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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, April 3*

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- Arab League to Discuss Israeli 'Massacre' in Gaza
- France to Israel After Gaza Border Deaths: 'Show Restraint'
- Egypt's Sisi Wins 97% in Election with No Real Opposition
- Saudi Crown Prince Recognizes Israel's Right to Exist
- U.S. Supreme Court Won't Revive Lawsuit Against PLO
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# News Excerpts

April 3, 2018

## Times of Israel

### **Hours After Announcing it, Netanyahu Suspends Migrant Deal**

In a dramatic about-face, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Monday evening that he was freezing a new agreement with the UN refugee agency that would have seen thousands of African migrants given temporary status in Israel — mere hours after announcing the plan. “I hear you, and especially the residents of south Tel Aviv,” Netanyahu said in a (Hebrew) Facebook post amid mounting right-wing criticism of the deal. “For the time being, I am suspending the agreement,” he added, noting that he would meet with Interior Minister Aryeh Deri and residents of south Tel Aviv, where many of the migrants reside, before reconsidering it. See also, [“Netanyahu’s Incredible Flip-Flop on African Migrants” \(Atlantic\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Arab League to Discuss Israeli ‘Massacre’ in Gaza**

The Arab League is planning to hold an emergency meeting on Tuesday at the level of permanent representatives to discuss “the crimes of the occupation against the Palestinian people,” the assistant secretary-general for Palestinian affairs, Said Abu Ali, told official Palestinian news agency Wafa. He added that the league is closely following developments after the “Israeli massacre against peaceful civilians” on the Gaza border. Abu Ali called on the international community to put an immediate halt to “the Israeli crimes” and to provide protection to the Palestinian people. See also, [“Gaza toll rises to 18, Israel rejects excessive force claims” \(AP\)](#)

## Ha’aretz

### **France to Israel After Gaza Border Deaths: 'Show Restraint'**

France issued a statement on Sunday expressing concern in response to last Friday's protests along the Israel-Gaza border that killed at least 18 Palestinians. France reminded Israeli authorities "of their duty to protect civilians" and urged them to "show the greatest restraint." "France also highlights the Palestinians' right to peacefully demonstrate," the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said in a statement. The German Federal Foreign Office expressed "extreme concern" in a statement released Saturday following the clashes that took place along the border. "Exercising the right to freedom of expression and peaceful protest must not be exploited and used to violate Israel's legitimate security interests on the border to the Palestinian territories," the statement said.

## Ynet News

### **Egypt's Sisi Wins 97% in Election with No Real Opposition**

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has been re-elected with 97 percent of votes, the same proportion that the former military commander secured four years ago for his first term but with a lower turnout, official results showed on Monday. Turnout was 41 percent, despite efforts to get as many Egyptians as possible to polling stations during last week's vote. The election featured only one other candidate—himself an ardent Sisi supporter—after all serious opposition contenders halted their campaigns in January. See also, [“Trump congratulates Egypt’s Sissi after what critics call a sham election” \(Washington Post\)](#)

## **Saudi Crown Prince Recognizes Israel's Right To Exist**

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in an interview published Monday, recognized Israel's right to exist and extolled the prospect of future diplomatic relations between his kingdom and the Jewish state. In an extensive interview with The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg, Prince Mohammed laid out his vision for the future of the Middle East, including the possibility of cooperation with Israel. Asked whether he believes "the Jewish people have a right to a nation-state in at least part of their ancestral homeland," he replied: "I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land." See also, "[Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'](#)" ([Atlantic](#))

### CNN

## **US Supreme Court Won't Revive Lawsuit Against PLO**

The Supreme Court declined on Monday to revive a lawsuit brought by 11 American families against the Palestinian Authority and Palestine Liberation Organization. The ruling, issued without comment from the justices, is a loss for victims and their family members who brought suit under federal law for seven terror attacks committed during a wave of violence in Israel. In 2015, a US jury awarded the victims a \$655.5 million judgment under the Anti-Terrorism Act. But a federal appeals court wiped away that judgment, holding that the federal courts lacked jurisdiction over the defendants in the case because they didn't have a strong enough connection to the US to justify subjecting them to a lawsuit. See also, "[US Supreme Court deals 'terrible blow' to families suing Palestinians for terror](#)" ([Times of Israel](#))

