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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, February 7*

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- Abbas: We Never Said No to Resuming Peace Talks
- PA Sued Over Alleged CIA-Backed Wiretapping
- Police to Announce Decision on PM Indictment Next Week
- One Killed, Dozens Wounded in Clashes With Israeli Army
- EU's Mogherini Pledges Support for UNRWA
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# News Excerpts

February 7, 2018

Times of Israel

## **PA to Form Plan for Extensive 'Disengagement' from Israel**

The Palestinian Authority government on Tuesday decided to form a committee to prepare plans for “disengagement” from Israel. The government also decided to task another committee with devising a plan to replace the Israeli shekel with any other currency, including a new Palestinian one. The Palestinians have long complained their economy remains too dependent on Israel. Similar decisions taken by various Palestinian bodies in the past, including halting security coordination with Israel, have never been carried out and are mostly intended to appease the Palestinian public.

See also, [\*“Abbas, Putin to discuss new peace talks mechanism sidelining US” \(Times of Israel\)\*](#)

Times of Israel

## **Abbas: We Never Said No to Resuming Peace Talks**

The Palestinians have never rejected any invitation to resume peace talks with Israel, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said on Tuesday. “Our hands are extended for peace through negotiations,” Abbas said. “We support the war on terrorism in every place in the world.” Still Abbas reiterated that the US administration was no longer qualified to act as an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He said that the Ramallah event was aimed at sending a message to the world that Jerusalem is exclusively the capital of the Palestinian state, though he later said Jerusalem belonged to the Muslim and Christian faiths.

Associated Press

## **PA Sued Over Alleged CIA-Backed Wiretapping**

A former Palestinian intelligence chief and the head of the West Bank bar association are suing the PA after a purported whistleblower alleged the two were targeted, along with many other allies and rivals of Abbas, in a large-scale CIA-backed wiretapping operation. The claims are contained in a 37-page anonymous document that was been shared widely among Palestinians, mostly on WhatsApp. The document alleges that three of the Palestinian security services set up a joint electronic surveillance unit in mid-2014 and monitored the phone calls of thousands of Palestinians, from senior figures in militant groups to judges, lawyers, civic leaders and political allies of Abbas.

Jerusalem Post

## **Police to Announce Decision on PM Indictment Next Week**

The Israeli police will announce its recommendation on whether or not to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Cases 1000 and 2000 next week, Channel 2 News reported. The investigating team plans to meet with Police Commissioner Insp.-Gen. Roni Alsheich on Wednesday, ahead of the decision. Various media reports suggested that police are leaning toward recommending to the state prosecution that it should indict the prime minister in both cases.

Ha'aretz

## **One Killed, Dozens Wounded in Clashes With Israeli Army**

One Palestinian was killed and fifty others were wounded during clashes with Israeli soldiers in the West Bank city of Nablus on Tuesday, the Palestinian Health Ministry said. The military said clashes broke out while it was searching for an assailant who killed an Israeli man in a stabbing attack on Monday. The military said rocks, firebombs and explosive devices were hurled at the forces, and that gun fire was also used.

See also, [\*"Security guard lightly hurt in stabbing attack in Karmeit Zzur"\* \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **EU's Mogherini Pledges Support for UNRWA**

European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini pledged continued support on Tuesday for UNRWA, the United Nations agency that assists Palestinian refugees. "The work they [UNRWA] do is crucial for the perspective of an agreement between Israel and Palestine," Mogherini said, adding that the agency's contribution "provides the political space toward achieving a peace deal and building a Palestinian state." UNRWA is also important for the political process in Gaza, Mogherini said, calling Palestinian reconciliation "essential for the perspective of a viable state of Palestine."

Ha'aretz

## **In First, Flight to Israel Allowed Over Saudi Airspace**

Saudi Arabia has granted Air India approval to operate direct flights from Delhi to Tel Aviv, sources in the Israeli flight industry told Haaretz. This is the first time the Saudis are allowing flights to Israel to use their airspace. The approval means that the duration of flights from India to Israel will be shortened by two-and-a-half hours, compared to the route currently in use. The new route will allow the airline to reduce fuel costs and sell cheaper tickers to passengers. Air India's New Delhi-Tel Aviv route is the first concrete and public piece of evidence to the warming of ties between Israel and the Saudi leadership. Though we have known for years of quiet coordination on security issues, there has not yet been any tangible evidence above the surface.

