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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 27, 2018

Times of Israel

Abbas, Netanyahu to Address UN Today

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will address the UN General Assembly on Thursday. Abbas is expected to urge the international community to save the two-state solution or take responsibility for its demise. He will call for an international peace conference as a last act before making “difficult decisions,” including suspending the PA’s recognition of Israel, annulment of accords — including Oslo — and declaring the Palestinian territories to be a state under occupation. Netanyahu, meanwhile, is expected to focus primarily on Iran’s nuclear ambitions and its military entrenchment in Syria.

Jerusalem Post

Trump Muddles Two-State Message at UN

Eight hours after announcing his preference for a two-state solution, Trump equivocated, returning to his previous position that he will be satisfied “if they do a single, if they do a double,” so long as the parties settle the conflict conclusively. “I think probably two-state is more likely,” Trump said at a news conference in New York. “If the Israelis and the Palestinians want one state, that’s okay with me.” he added. “It’s a real estate deal,” he said, but “there’s been so much hatred and anger.”

Times of Israel

Palestinians Hold UN Meeting Against Trump Plan

Foreign ministers and diplomats from 40 countries and representatives of international organizations on Wednesday evening attended a conference organized by the Palestinian mission to the United Nations to promote alternatives to the expected US peace proposal. The diplomats discussed “how to salvage the two-state solution, and to find ways of how to overcome the current obstacles that were put in front of this process, both by the American administration and the Israeli government,” Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki said during a press conference.

Times of Israel

PM: Trump Accepts Palestinian State With Israeli Control

Netanyahu said Wednesday that the US accepts that even if a two-state solution is achieved, Israel will retain overall security control of the West Bank. “Some things are not to acceptable to us,” he added. “Make no mistake: Israel will not give up on security control west of the Jordan as long as I am prime minister. I think the Americans accept that principle.” Asked whether he hoped a Palestinian state would to come into being during his time in office, Netanyahu smiled and said, “I suggest that you wait patiently.” “The question is, what is a state... Will it be Costa Rica or Iran? Who will have security control?”

Palestinian Doubt, Right-Wing Resistance to Trump Remarks

Trump's comments drew skepticism from Palestinian officials and opposition from the Israeli right on Wednesday, as well as support from left-wing groups that tend to criticize him. Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett said, "as long as the Jewish Home party is part of Israel's government, there will not be a Palestinian state, which would be a disaster for Israel." The expelled Palestinian envoy, Husam Zomlot, said that the President's "words go against their actions and their action is absolutely clear [and] is destroying the possibility of the two-state solution."

PM Snubs UNESCO Anti-Semitism Forum

Netanyahu refused to accept an invitation to attend Wednesday night's antisemitism forum that is sponsored by UNESCO and was to take place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The forum will be attended by heads of state and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, but Israel's head of state will be absent, underscoring the country's opposition to the organization's biased treatment of Israel, which includes annual resolutions disavowing Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem.

Israel Blasts UNRWA for 'False Definition' of Refugees

Israeli officials are calling a new Foreign Ministry report "revolutionary" for its stance on UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. "Instead of providing social aid, UNRWA exacerbates the conflict by inflating the number of fake refugees, instilling a narrative of hatred and undermining Israel's right to exist and having ties with Hamas," the report said. "Only a few tens of thousands of the 5.4 million registered beneficiaries are refugees." In the policy paper, ministry officials conclude UNRWA is a political organization that perpetuates the status of Palestinian refugees and feeds the cycle of violence and desperation.

Corbyn: U.K. Will Recognize Palestine if Labour Elected

Britain's opposition Labour Party will "will recognise a Palestinian state as soon as we take office," says leader Jeremy Corbyn while speaking Wednesday at the annual party conference. "The continuing occupation, the expansion of illegal settlements and the imprisonment of Palestinian children are an outrage," Corbyn said, while explaining Labour backs a two-state solution to the conflict. Corbyn also said the party will vote against a Brexit deal based on Prime Minister Theresa May's proposals.