### Ha'aretz

## **U.S. Jewish Leaders Laud Israel's New Deal With UN**

Leading Jewish American groups congratulated the Israeli government on Monday for reaching a new agreement on asylum seekers with the UN's refugee agency. According to the new plan, half of the African asylum seekers will be resettled in Western countries while half will eventually receive residency in Israel. "We applaud all those who demonstrated and raised their voices to promote a just solution for those seeking asylum in Israel," Rabbi Rick Jacobs, of the Union for Reform Judaism, said. "How fitting that during the Passover holidays, Israel has shone a light unto the nations of the world for treating those who are escaping harm in their homelands to find sanctuary among the righteous," he added. "May other nations in the world, including the U.S., look righteously upon those among us who seek refuge, safety, and better lives." See also, "[German Officials to Haaretz: Contrary to Netanyahu's Remark, We Weren't Asked to Receive Asylum Seekers From Israel](#)" ([Ha'aretz](#))

### Ynet News

## **Over 200,000 Israelis Tour the Country During Passover**

About 220,000 Israelis visited nature reserves and national parks throughout the country at the start of the intermediate days of Passover. Among the popular sites were Yarkon National Park, Gan Hashlosha (Sachne), Qumran National Park—which holds family activities about the search of the hidden Qumran scrolls—the Caesarea Maritima National Park where the Israel Nature and Parks Authority holds the hippodrome horse show, and the Ein Gedi and Einot Tzukim nature reserves. The Golan Heights alone saw some 20,000 visitors on Sunday, while on Monday visitors flocked to Park Hama'ayanot and Goren Park, as well as Agamon Hula and Jordan Park.

## **Israel's Gaza Nightmare**

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor Israel Pulse

- **The March 30 Great March of Return to the Gaza border fence was nothing more than Act 1 of an unfolding drama, a dress rehearsal or possibly a pilot for what one can expect to see in the very near future. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are now preparing for April 17, Palestinian Prisoners Day, also the eve of Israel's Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers, and for May 15, Nakba Day, also the day after the United States is expected to open its new embassy in Jerusalem. Further complicating matters, the latter event coincides with the start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The Great March of Return was initiated and orchestrated by Hamas in an attempt to change the rules of the game, create a new balance of power and send a message to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that the struggle for the hearts and minds of the Palestinian people is far from over. Hamas is alive and kicking, and it is marching as well.**
- **Hamas is in the process of losing its tunnels as a weapon. The IDF and Egypt have also successfully prevented the group from smuggling into Gaza rockets, missiles and other arms that could break the balance of power. Facing the most threatening dead end ever, Hamas found a way to reinvent itself: a popular, mass march by tens of thousands of people, all heading to the Israeli border at the Erez checkpoint, where they would trample the fence, break the Israeli siege and move on toward Jerusalem or at least to the southern town of Ashkelon. Images of IDF tanks and helicopters firing at civilians marching for their freedom would be Israel's worst imaginable nightmare. That is why the IDF has decided not to let that happen.**
- **The IDF prepared for 100,000 marchers on March 30. That Hamas only managed to rally 35,000, according to the official Israeli estimate, is seen as a failure by the movement, already in a daunting state of crisis. It was thought that women and children would be at the forefront of the demonstrations, shielding others who would attempt to break through the fence and hide explosive devices or otherwise attack IDF troops. As the event neared, official Israeli spokespeople, including Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman and IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot issued a stern warning to Hamas' leaders. The IDF stationed more than 100 snipers along the fence, with strict rules of engagement. The objectives were to conclude the event with a minimum number of casualties, make every effort to avoid shooting women and children and prevent any damage to the fence.**
- **“Just imagine what could have happened,” one senior Israeli defense official told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. “Picture the outcome if they would have burst through the fence, even at a single point, and begun marching into Israel. It would have ended in a bloodbath. We don't have the privilege of allowing masses of Palestinians to march to Jerusalem, Ashkelon or any of the kibbutzim along the fence. We would have no choice but to employ enormous force, and that would have resulted in dozens, if not hundreds, of casualties. The images would have been a huge victory for the Palestinians. As far as we're concerned, the fact that the recent event ended with 16 casualties, 12 of whom have already been identified as Hamas terrorists, but without any casualties among the women and children, is a very significant achievement on our part. It should not be taken for granted.”**