Jerusalem Post

## **Thousands of African Migrants Protest Deportation in Israel**

Three days after receiving 20,000 deportation notices from the Israeli government, thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees gathered in front of Rwanda's Embassy in Herzliya to protest the expulsion, and condemn Rwanda for accepting money for their exile. Amid chants of "We are refugees – we are not criminals!" and "Rwanda: Shame on you!" the protesters expressed fear of being forced to leave Israel to a country known for its autocratic regime and human rights violations.

## **Israel Needs Abbas to Solve Gaza Crisis**

By Shlomi Eldar, Columnist, AI Monitor

- A well-publicized clash between Israel's defense and political echelons has occurred yet again. At issue this time is not a disagreement over military matters or the desired intensity of reactions to terrorism. Rather, it is the question of whether the Gaza Strip is collapsing or "only" experiencing a bearable economic crisis. At the Feb. 4 weekly Cabinet meeting, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot warned that Gaza was on the verge of collapse, adding that Israel should take significant preventive measures. An additional deterioration, he warned, could increase prospects of a clash with Hamas in the coming year — even though neither side wants one. Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai voiced similar concern about the effect of a total breakdown in Gaza at a Jan. 31 emergency meeting of Palestinian Authority (PA) donor states in Brussels. Mordechai called on all the donors to mobilize for Gaza's sake and presented a detailed plan for the rehabilitation of the Strip's infrastructure. However, Mordechai's blueprint could take many months to implement, far longer than the Israeli defense assessment of the timetable for Gaza's collapse.
- A day after Eizenkot described his catastrophic Gaza scenario, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman contradicted him. "The situation in Gaza is indeed serious. There is a very serious economic situation that must be dealt with, but there is no humanitarian crisis," Liberman told Knesset members of his Yisrael Beitenu party. Liberman insisted that Eizenkot and other defense professionals shared his views. Responding to the chief of staff's warning that the humanitarian crisis could result in an armed clash that neither side desires, Liberman said dismissively, "Since yesterday, we have witnessed the flow of a lot of information and mainly disinformation in all the media regarding the Gaza Strip. ... We have no intention of initiating any military action in Gaza, but I'm glad the Hamas leadership is in a panic." Liberman is currently more concerned about how a crisis can be prevented and even more so how to devise a long-term solution that would end more than a decadelong Israeli blockade of the Strip.
- At the same time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has instructed the security-diplomatic Cabinet to debate a proposal by Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz for the construction of an offshore Mediterranean port for Gaza. Katz has been pushing the plan for more than two years but had thus far met with opposition on the part of Netanyahu and his top ministers. Netanyahu wanted nothing to do with the grandiose plan by Katz, with whom his ties are rocky, and Liberman also expressed vehement opposition. In June 2017, when Katz warned of an impending crisis and claimed Israel does not have a policy on Gaza, Liberman said at an event in Tel Aviv, "Building an island and a port in Gaza means giving a reward to terrorism and encouraging it. ... This would be the best way to smuggle weapons into Gaza." The defense minister mocked the transportation minister's claim that international monitors could oversee the

shipments from the port to Gaza's shore. "You cannot maintain our security via a remote control," he ruled.

