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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, March 14

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News Excerpts

March 14, 2018

Ha'aretz

Israeli Snap Elections Averted: PM Says 'I Kept My Promise'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party announced Tuesday that the coalition parties reached an agreement to prevent snap elections. A preliminary version of the conscription law exempting draft exemptions for ultra-Orthodox students from the draft was passed in the Knesset. The compromise allowed members of the coalition factions to vote as they choose. Before the crisis was resolved, proposals to dissolve the parliament had been expected to receive support from the coalition parties, and thus to result in early elections.

See also, [*"Liberman denies he, Netanyahu coordinated secret bid for snap vote" \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

Times of Israel

After Summit, WH Will Pursue Gaza Projects Without PA

While the White House would like to work with the Palestinian Authority on its initiatives in Gaza, it will move on without them if they're unwilling to cooperate with the Trump administration, senior officials said Tuesday shortly after completing a conference with Israeli, Arab and European officials. Jerusalem was represented by Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai. Also present were envoys for Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar, which has close ties to Gaza's Hamas rulers. Notably missing was the PA, which has refused to work with the US since the recognition of Jerusalem.

Times of Israel

Abbas Condemns 'Murderous Terror Attack' on PA Convoy

President Mahmoud Abbas on Tuesday strongly condemned the explosion that targeted the convoy of Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah in the northern Gaza Strip, calling it a "murderous terror attack." Referring to Hamas, Abbas said that the "de facto" government in the Gaza Strip was responsible for the assassination attempt. The PA said that seven men injured in the explosion were receiving medical treatment in Ramallah hospitals. Hamas denied any connection to the explosion and said it had launched an investigation.

Times of Israel

Assassination Attempt Rains on Bid to Ease Water Crisis

Hamdallah's visit to Gaza on Tuesday was meant to focus on sewage, highlighting the territory's dire water situation. Hamdallah's first stop in Gaza was meant to be an inauguration ceremony a \$43 million wastewater treatment plant sponsored by the World Bank. For lack of adequate means for treating Gaza's sewage, and with power outages having shut down even the existing and inadequate wastewater treatment plants, sewage is generally dumped directly into the Mediterranean Sea, and seeps into Gaza's groundwater.

Reuters

Jewish Pilgrimage in West Bank a Rare Sign of Cooperation

The West Bank is the cradle of Judaism, which claims more than a dozen graves and shrines that dot the hills and deserts that Israelis know by the biblical names Judea and Samaria. Under the 1993 Oslo interim peace accords, the Palestinians agreed to secure such sites for Jewish access. Some of the sites have become political flashpoints. But elsewhere, rarely making headlines, the pilgrimages continue more peacefully, a gesture to the kind of religious pluralism that the authors of the peace process envisaged even in the crazy-quilt geography of the West Bank, where Palestinian towns and Israeli settlements exist uneasily side by side.

Jerusalem Post

Hundreds of US Marines, IDF Troops Train in Southern Israel

Hundreds of Israeli soldiers and US Marines trained shoulder-to-shoulder Monday in southern Israel as part of Juniper Cobra 2018, drilling on close urban combat and tunnel warfare. While the two-week-long joint Israeli/American military exercise drills on various scenarios adapted to Israel's operational reality such as missile threats in various sectors simultaneously, the Marines have not directly participated in the missile drills which comprised the majority of Juniper Cobra. Instead, the 650 Marines trained with Israeli troops in several operational scenarios, including live fire and artillery drills, in order to enhance interoperability and cooperation between the two allies.

Washington Post

Does the PA Pay \$350 Million A Year to Terrorists?

For several weeks, The Fact Checker has examined Israeli claims that the PA pays “\$350 million a year to terrorists and their families,” as Netanyahu put it in a recent speech. The Israeli estimate has helped fuel a push in Congress to pass a bill, known as the Taylor Force Act, that would end U.S. aid to the PA unless the practice is ended. But the math is fuzzy. Israel prefers to use broad numbers, labeling every Palestinian in custody as a terrorist, to avoid a spotlight on its detention practices. The Palestinians do not want to single out clear-cut cases of terrorism, no matter how horrific, when even their loved ones celebrate such acts as necessary resistance.

