials apparently realize that the process is stuck. Khaled Fawzy, the intelligence minister who led the mediation efforts, resigned suddenly in January; it is unclear if the move was linked to the fact that the efforts largely failed.
- Those who believe that PA civilian control of Gaza is still a worthy objective would need to make a dual argument to Abbas. First, Gaza is not beyond hope economically. With proper coordination, the international community and the PA could provide electricity all day in Gaza, and Israeli security officials indicate that they could vet at least 10,000 workers from the Strip (work permits have been canceled since the outbreak of the second intifada). Israel may also be willing to increase the amount of Gaza exports allowed into the country. Second, while many believe Hamas will never forsake its weapons, some Western diplomats argue that Arab states can use their leverage – including control over Gulf bank accounts – to press Hamas on this issue. Egypt could also be encouraged to reopen and control the Rafah crossing in southern Gaza, allowing more freedom of movement for residents and transforming the territory from a pressure pot into an example of what can be done when the parties cooperate.

## **Trump Radicalizes US Mideast Policies**

By Uri Savir, Former Chief Israeli Negotiator

- For the first time since the year 2000, a sitting US president arrived at the Swiss Alps town of Davos to take part in the World Economic Forum. But more than his mere participation, President Donald Trump shocked European and other guests by the statements he made there. Referring to the Palestinian refusal to meet with Vice President Mike Pence Jan. 22, Trump attacked Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, stating, “They disrespected us a week ago by not allowing our great vice president to see them.” Even more dramatic and significant was Trump’s reiterated threat to cut US financial assistance to the Palestinians. He said, “Money is not going to them unless they sit down and negotiate peace.” Trump echoed former threats by his administration to slash funding by \$65 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.
- This last threat was supposed to coerce Palestinian leadership into negotiations with Israel on a US peace plan. It will, of course, have the opposite effect, and it will harm the livelihood of Palestinians in refugee camps. The Palestinian leadership suspects that after having taken Israel’s position on the issue of Jerusalem, Trump is now planning to fully endorse Israel against the Palestinians’ right of return. A senior PLO official close to the Palestinian president told AI-Monitor that Abbas is reaching out on two levels to his Arab partners, including Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. He hopes to solicit alternative funds for the refugees and also to garner Arab support against a Benjamin Netanyahu-modeled peace plan by the US administration. The official assessed that the outline of Trump’s plan has been orchestrated by his envoys Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt in cooperation with Netanyahu.
- The plan would apparently be a Palestinian state with limited sovereignty on approximately half of the West Bank. The Palestinian state would include the Gaza Strip and possibly extend into the Sinai Peninsula, should the Egyptians agree. The Palestinian capital should be in Abu Dis in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Other East Jerusalem neighborhoods will also come under Palestinian rule. Main Israeli settlements will stay in place, protected by the Israeli army. According to this outline described by the Palestinian source, there will be no right of return for Palestinian refugees. The United States will offer the Palestinian state significant economic assistance. The PLO official added that this proposed plan is a dream come true for Netanyahu. In fact, it resembles Education Minister Naftali Bennett’s plans of annexing West Bank Area C (currently under Israeli control) and “uniting” Jerusalem. Speaking on condition of anonymity, the Palestinian source said, “There is not and will not be a Palestinian who would accept such plans as basis for negotiations. These US positions result from pressure by American evangelist and Jewish communities in order to enhance Trump’s chances to be re-elected in the 2020 elections.”

- A senior European Union official close to High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini told Al-Monitor that leaders of European member states are highly alarmed by Trump's apparent radicalization on Middle Eastern issues. This is true concerning issues other than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. French President Emmanuel Macron has taken the role of building bridges of understanding with Trump, foremost on the Iran nuclear agreement. But in this case, too, Trump is leaning to pull the United States out of the agreement unless it is significantly changed. Paris fears that with time this may jeopardize the balance that is holding the agreement together. In such a setup, international trade with Iran would continue without Tehran feeling obliged to keep its part on canceling its development of nuclear arms. As aforementioned, Brussels is highly concerned about the Palestinian issue. Abbas is obviously cornered and weakened. The winner in this situation is Hamas, mainly in the West Bank. The EU is aware of a growing rapprochement between Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. The official said that if this trend continues, a cycle of violence with Israel involving pro-Iran forces in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria cannot be ruled out.
- The EU at the highest levels intends to intervene with the Trump administration realists, specifically national security adviser H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. A Senior Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that the prime minister feels vindicated in his policies on the Palestinian and Iranian issues, and he will continue to pressure for changes in the Iran agreement and for a diplomatic boycott of Abbas. Indeed, with time, Netanyahu's policies are largely becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.