The Two Words Netanyahu Is Afraid to Repeat Out Loud

By Noa Landau, Correspondent

- It has been more than nine years since Netanyahu announced that "if we get a guarantee of demilitarization" and "ironclad security provisions, we will be prepared to reach agreements for a demilitarized Palestine, side by side with the Jewish state." He was saying this "in a clear voice," he declared from a podium at Bar Ilan University. Since then, the prime minister has done everything in his power to avoid any such explicit statement on a "Palestinian state," especially in Hebrew. But in English, he has repeated an identical position in principle in various places around the world. If Israel maintained security control, he would be ready to negotiate the establishment of a "Palestinian state minus" – a demilitarized state.
- Now that President Trump has announced that the two-state solution is his preferred solution after all, after his previous, unripe flirtations with "one or two states, whatever the sides want," Netanyahu is now forced to explain this position again. This position sounds amazingly similar to the one from the Bar Ilan speech, with one significant difference: a serious acrobatic twist to avoid explicitly repeating, heaven forbid, that loathsome word "state," although that is exactly what he is saying. "I'm prepared for the Palestinians to have the authorities to govern themselves without the authority to hurt us." A demilitarized state. Netanyahu explained at the time at Bar Ilan: "If we could agree on the substance, then the terminology would not pose a problem." But the terminology is undoubtedly a difficult problem in 2018 Israel. A political problem spearheaded by Naftali Bennett, who is relentlessly flanking Netanyahu from the right. So, like in a children's game in which certain words are forbidden, Netanyahu is now explaining that "everyone defines the term state differently" and says he "doesn't deal with terms but with substance."
- He also jabs at Bennett, who said he wouldn't be in a government in which there's a Palestinian state, which is a "disaster to Israel." Netanyahu stresses with a cynical smile: "So I promise there won't be a Palestinian state that would be a disaster to Israel." That is, not that there won't be a state but that it wouldn't be a disaster. Like his efforts to avoid definitions, Netanyahu is avoiding a description of his own aspirations regarding the issue. He prefers setting red lines – Israeli control west of Jordan – to leading processes. Instead of leading, he's being led - by Trump on the one hand and Bennett on the other. The tragic result is that, for years, we've been stuck in the "as if" game, in which everyone circles round and round the same solution with or without calling it by name.
- The two-state solution that consists of setting up a demilitarized Palestinian state is in fact accepted by an extremely broad political spectrum in Israel and the world. In countless agreements and negotiations even the Palestinians themselves have already agreed to it, certainly as a first step to independence and usually as part of five-year plan at least. Anyone who sees himself now as an alternative to Netanyahu – especially from the center leftward,

because to the right of Netanyahu, the voices backing annexation prevail – is actually repeating Netanyahu's message in different words. So if what's really important is the substance and not the definitions, then it's time to stop playing "as if" and put the truth on the table: Netanyahu never changed his position that the reasonable solution is a demilitarized Palestinian state. A state-minus – which is really a state minus calling it a state. The world supports it. The Palestinians don't negate it. Perhaps Trump will soon call a spade a spade.