Times of Israel

Orly Levy-Abekasis is Israel's Newest Political Wildcard

Beyond the Will They? Won't They? elections drama that unfolded in the halls of the Knesset, perhaps the most important political story this week was the emergence of a new, and possibly major, player. MK Orly Levy-Abekasis's freshly announced party managed to garner 5 seats in a poll of likely voters Monday — before it had been given a title or named a single person on its roster beyond the headlining legislator. Asked on which side of the political map she believed her natural political partners were found, the legislator said she sought to break free of the traditional left-right paradigm. She would rather focus on socioeconomic affairs including pensions, health, housing, child-rearing and strengthening small and medium businesses.

Deal Prevents Elections but May Just Postpone Stand-Off

By Raoul Wootliff, Analyst, Times of Israel

- The compromise deal reached by ministers Monday night over the ultra-Orthodox conscription bill appears to have ended the immediate threat of early elections, but has not altogether solved the coalition crisis. It has, however, postponed the stand off, giving coalition members at least another few months of the current government. According to a statement from the Likud, each coalition party has agreed to the plan that allows them to claim victory for now and remain in government, but effectively pushes off the fight until the Summer sitting of the Knesset, which begins at the end of April.
- The statement said that the Ministerial Committee for Legislation had agreed “to give each faction freedom to vote on the [conscription] bill according to the position set by the party chair,” on the condition that every member of the party vote alike. Yisrael Beytenu chairman Avigdor Liberman, a vociferous opponent of the bill — which is seen as giving the ultra-Orthodox the ability to dodge the country’s mandatory military draft — had been insistent that his party will oppose it, fueling speculation that a snap election as early as June was all but assured.
- He has said that all five of his party’s Knesset members would vote against the bill, including Immigration Minister Sofa Landver, the only member of his party who is both a legislator and a minister. A minister voting against a government bill could be grounds for dismissal, a move Liberman said would also have spurred him to leave the government. The agreement allows Landver to vote against without facing repercussions. Plus, with Yisrael Beytenu only contributing five of the coalition’s 66 MKs, the bill can still pass without them, given that all the other coalition parties have agreed to support it. The agreement also states that Liberman, in his role as defense minister, will present the committee with a proposal for a government conscription bill as agreed upon by his ministry, no later than four weeks after the beginning of the Knesset summer sitting.
- “After that proposal is approved by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation and is passed in its first reading in the Knesset, it will be joined with the bill presented by [Shas] MK Yoav Ben Tzur in preparation for second and third readings,” the agreement says, adding that the final bill will need agreement from all coalition parties. That agreement may be hard to come by, with Yisrael Beytenu and the ultra-Orthodox at loggerheads over exempting Haredi men from military or national service. If a formulation palatable to both isn’t found, early elections could once again be on the table.
- The draft legislation passed in its initial reading Tuesday and is backed by the United Torah Judaism party, which had threatened to veto the 2019 state budget if its bill isn’t passed. Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon had threatened in response to pull his Kulanu party out of the government if the budget isn’t passed this week. Tuesday’s agreement allows for a vote on both

the conscription bill and the budget before the Knesset goes on recess on Thursday after the four-month winter sitting.

- Ministers also agreed to vote on the first reading of the controversial Jewish State bill immediately after the 2019 budget is approved and “if that is not possible,” due to schedule restraints, to vote on the proposal on the first day of the Summer sitting. Like the conscription bill, the final bill will be formulated in coordination with all the coalition parties, who will then be obligated to support it. In recent days, some Likud lawmakers joined the fray by demanding that the Jewish State bill, which seeks to officially define Israel as a Jewish state and enshrine that definition in the country’s Basic Laws, also be passed before the recess begins.
- Including it in the compromise allows the Likud, as well as the ultra-Orthodox parties, Yisrael Beytenu and Kulanu, to claim a legislative victory Tuesday’s election-averting agreement finished with a symbolic declaration: “A stable government is a national necessity. All the party heads are obligated to work together so that the government can continue to function for an extended period of time.” The result is that everyone gets what they want. The ultra-Orthodox get a show of political relevance for their constituents. Yisrael Beytenu gets to claim it stopped the Haredi-drafted version of the bill. Lastly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gets a commitment from all his coalition partners to pass the 2019 budget and — possibly — prevent any early elections before the winter of 2019.

