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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, March 30

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News Excerpts

March 30, 2018

Times of Israel

Palestinian Killed by IDF Tank Fire Along Gaza Fence

A Palestinian man was killed early Friday by Israeli tank fire near Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, the Hamas-run health ministry said. The man was identified as Omar Wahid Sammour, 27, a farmer. Witnesses said he was working his land near the border when the shells hit. The IDF said that it had opened fire on four suspects near the security fence overnight, both in the north and south of the Gaza Strip. It said that during the incident outside Khan Yunis, “two suspects approached the perimeter fence... and engaged in suspicious behavior on the ground alongside it. In response, an IDF unit fired at them with a tank.” See also, [“Gaza farmer killed by Israeli tank shell: Gaza health official” \(Reuters\)](#)

Times of Israel

US Peace Envoy Blasts ‘Hostile March’ on Gaza Border

Jason Greenblatt, the US envoy to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, took Hamas to task early Friday over its “hostile march” along the Gaza Strip’s border with the Jewish state. “Hamas is encouraging a hostile march on the Israel-Gaza border,” he tweeted. “Hamas should focus on desperately needed improvements to the lives of Palestinians in Gaza instead of inciting violence against Israel that only increases hardship & undermines chances for peace.” Earlier, State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said that, while Israel “has the right to defend itself,” Gazans also “have a right” to demonstrate. See also, [“US Mid-East envoy Greenblatt accuses Hamas of planning ‘hostile march’ against Israel” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha’aretz

Netanyahu to Israeli Lawmakers: Avoid Visiting Temple Mount

Knesset members should refrain from visiting the Temple Mount over the next three months because of security tensions, the National Security Council at the Prime Minister's Office said on Thursday. Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein (Likud) announced the decision, citing recent statements by security officials. "I'd like to bring your attention to the opinions of security officials who say that because of the current volatile security situation, Knesset members should refrain from visiting the Temple Mount for the foreseeable future," he said. PM Netanyahu made this decision earlier this week, a letter sent to Edelstein said, due to the "assessment of intelligence officials of the increased potential for explosive activity in Palestinian areas in the near future, following the recent exacerbation of tensions"

Jerusalem post

Olmert Urges PM to Step Down, Preserve Dignity of Office

Prime Minister Netanyahu must resign due to his multiple criminal investigations, former prime minister Ehud Olmert said in an interview with The Jerusalem Post that will be published in next weekend’s Post Magazine. “My suggestion to Benjamin Netanyahu is to do what needs to be done to preserve the dignity and respect the status of the Israeli prime minister,” Olmert said. “He should do the right thing, based on what he and his family and attorneys know about his cases, and do it in a way that will not compromise the dignity of the Prime Minister’s Office and himself as prime minister.” See also, [“Olmert says Netanyahu should ‘resign elegantly’ right now: ‘Go, run, disappear!’” \(TOI\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Trump: U.S. Leaving Syria 'Very Soon, Let Others Take Care of It'

U.S. President Donald Trump said Thursday that Washington may pull out of its involvement in Syria "very soon," in comments that seem to have caught the U.S. State Department off guard. Speaking at a rally, Trump said that "we're knocking the hell out of ISIS. We'll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now. "Very soon, very soon, we're coming out. We're going to have 100 percent of the caliphate, as they call it – sometimes referred to as land. We're taking it all back – quickly, quickly," he said. Contradicting Trump, the U.S. State Department said it was unaware of any plans to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. See also, ["Trump says US withdrawing from Syria 'very soon'" \(i24 News\)](#)

Ynet news

Druze Appointed as New COGAT

Brig. Gen. Kamil Abu Rokon was promoted to the rank of major general on Thursday as he was appointed the new Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, replacing outgoing COGAT Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, who served in the position for the last four years. The appointment ceremony was held at the IDF chief of staff's office in the Kirya IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv, and was attended by Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot and members of the IDF General Staff. Abu Rokon, who is currently the head of the Border Crossings Authority in the Defense Ministry, is set to officially take the position in May. He will be the second Druze appointed to the post, as well as the second Druze to ever reach the rank of major general. See also, ["Kamil Abu Rokon appointed Israel's next liaison to Palestinians" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Soccer Hooligan Who Attacked Fan Gets 10 Years in Jail

