



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Ha'aretz

What Comes Next for Asylum Seekers?

After Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu backtracked on the plan he announced on Monday to send 16,000 asylum seekers to Western countries, it emerged that Netanyahu is now examining several options for a deportation plan. Among the options is the possibility of finding a different country in Africa (not Rwanda or Uganda, which are off the table) that would agree to take in asylum seekers. Yet another option is to reopen the Holot detention facility, which was recently closed.

Ha'aretz

US Jewish Leaders Slam PM for Scrapping Deal

Jewish groups in the United States expressed anger and disappointment Tuesday over Netanyahu's reversal. A number of mainstream Jewish organizations in the U.S. had expressed their strong support for the agreement, and were shocked by the abrupt change, which he made under right-wing pressure. "We urge [Netanyahu] to move ahead and implement the original UN plan," said the Anti-Defamation League. "There's no other alternative but to find an ethical and humane approach to resettle the tens of thousands of refugees whose lives hang in the balance."

The New York Times

Netanyahu's Reversal Shows Influence of Hard-Line Allies

Netanyahu has backed down under pressure before, but rarely in such a spectacular fashion as he did on Tuesday. Netanyahu defended his abrupt reversal, saying he was responding to an outcry from members of his conservative Likud party as well as partners in his governing coalition who routinely refer to the migrants as "infiltrators" and want all of them expelled. But the capitulation may have dented his image as a master political player. The episode was a reminder of the influence of hard-liners in Netanyahu's party and his government, constraining him domestically and diplomatically.

Ha'aretz

Palestinians Prepare for Week Two of Gaza Protests

Preparations are underway for renewed protests near the Gaza Strip border fence this weekend. The various Palestinian factions are once again planning to enlist tens of thousands of people of all ages to come to the tent camp near the fence. Clear directives were given to all participants to maintain the principle said to have been set last week of a nonviolent march as part of a popular uprising against the occupation and blockade of Gaza. Earlier Tuesday, a 25-year-old Palestinian was shot and killed in the central Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Health Ministry said, bringing the number of people killed in demonstrations near the border fence to 17.

Trump and Netanyahu Talk Middle East in Phone Call

U.S. President Donald Trump spoke on the phone with Netanyahu on Tuesday, said the White House. Trump reportedly wanted to "address recent developments in the Middle East." The White House added that "the two leaders agreed to continue their close coordination on countering Iran's malign influence and destabilizing activities." Trump spoke earlier on Tuesday with King Salman of Saudi Arabia, who asked the President to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and emphasized Saudi Arabia's support for the creation a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Times of Israel

Abbas Meets with Egyptian Intel Chief on Reconciliation

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas met in his office in Ramallah on Tuesday with Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Mustafa, who delivered to him an "important" letter from President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi. The visit is seen by Palestinians in the context of Egypt's continued efforts to end the power struggle between the Hamas terror group that rules the Gaza Strip and Abbas's ruling Fatah faction. During the meeting, the two sides discussed the latest developments in the Palestinian territories and Egyptian efforts to achieve Palestinian reconciliation.

Times of Israel

UNESCO to Pass 'Extreme' Jerusalem Resolution Next Week

The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture is expected next week to pass another resolution on Jerusalem that an Israeli official has denounced as "the most extreme and problematic text" ever proposed. At first blush, the short text appears harmless from an Israeli perspective, devoid of any incendiary claims or designations. And yet, Jerusalem opposes it because it cites previous UN resolutions on Middle Eastern affairs, thus legitimizing more problematic formulations "through the back door," Israel's ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama Hacoen, said.

Ynet

Islamic Jihad Charged with Planning Attack on Israeli Navy

A Palestinian Islamic Jihad member was indicted Wednesday morning for gathering intelligence for a planned attack on an Israeli Navy ship, with the aim of abducting Israeli soldiers. On March 12, an Israeli Navy vessel stopped a Palestinian fishing boat and arrested the 10 people on board during routine operations off the Gaza coast after the boat was seen sailing outside the permitted fishing zone. One of the suspects, Amin Saadi Muhammad Jamaa, a 24-year-old fisherman from Rafah, is a member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