- The IDF believes that it was able to let the air out of Hamas' balloon and keep the group from claiming an achievement before they continue with the current strategy. "Next time," Liberman said, "we have the capacity to respond more forcibly. We will not hesitate to use any means at our disposal." His statement was meant to emphasize that when it comes to violations of Israel's sovereignty along the border fence, Israel has no plans to blink.
- One senior military official told Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity, "Understand, this fence is a border in every sense of the term. No country in the world would allow terrorists to break through its borders. All anyone has to do is to listen to the leaders of Hamas. They did not call this event a demonstration against the occupation but a March of Return. They announced that they would be marching to Jerusalem. They declare again and again that they do not recognize Israel's right to exist. That is why they leave us no choice but to block them by force, no matter what the cost."
- The cost is the essential issue that makes Israel's achievement on Friday problematic. The far left was critical of what transpired, while the leaders of the center-left Zionist Camp expressed their support for the IDF and the measures taken by the government. That aside, the security establishment is well aware that the high number of casualties helps Hamas keep its fires burning. It may even be fanning the flames. Israel has a clear interest in minimizing the number of casualties, since this would help lower the flames and restore calm. While the IDF considers that it contained the number of fatalities to 16, that is still a high number. It is more than either side has suffered in a day, with the exception of when actually fighting.
- On April 1, the IDF began to speed up its construction and engineering projects involving Gaza. Obstacles and additional barriers are being installed to delay and even prevent Palestinians from quickly breaking through the fence into Israeli territory. Work continues at a fast pace and with vast sums to complete the underground barrier to deny Palestinians the ability to tunnel into Israel. Eizenkot, in Passover interviews, estimated that the underground barrier would be completed this year. With the identification and destruction of any existing tunnels, apparently in the single digits, Hamas will no longer have a significant strategic weapon to use against Israel. Given this, Israel realizes that the only weapon Hamas has left is mass marches.
- The working assumption in Israel is that going forward, Hamas activists will not be satisfied with trying to plant explosive devices along the border fence or otherwise ignite the area. "It is possible that the next time, they will try to shoot at IDF troops," a senior Israeli military figure told Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity. "They will try to incite the area and cause us to make a mistake, which would send tens of thousands of people to the fence."
- The IDF will try not to make that mistake. A 7-year-old girl brought to the fence on March 30 was returned to her parents by the IDF. The question is whether the next time, Israel will avoid making any major mistakes and creating a new Mohammed al-Dura, the Palestinian boy killed while huddling from gunfire with his father at the Kisufim checkpoint at the start of the last intifada, in 2000. A mistake of that magnitude would reshuffle the deck, putting Hamas back on center stage and the Palestinian issue back on the international agenda. Could that happen? Anything is possible.

**SUMMARY: “Just imagine what could have happened,” one senior Israeli defense official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. “Picture the outcome if they would have burst through the fence, even at a single point, and begun marching into Israel. It would have ended in a bloodbath. We don’t have the privilege of allowing masses of Palestinians to march to Jerusalem, Ashkelon or any of the kibbutzim along the fence. We would have no choice but to employ enormous force, and that would have resulted in dozens, if not hundreds, of casualties. The images would have been a huge victory for the Palestinians. As far as we’re concerned, the fact that the recent event ended with 16 casualties, 12 of whom have already been identified as Hamas terrorists, but without any casualties among the women and children, is a very significant achievement on our part. It should not be taken for granted.”**