Member of the notorious 'La Familia' fan group sentenced to ten years in prison for aggravated assault of supporter of a rival soccer team; upon receiving sentencing, convict faints. Omer Golan, the main defendant in the La Familia affair, in which several supporters of the Beitar Jerusalem soccer club were convicted of committing a series of violent offenses, was sentenced Thursday to ten years in prison and a NIS 100,000 fine for aggravated assault of a supporter of a rival soccer club. Golan was convicted of assaulting and seriously wounding 37-year-old Yuri Sedletsky, a supporter of the Hapoel Tel Aviv soccer club, at the Reading parking lot in the city's Florentine neighborhood in 2015 after admitting as part of a plea deal he was the one among his group of friends who perpetrated the attack. See also, ["Israeli soccer hooligans arrested" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Canadian Parliament approves Canadian Jewish Heritage Month

The Canadian Parliament passed legislation making every May Canadian Jewish Heritage Month. The bill unanimously passed the House of Commons on Thursday. It previously had passed the Senate. It is expected to receive royal assent and become law before May. Two Jewish lawmakers — Michael Levitt in the House of Commons and Linda Frum in the Senate — sponsored the measure. Levitt lauded the multi-partisan support by the Parliament. "Canadian Jewish Heritage Month will provide an opportunity for all Canadians to reflect on and celebrate the incredible contributions that Jewish Canadians have made to our country, in communities across Canada," Levitt said.

Gaza Mass Protests Force Israeli Military to Maneuver Between Two Contradictory Goals

By Amos Harel, military commentator at Ha'aretz

- **Top officials in the army's Southern Command, whose units will deploy massively on Friday to prevent participants in the Palestinian "March of Return" from entering Israel through the Gazan border, will have to maneuver between two goals likely to be contradictory. On one hand, commanders were ordered to prevent mass border crossings and stop attempts to destroy the border fence. On the other hand, a heavy use of force could end in killings of demonstrators – and the conventional wisdom in the Israel Defense Forces holds that killing Palestinians means throwing fuel on the fire in the West Bank and Gaza.**
- **Hamas is seeking to keep this flame burning at least until Nakba Day on May 15. IDF commanders will have to use force wisely to deprive Hamas of this achievement. Israeli politicians are very stressed about the unfolding of events, which coincide with the beginning of Passover. Army officials know that in the case of failure, some people will be happy to pin responsibility on the senior commanders – the chief of staff, head of Southern Command and the commander of the Gaza battalion. It seems the army has seriously and thoroughly prepared for the mission, and usually when it has sufficient intelligence warnings, this is how it acts.**
- **Some of the officers navigating the handling of Friday's demonstrations were burned in similar circumstances in the past. It happened in May 2111, when the Assad regime triggered demonstrations by Palestinian refugees on the border with Israel in the Golan Heights, for the purpose of diverting attention from the civil war that was just beginning to break out in Syria. There was a problem with transferring early intelligence, or with the interpretation given that intelligence, and dozens of demonstrators managed to break through the fence near the Druze village of Majdal Shams.**
- **One would hope that lessons have been learned since then. This time, thousands of Nahal and Givati soldiers, most of whom will have to spend seder night in the field, have been brought in. Barbed wire fences have been laid out, and a large number of snipers have been deployed. If there is a weak spot, it seems to be the army's decision not to rely on the knowledge and experience of the police and Border Police in handling mass demonstrations. Army officials give the excuse that the police are already burdened this weekend with Land Day demonstrations by Israeli Arabs and the fear of attacks in Jerusalem.**
- **In recent days, perhaps inspired by widespread coverage by the Israeli press, Hamas escalated its rhetoric. Army officials note the active involvement of Hamas members in the demonstrations. According to this analysis, Hamas sees the coming six weeks as an opportunity to extricate itself from the strategic morass it has long been stuck in. The organization failed to break the siege around Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014. Since then, the state of Gaza's infrastructure has deteriorated, and Hamas has despaired of the attempt to manage civilian life in Gaza.**
- **Therefore, the organization's new leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, took a bold step: reconciling with the Palestinian Authority in the hope of handing it the reins over civilian life in the Strip. However, the reconciliation failed. Its death certificate was issued on the day of the failed**

attempted assassination of PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. Now, two choices remain: war with Israel, the consequences of which Hamas fears, or mass civilian demonstrations, which will provoke Israel into responding and, if there are numerous killings, put the Palestinian issue back on the international stage.