Assassination Attempt Dealt Mortal Blow to Reconciliation

By Amos Harel, Columnist, Ha'aretz

- Who tried to assassinate the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, Rami Hamdallah, and the head of the PA's intelligence services, General Majid Faraj, immediately after they arrived in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday morning? Was this a failed attempt on their lives or just a threatening signal to the PA's leadership? The answers to these questions, in the first few hours after the incident, are still rather blurry, contradictory and rife with conspiracy theories that in any case had prevailed with respect to the relations between Fatah and Hamas. What is clear is that even though the two senior PA officials escaped the blast without injury, the efforts led by Egypt to effect a reconciliation between the two Palestinian factions have suffered a mortal blow.
- It is unlikely that Hamdallah will come to Gaza for another visit anytime soon. And the Hamas leadership – whether they are behind the attack or just enabled it due to an act of omission – have now earned themselves an even more determined rival in Faraj, who is arguably the most powerful person in the West Bank today. Hamdallah arrived in Gaza on Tuesday, on his first visit in months, to cut the ribbon at the launch of a new sewage-purification plant in the northern Strip, in whose construction the PA had participated. Hovering in the background, the Egyptian attempt to broker a rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas has hit a dead end. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas sees – somewhat justifiably – Hamas' conditions for such an agreement as a dangerous honey trap for him. The Hamas leadership wants to dump the ongoing civil operation of Gaza on Abbas, without subordinating its military forces to the PA.
- At the same time, Fatah fears that Hamas will try to exploit a reconciliation to carry out a hostile takeover, starting with the institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization and then later taking over the reins of power in the West Bank. Tuesday's explosion will exacerbate the tension between the various quarreling Palestinian camps. Some in the PA have already accused Hamas of being responsible for endangering the safety of those riding in the convoy. Hamdallah went on to give a speech in Gaza and announced that he will continue to visit there, but a short time later cut short his tour and quickly returned to the West Bank, via Israeli territory. The convoy packed up and turned around – taking with it a few security guards who were lightly injured by the explosion.
- The assassination attempt took place just a few hundred meters south of the Erez crossing on the Gaza-Israel border, on the Strip's main north-south thoroughfare. This is an area that is ostensibly under the strict supervision of Hamas' security services. Nonetheless, someone managed to infiltrate it, and to conceal a very powerful explosive device (based on the large mushroom cloud that rose high over the scene after its detonation) under the road. It appears that if the blast's timing had been arranged in a more professional way – and had not hit only the last vehicle in the convoy – the injuries to the senior PA officials would have been much more serious.

- This leads to two possibilities: first, that the organization behind the attack is one that is operating in opposition to Hamas policy; or, alternatively, that Hamas turned a blind eye to an act that was intended to threaten senior PA officials, but not kill them. Hamas does not have total control over the Gaza Strip. One of the heads of the security services there, Tawfiq Abu Naim, spoke shortly after the attack about an investigation of the incident. Abu Naim was wounded in October 2017 in an assassination attempt. At the time, the accusations were aimed at extremist Salafist groups, which Abu Naim had been handling with an iron fist.
- This time too, those responsible may be Islamic Salafist extremists, but the long list of suspects also includes Mohammed Dahlan's men. Dahlan is a former senior PA official who is at odds with Abbas, as well as with Hamas, or at least certain elements in that organization. Hamas quickly blamed Israel for the blast, by the way. This is not the first such incident on this road. In October 2003, three American security guards were killed in an explosion aimed at a convoy of vehicles heading south from the Erez crossing, near Beit Hanun. That incident, which the popular resistance committees in Gaza seem to have been behind, fomented a long-term crisis between the PA and the Bush administration. This time, too, even though no lives were lost, the incident could have far-reaching consequences – especially concerning the already-charged relations between the PA and Hamas.
- The explosive device used against Hamdallah's convoy was detonated only a few hours before the convening of a special conference in Washington called by the White House, over the ways to deal with the severe humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. Unlike the previous meeting on the subject, which was held recently in Cairo, this time both the PA and Hamas are boycotting the conference, which will include American and Israeli representatives. The incident in Gaza will cast a large shadow over the meeting in Washington. The chances of improving the situation in the Strip, if only by a little bit, now look to be even slimmer than they were before the bombing.