Netanyahu Alarmed Over Abbas-Olmert Meeting

By Shlomi Eldar, Analyst

- Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert met Sept. 21 in Paris with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who was on his way to the UN General Assembly session in New York. The statement issued on Olmert's behalf after the meeting portrayed Abbas in a positive light — unlike the tarred image of the Palestinian leader favored by the Israeli right, especially by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, as a peace rejectionist who supports terrorism and incites against the State of Israel. Olmert praised Abbas, calling him “a great political leader and the most relevant person for the future developments in the relations between Israel and Palestinians.” Olmert also said Abbas had never officially rejected the peace initiative he had proposed to him in September 2008, a claim that the right found particularly offensive given its telling of events.
- The narrative emerging from various disclosures over the past decade about the Olmert-Abbas peace talks has the Israeli leader offering the Palestinians 95% of the West Bank and the division of Jerusalem into an Israeli and a Palestinian capital, with Abbas “disappearing” at the moment of truth. The political right has repeatedly argued that Abbas' rejection of such a generous offer was ultimate proof that he did not want peace and aspired to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. Now Olmert is discrediting the right's alibi for refusing to forge a peace deal with the Palestinians, generating accusations of treason, no less. The head of the Almagor Terror Victims Association, Meir Indor, called on Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked to prosecute Olmert for treason and on President Reuven Rivlin to revoke the decision that commuted Olmert's 27-month sentence for bribery, effectively approving an early release. Michael Oren of the center-right Kulanu Party, a deputy minister in the prime minister's office and former Israeli ambassador to Washington, claimed the Olmert-Abbas meeting was illegal and would have carried a lengthy prison term under US federal law.
- However, the most virulent attacks came from the Likud Party. While the prime minister's office did not attack him directly, Netanyahu's people under the guise of “a senior Likud source” were quoted as saying, “Olmert — who offered Abbas the Western Wall — has now turned into his faithful mouthpiece. ... The reason for his extreme demands is not peace but rather the elimination of the State of Israel.” Minister of Science and Technology Ofir Akunis, for many years Netanyahu's spokesman, reiterated the same mantra deeply imprinted in the Israeli narrative, undeterred by Olmert's contraction. “After Abbas humiliated him [Olmert] when he did not respond to his miserable offer to establish a Palestinian state with [East] Jerusalem as its capital and [an Israeli] withdrawal to the 1967 borders, Olmert is now spreading lies against the elected Israeli government,” he said. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, by no means an Olmert fan, felt compelled to react to these accusations of treason and to come to his defense. “Olmert committed grave offenses, was punished and served jail time. But he is not a traitor. He is just as much of a true Zionist patriot as Netanyahu,” Barak tweeted.

- The hysterical reaction of the Likud and other right-wing parties is hardly surprising. Olmert has challenged the demonization and legitimization of Abbas in which their leaders have engaged for many years. Under their influence, many significant chapters in Abbas' biography have been hidden from public view. Abbas, 83, was elected to his position after the death of PLO leader Yasser Arafat in 2004. His stated agenda favored diplomacy and rejected the violent Palestinian intifada raging at the time — views with which he fearlessly challenged Arafat when he was still in power. During the second intifada years (2000 to 2005), Abbas repeatedly argued that this was not the way to obtain Palestinian independence, even as he realized his people might consider him a traitor. His lengthy term has been a period of vicissitudes, of fury and frustration, but throughout he remained committed to the war against terror.
- Almost all the heads of Israel's security agencies will attest to this fact, describing him as the main mitigating force against all-consuming violence in the West Bank. He was the one who prevented the so-called individual terror attacks that started in the fall of 2015 from turning into an all-out insurrection. His actions earned him praise from the heads of the defense establishment, which they voiced repeatedly at government and defense Cabinet meetings. In April 2016, for example, Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot told government ministers that "Abbas is fighting terrorism." A month before, Intelligence Chief Maj. Gen. Hetzl Halevi said the Palestinian leader was seeking to restore calm and ordering his security forces to prevent terror attacks against Israel. In fact, already in November 2014, in an assessment he presented to the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, then Shin Bet head Yoram Cohen contradicted claims by Netanyahu, Liberman and Education Minister Naftali Bennett that Palestinian terror attacks were the result of incitement led by Abbas. "Abbas is not interested in terror and is not leading toward terror," Cohen said categorically.
- At a Sept. 2 meeting with activists of the Israeli Peace Now movement and with opposition Knesset members, Abbas revealed that he generally meets with the current Shin Bet head Nadav Argaman once a month. Despite all the domestic Palestinian pressures exerted on him and the humiliation meted out by the Trump administration and Israel, Abbas is adhering to the security coordination with Israel. Netanyahu's right-wing government fears that unless Abbas is portrayed as a rejectionist, Israelis might start believing in a two-state solution and demanding the dismantling of Israeli settlements. This would put a spoke in the wheels of the annexation discourse based on the premise that Israel does not have a Palestinian partner with whom to forge peace and therefore has to annex parts of the West Bank. The right would much rather Israelis remember Abbas' unfortunate May 2018 remark that the Holocaust was caused by the Jews' "social behavior" than take cognizance of his real actions — the ones illustrating the seriousness of his intentions.