- There are different assessments in the army regarding the number of Palestinians who will show up starting Friday afternoon at the fence. They vary between 15,000 to 100,000, but the events of the Arab Spring have already proven that no one can forecast mass movements in the Middle East. The army will also have to keep an eye on what transpires in Jerusalem and the West Bank. News of deaths in Gaza are liable to stir things up in other areas.
- A series of incidents have overshadowed the preparations for possible clashes on Friday: Palestinians have infiltrated from Gaza into Israeli territory five times since last Saturday, but it would likely be a mistake to see these incidents as identical. The infiltration of three youths, who were arrested next to Kibbutz Tze'elim, was a resounding failure because their footprints were identified much later than they should have been, and the three managed to walk about 20 kilometers without hindrance inside Israeli territory. (Still, it is doubtful they were on their way to carry out an attack, despite carrying hand grenades and knives.)
- In two other incidents, Palestinians damaged equipment on both sides of the border, exploiting gaps in the defense fortifications. However, when an ordinary Gazan in search of a job crosses an obsolete fence and is immediately captured, as happened at Zikim on Wednesday, one should not view this as a failure by the army, and there is certainly no reason to scare local kibbutz and moshav residents.
- The atmosphere in the communities near Gaza is already tense, with all the Palestinian and IDF preparations for the marches. Palestinian reports speak of the return of refugees – and illustrations distributed in Gaza show children on bicycles creating a shadow in the shape of “194,” referring to the 1948 UN resolution recognizing the refugees’ right of return.
- Seventy years of fraught history between Israel and Gaza informs the atmosphere along the border these days. People in communities near Gaza were reminded this week of the eulogy by Moshe Dayan at the grave of Ro'i Rotberg, a member of Kibbutz Nahal Oz, who was killed by infiltrators in 1956. Dayan, who sounded a pessimistic forecast of the future conflict with the Palestinians, specifically referred to the tension created by the refugee question. “How can we complain about their intense hatred of us?” Dayan said. “For eight years now, they have been sitting in the refugee camps of Gaza, while before their very eyes we are expropriating their lands and villages, where they and their forefathers previously dwelled.”

SUMMARY: In recent days, perhaps inspired by widespread coverage by the Israeli press, Hamas escalated its rhetoric. Army officials note the active involvement of Hamas members in the demonstrations. According to this analysis, Hamas sees the coming six weeks as an opportunity to extricate itself from the strategic morass it has long been stuck in. The organization failed to break the siege around Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014. Since then, the state of Gaza’s infrastructure has deteriorated, and Hamas has despaired of the attempt to manage civilian life in Gaza.

Should Palestinians Keep Boycotting Jerusalem Elections?

By Akiva Eldar, columnist at AI Monitor Israel Pulse

- **Knesset member Ahmad Tibi of the Arab Joint List party made no effort to conceal his glee at the distress of his Jewish colleagues who had a hard time digesting the population data reported by Israeli officials on March 26 indicating the loss of a Jewish majority in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. “The vision of an Arab prime minister that now appears a far-fetched idea is drawing nearer,” the veteran lawmaker declared, promising that when that happens, Israel would be “equal and democratic, not Jewish and democratic.”**
- **But the realization of Tibi’s vision is an unlikely prospect. The prospect of a Jewish minority governing an Arab majority — in other words, apartheid — appears far more realistic than one in which an Arab majority with full civil rights rules a Jewish minority. Of the over 6 million Arabs residing between Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, only 800,000 Israeli Arabs are eligible to vote and be elected to the Knesset.**
- **On the other hand, the announcement this week by Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat that he intends to throw his hat into the national political arena and run for the Knesset makes the vision of an Arab at the helm of Israel’s capital city quite realistic. Its feasibility would depend on encouragement by the Palestinian leadership on East Jerusalem’s Palestinian residents to exercise their right to vote and influence municipal politics. According to 2015 data published by Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, some 325,000 Palestinian residents of “unified” Jerusalem made up more than a third of the city’s population. A significant majority are registered as permanent residents of the State of Israel and hold an Israeli identification card. However, they are not Israeli citizens; over the past 50 years, Israel has approved fewer than 5,000 applications for citizenship by East Jerusalem’s Arab residents. They are therefore not eligible to vote in Knesset elections but eligible to vote for their city’s mayor and council members and to be elected to those positions.**
- **In local elections held in 2013, Barkat garnered approximately 111,000 votes, 51.1%, while his rival Moshe Lion, who is also running in the upcoming Oct. 30 elections, received some 95,000. In the city council balloting, the ultra-Orthodox factions won 88,000 votes; the two independent lists, that of Barkat and the Wake-up Jerusalem, won all in all 56,000 votes; and 12,000 gave their vote to a joint list of the Labor and Meretz parties.**
- **These figures do not include the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, most of whom tend to boycott the elections. Participation by roughly 280,000 eligible Palestinian adult voters could have a dramatic impact on the results. A joint Palestinian ticket reportedly being formed could benefit from splits among the Jewish constituency — between ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews, between left-wing and right-wing voters, and within the right-wing camp and the left-wing camp. There’s nothing stopping such a list from cooperating with the ultra-Orthodox factions and even forging a city council coalition with them based on common interests of the city’s disadvantaged communities.**