- In the months since, the Gaza crisis has deepened. On Feb. 6, Gaza merchants suspended all trading at the Kerem Shalom border crossing with Israel, claiming the purchasing power in the Strip had reached rock bottom, the volume of orders from importers and traders had plummeted, and they could no longer afford the losses. People don't even have money to buy food, they said. The business situation indicates that the collapse is not an apocalyptic, far-off scenario but is already here — on the other side of the border crossings with Gaza, an hour's drive south of Tel Aviv. Israel, which is unprepared for such a situation and continues to hold the blockade sacrosanct, still has no answers. An Israeli security source told Al-Monitor that it is still unclear whether Netanyahu favors the Katz plan, but his order to hold a discussion of the matter at least proves that Eizenkot's warning had set off alarm bells in his office. Yet even if the Cabinet approves the building of an island across from Gaza with the help of donor states, construction will take several years and Gaza cannot wait.
- For now, Israeli defense authorities are recommending emergency shipments of food, water, medicine and hospital supplies. Who will pay for them? That is unclear. What is clear is that this is not a fundamental, long-term solution. "Even a combined aid forum of donor states in addition to the easing of extensive restrictions by Israel will not save Gaza from collapse. Gaza will keep dying gradually, postponing the end for a while. But the end is near," said the source on condition of anonymity. Until a fundamental solution is found, whether by building a port or any other creative means, the key to the salvation of Gaza's 2 million residents is in the hands of one man: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Although he, too, is politically, diplomatically and economically weak — especially since the Donald Trump administration has threatened to cut off US aid to the Palestinians — he is apparently the only one who can do something. However, for now at least, Abbas is not assuming any responsibility for events in Gaza.
- Some in Israel think Abbas' refusal to take a stand stems not only from unresolved issues with Hamas over the stalled reconciliation process with Fatah, but also from a desire to take revenge against Trump and Netanyahu for humiliating him. He is avenging Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Netanyahu's cheering of the declaration. And for that, Abbas would rather see Gaza's downfall blamed on Netanyahu. He wants Netanyahu to get a taste of his own medicine.

## Let the Israeli Army's Policy of Restraint in Gaza Prevail

By Zvi Bar'el, Correspondent, Ha'aretz

- The army has a free hand to act against terror. It's allowed to attack targets even in Syria or Sinai. The army is responsible for providing assessments of threats and opportunities, to propose means of action, or to stop government initiatives that endanger Israel, like an attack on Iran. But the army isn't allowed to start a war without the government's approval, and of course it's not allowed to conduct peace negotiations, even if peace is an integral part of the country's security. But is the army allowed to provide legitimacy to an unethical policy masked as a war on terror, or to a policy disguised as safeguarding Israel's security? Is the army authorized to prevent a war stemming from such a policy? The test case that's currently a threat is the severe hardship in Gaza, which according to Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot could lead to a total breakdown that spurs a violent confrontation in the near future. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman dismisses the chief of staff's words out of hand and insists that there's no humanitarian disaster in Gaza and it's not so terrible if Hamas starts to panic a little.
- Eisenkot's warning doesn't necessarily stem from humanitarian concerns. It's a professional military assessment addressed to the cabinet. It's based on the recognition that although the Israel Defense Forces has forged a balance of deterrence against Hamas, such deterrence is effective on condition that the other side has something to lose — and in this it's very similar to the deterrence formula against Hezbollah. It's a formula that's easy to understand and has been learned and tried in many places around the world. As long as the local regime is worried about its survival and its military weakness so dictates, it won't start a war. But when its only lifeline is a military attack, because it's losing control due to its inability to provide for the population it rules, it will attack or try to reach a compromise with the enemy.
- The option of compromise doesn't exist in Gaza, just as it's absent in Lebanon. The difference between them is that in Lebanon there are still forces that can hold Hezbollah in check, because its political power depends on cooperation with rival parties and is subject to regional and even international considerations dictated by the interests of Iran and Syria. In Gaza there is no local force that can dictate to Hamas, and even its reconciliation with Egypt hasn't yet produced anything concrete to strengthen its position as long as the Rafah crossing isn't opened regularly and systematically.
- The result is that the strategy of closure, which is designed to bring about the collapse of Hamas, has become bankrupt because Israel has no effective civilian tools left to pressure Gaza with. The IDF and the Shin Bet security service were the first to understand that Hamas can serve as a vital tool to help stop the firing of rockets into Israel, on condition that it can survive. In the balance between the threat presented by a strong Hamas and the benefit to be gained from its strength, the IDF has concluded that in the current diplomatic situation, Hamas' ability to govern should be preferred. This isn't a strategic betrayal of the deterrence formula but

actually supports it. The more the Gaza economy improves, the more Hamas will have to lose. This is an entirely military perspective that doesn't require negotiating with the organization over peace or withdrawing from the territories.

- Such a perspective gives meaning to Israel's threats, because in the absence of civilian infrastructure and a flourishing economy, there is nothing to threaten. But to implement this perspective, the chief of staff can't suffice with warnings or situation assessments. He must decide that the current policy is a threat and likely to become a casus belli for a war against Israel. And if he feels unable to breach the cabinet's wall of folly that's endangering the country, he must draw conclusions. An honest, decent and wise chief of staff can't be a partner to the foolish plot that the cabinet is preparing against the country.