This Is Netanyahu's Worst Capitulation Yet

By Yossi Verter, Columnist, Ha'aretz

- In the face of all of Netanyahu's past capitulations, it was the most disgraceful, the most transparent. In comparison to all his reversals, it was the quickest, the most humiliating. The man had already taught us a chapter on zigzags and back-and-forths – in the story of the Western Wall egalitarian prayer space and the metal detectors at the Temple Mount, for example – but this time he outdid himself, in both speed and flexibility. A contortionist could only dream of having such a liquid backbone.
- What we saw in the past 24 hours is a parody of a prime minister and a tragedy to the state he heads. There's never been anything like it: The Israeli government signs an agreement with an international organization over an issue that is at the heart of the public debate and about which the government has a firm position. The prime minister declaims to his nation the details of the deal in a jubilant news briefing in the midst of the intermediate days of Passover, and within hours he backtracks. The main question isn't why Bibi folded. The answer to that is obvious: He underestimated the resistance he would face. From the right, Naftali Bennett, his longtime rival for the votes of his electoral base; from inside Likud, Gideon Sa'ar, who is working his way back into politics, was the first to break the omerta against disagreeing with the leader's policy; and from his left, Moshe Kahlon.
- These three, in addition to the bear hugs from the human rights and left-wing organizations that he detests, as well as from Meretz and Labor Party politicians, led him to race to his Facebook page Monday night to compose his letter of surrender. The measure was described as a "freeze" of the agreement. The formal cancellation announcement came on Tuesday morning, during his meeting with a delegation of longtime residents of south Tel Aviv. He didn't wait to listen to their complaints. Right at the start he announced the decision he'd taken the previous evening, reading from prepared remarks.
- It's possible that when he returned home Monday evening, Netanyahu spoke with his wife, Sara, and their son, Yair, who had already faced the right-wing social-media tsunami and possibly also read the comments on the prime minister's Facebook page. The influence his wife and his eldest son wield over him is famous – especially that of Yair, who doesn't spare his father the rod when he strays from the path. There's no doubt that by the time Netanyahu climbed into bed Monday, the deal was dead as far as he was concerned.
- As noted, that isn't the question. The big mystery is why he made the decision in the first place to extend legal status to at least half of the 36,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Israel – a decision he announced Monday afternoon, his face beaming. After promising to "get rid of them all," after describing the asylum seekers as an immediate threat to Israel's Jewish character, after touring south Tel Aviv and expressing solidarity with the suffering longtime residents –

suddenly, in secret, he reaches an agreement that is the polar opposite of the policy he preached for years. Something is very, very fishy.

- We have no choice but to dive into the murky waters of conspiracy theory in search of a plausible explanation. Here's one: Netanyahu and Interior Minister Arye Dery, two criminal suspects, cooked up this stew to win points with the judicial system, and particularly with the High Court of Justice, whose position on forced expulsions is clear: The justices prevented it. The same justices who could be ruling on their cases in the future. Perhaps their growing legal distress led them to take action. Perhaps they wanted to signal to the judicial system that they are the responsible adults, capable of taking decisions that are contrary to their own interests and to the emotions of their voters.
- It was the judicial establishment that in the past proposed several possible solutions to the refugee problem, including conferring legal status and dispersing them throughout the country. Presto, that's exactly the agreement Netanyahu and Dery reached with the High Commissioner for Refugees of the United Nations, which is anathema to the Israeli government and in any event unlikely to be capable of relocating some 17,000 refugees. What followed was the very embodiment of the favorite concept of senior Likud figures: the Netanyahu method. ("The prime minister not only waits in line, he also argues with the salesman, pays an inflated price and in the end leaves the store empty-handed.") This time it was the Netanyahu method on steroids.