- A poll conducted in January shows that almost 60% of East Jerusalem's Arab residents support participation in the municipal elections. The poll, conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion for Hebrew University's Institute of International Relations and the Israeli-Palestinian IPCRI organization, found that only 13% were opposed to participation. However, under pressure by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, and even threats of violent repercussions, most polling stations in the city's Palestinian neighborhoods are virtually empty on election days. The Palestinian organizations view participation in the voting not only as recognizing Israel's annexation but also as renouncing the demand for recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.
- Knesset member Tibi said as much in response to a recent suggestion by former Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg that he run for mayor, writing on his Twitter account, "No thanks! That would grant legitimacy to a city under occupation. ... Let's end the [Israeli] occupation of all areas captured in 1967, including East Jerusalem." Nonetheless, does the willingness to carry an Israeli ID card and driver's license not constitute recognition of a city under occupation? Are Tibi and his friends in the Palestinian leadership suggesting that East Jerusalem's Palestinian residents stop paying taxes to the Israeli treasury and forgo Israeli social benefits in order to avoid legitimizing the occupation?
- The continued boycott of the Jerusalem elections does not contribute in any way to the struggle against the occupation. On the contrary. Giving up local political representation plays into the hands of the occupation forces. The right-wing settlement movement enjoys complete freedom in pushing ahead with its project to "Jewify" Jerusalem. While the PA is treading the murky waters of the so-called political process with Israel, sewage water is flowing unhampered in the Palestinian refugee camps of East Jerusalem that Israel has annexed. A significant Palestinian representation in the upper echelons of local government could make use of planning and construction tools to block the takeover of the Jerusalem Holy Basin (the Old City and its adjacent territories) by nationalist forces, such as the nongovernmental organizations El-Ad and Ateret Cohanim.
- East Jerusalem's residents must take part in the municipal elections not only to counter the discrimination of its residents on all fronts. They should go out in full force to the polling station in East Jerusalem in the name of their Palestinian brothers in the West Bank. As professor Sari Nusseibeh told me in 2008 when he was considering a mayoral run, "The [Palestinian] candidate in the municipal elections will run not only as a representative of the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem but of the entire Palestinian population in the occupied territories."
- The elections for Jerusalem's leadership are almost a perfect opportunity to demonstrate to Israelis the validity of Tibi's vision of an Arab prime minister. A significant Arab municipal leadership in the city that Israeli leaders dub "the unified capital of the Jewish people for eternity" could well drive a far greater turnout of Israel's Arab citizens in the next Knesset elections to bury once and for all the illusion of the status quo and the delusion of the annexation.

SUMMARY: The continued boycott of the Jerusalem elections does not contribute in any way to the struggle against the occupation. On the contrary. Giving up local political representation plays into the hands of the occupation forces. The right-wing settlement movement enjoys complete freedom in pushing ahead with its project to “Jewify” Jerusalem. While the PA is treading the murky waters of the so-called political process with Israel, sewage water is flowing unhampered in the Palestinian refugee camps of East Jerusalem that Israel has annexed. A significant Palestinian representation in the upper echelons of local government could make use of planning and construction tools to block the takeover of the Jerusalem Holy Basin (the Old City and its adjacent territories) by nationalist forces, such as the nongovernmental organizations El-Ad and Ateret Cohanim.