## **It Took One Press Conference to Expose All of Netanyahu's Asylum Seeker Fables**

By Noa Landau, columnist at Ha'aretz

- **“Sometimes there are surprises,”** Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tried to explain to his followers on Facebook Monday night regarding the Israeli-UN refugee agency deal to deport african asylum seekers to western countries, mere moments before renegeing and announcing the suspension of said deal. It seems to be the most accurate description of the feelings, on the right and on the left, in light of his decision to sign an agreement that might finally resolve the absorption of thousands of asylum seekers from Africa in Israel.
- **After years of populist declarations and systematic incitement against a small group without residency status, Netanyahu was forced to admit that the best solution is in fact the one he fought against the entire time: recognizing the refugees in principle, international cooperation, absorbing those who remain as residents, dispersing them throughout the country and creating a plan to rehabilitate south Tel Aviv. But to reach this reasonable point, Israel was forced to pass through embarrassing realms with threats of unlimited jail time and forced deportation until the world came forward to save us from ourselves.**
- **Netanyahu, as he explicitly admitted, did not reach this conclusion of his own free will. The public pressure in Israel, the Jewish and international communities alongside the legal system, painted him in to a corner. The straw that broke his back was the collapse of the agreement with Rwanda, the third country, which also gave in to international norms after its identity was revealed and a protest broke out. This was an important bright spot, and a considerable lesson, for all those promoting other liberal struggles in Israel.**
- **But even if this was forced upon him, Netanyahu is right about one main thing: the agreement sponsored by the UNHCR is indeed the best agreement, far more so than any other put up for discussion, for all the parties involved. If it is eventually enacted as (was) planned, 16,000 people will leave Israel to lead a dignified life, versus a lot less in previous deals (14,000 in the deal with the African states, according to Netanyahu,) and those remaining, a group smaller than any other work immigrant group in Israel, can focus on rehabilitation, instead of spiraling down to crime and unemployment. Cancelling the deal under the pressure of right-wing ministers means keeping all the asylum seekers in Israel. It's as simple as that. There is no other solution.**
- **But Netanyahu's slogan method backfired when he tried to do the right thing. How else are the supporters of the deportation plan going to be convinced now, after all the lies they've been told were refuted? Netanyahu is like the boy who cried wolf, only in this story the people are now expected to embrace the fictional wolf into their midst. All of the fables told to Israelis by Netanyahu's government were exposed in one hurried press conference: It was impossible to forcibly deport all of the asylum seekers, the agreement with the third countries would have left a group requiring assimilation anyway (“and Israel will resolve the status of protected populations, most of which would have remained in Israel to begin with” – quoted from the Prime Minister's statement,) there's nothing preventing the dispersal of the population around the**

country in a controlled manner, and of course no one prevented this government from rehabilitating southern Tel Aviv long before this current agreement.

- On the UN side, the agreement is worthy, but holds no great pride. The western countries basically gave in to Israel's threats and volunteered on their part to solve the problem for it, although many of them struggle under the burden of immigration - especially in relation to their size. When the Interior Minister Arye Dery boasts of this being a special settlement with the UN, he is virtually admitting that Israel's policy was so bad in relation to western democracies, that it was impossible not to intervene and save these refugees.
- It remains now to be seen if the government transcends itself and approves the deal, and even then, the big question still remains: will the agreement truly be executed in full? after Germany and Italy firmly denied Netanyahu's claims that they were allegedly absorbing some of the refugees, his bureau said they were meant to be "examples of western states," and that the agreement between Israel and UNHCR does not involve specific understandings with the countries. The UNHCR also confirmed there are no accords with any particular states, and that the intention was to find solutions over the next five years, using existing international plans, among other things.
- It is important to note that Israel and UNHCR have yet to publish the full agreement reached between them. Even after the copious criticism laid over the lack of transparency in the agreements with the African nations – the accord with the UN is also still not fully exposed to the public.

**SUMMARY:** After years of populist statements, Israel's premier was forced to admit the best solution is the one he's been fighting all along. But how will deportation supporters be convinced now, after all the lies they were told have been refuted?