Israel Faces Historic Decision on Population Figures

By Yossi Beilin, Former Israeli Minister and Negotiator

- The Israeli political right was caught off guard by the surprising official figures presented on March 26 at the Knesset by a representative of the Civil Administration, the army unit coordinating the Israeli government's activities in the occupied territories. The representative indicated that the number of Jews and Arabs living under Israeli control in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean had reached parity at 6.5 million for each side.
- Over the years, the Zionist left kept warning about the prospect of a Jewish minority in Israel controlling a Palestinian majority, with only a small number of them enjoying full civil rights. Yet the Israeli right kept dismissing these warnings. It countered with imaginary data showing that some 3 million Palestinians live in Israel and the occupied territories, compared with 6.5 million Jews. However, from the moment the true numbers were communicated to the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee with the new data last week by the Israel Defense Forces, the leadership of the political right can no longer argue that political bias is skewing the figures. It is now forced to confront the figures. The updated population data have once again placed the inherent tension between Israel's Jewish and democratic nature in the forefront of the political arena. While Israeli liberal-minded political forces argue that there is no contradiction and that Israel can be both Jewish and democratic, others on the political right and the left reject the idea.
- Nationalist elements, which oppose dividing the land between Israelis and Palestinians, suggest ensuring the country's Jewish character by imposing sovereignty over all the Palestinians living in Israel and the occupied territories. This scenario would grant the Palestinians in the occupied territories individual rights, but not the right to vote for the Knesset. The non-Zionist left also proposes one state for both people, but insists on full equality for the Palestinians, including the right to vote and be elected to the Knesset. That would allow a future Palestinian Arab majority to override Israel's unique Jewish nature, especially when it comes to encouraging Jewish immigration, strengthening the state's ties with diaspora Jewry and even amending the Law of Return that currently enables all Jews to obtain citizenship if they move to Israel.
- For over 80 years, since the British government's Peel Commission recommended the establishment of two separate states in 1937, the Jewish majority in Israel has favored a division of the land in order to guarantee both a Jewish and democratic state. Publication of the demographic parity between the two people is confronting this camp with a decisive moment, perhaps sooner than expected. The "peace camp" would prefer the option adopted by late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of an agreement with the Palestinians on dividing the land. The so-called "national camp" would opt for the path taken by late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of avoiding dialogue with the Palestinian leadership and withdrawing unilaterally from occupied

territories, perhaps to the line of the separation wall he began building as leader of the right-wing Likud Party at the turn of the century.

- Demographics are the underpinning of the story of Israel. When Theodor Herzl wrote his 1896 treatise titled “The Jewish State” (“Der Judenstaat”), he envisioned an orderly mass Jewish move from Europe to the sparsely populated Land of Israel (or to Argentina, as a fallback option). He believed that one of the powers that ruled Palestine in the 19th and 20th centuries — whether Germany, Britain or the Ottoman Empire — would grant the Jews the right to live there, and with that in mind, he courted the German Kaiser, Turkish Sultan and the British government. Herzl’s vision stemmed from his analysis that Jews such as himself had failed in their attempts to integrate in Europe and were under a growing threat of violence. In 1917, the British Empire expressed willingness to enable the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine.
- This seemed like a rare opportunity for the Zionist movement: The British government, mostly, was pro-Zionist. Its religious Christian members, such as Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour, believed this gesture would prompt American Jewry to pressure US President Woodrow Wilson to play a significant role in World War I. The Zionist leaders could have presumably asked Britain for permission to establish an independent state, but it never occurred to them for the simple reason that, at the time, the Jews in Palestine only numbered in the tens of thousands, whereas Arabs constituted the majority. The thinking was that the British would throw open the gates of Palestine, allowing European Jewish immigration that would eventually result in a Jewish majority, at which time a state would be declared. Both the Zionist left and right espoused the view that this future state would cover all the western part of the Land of Israel and some of the Jordan River’s eastern bank.
- That hope was not realized due to sweeping Arab rejection of Jewish sovereignty, British fears of clashes between Jews and Arabs over the growing Jewish immigration from Europe, and also because most Jews who did leave Europe at the time opted for life in America rather than in impoverished Palestine. Thus, the Zionist left accepted the Peel Commission’s recommendation to split in two the western part of the Land of Israel. The right rejected the idea, preferring continued British rule until such time as the necessary Jewish majority could be achieved to form an independent state.
- Ten years on, despite the horrors of the Holocaust, that same dichotomy between left and right was to re-emerge. The Zionist left, led by David Ben-Gurion (later Israel’s first prime minister), supported the UN’s 1947 Partition Resolution calling for a two-state solution. The Zionist right, led by such figures as future Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, preferred continued British rule in order to enable the creation of a Jewish majority throughout the Land of Israel, all the way to the Jordan River and beyond. This time, too, the suggestion came up against staunch Arab opposition, but the State of Israel was established, nonetheless, and its 1948 war of independence expanded the boundaries delineated by the UN. At no point did anyone suggest the establishment of a widely spread state governed by a Jewish minority.

- With the official military announcement of Jewish-Arab parity between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, Israel is facing the historic decision it has been trying to postpone or repress. Israel is far from being an apartheid state currently, but if it opts for minority rule of an Arab majority, it will have no choice but to adopt apartheid methods. Precluding this option would spell the end of the Zionist idea: Israel will turn into a Palestinian state, probably a nondemocratic one, with a Jewish minority. A decision to divide the land in order to ensure its continued Jewish and democratic nature would best be carried out through an imperfect agreement, based on Israel's 1967 borders, implementing the UN's Partition Resolution — this time with Palestinian approval. Barring that option, a unilateral withdrawal such as the 2005 Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip would also be preferable to preserving the status quo.