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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, October 11*

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# News Excerpts

October 11, 2018

## Associated Press

### **Erdan Defends Actions Against Detained US Student**

Israeli Security Minister Gilad Erdan defended on Wednesday Israel's handling of the case of Lara Alqasem, an American graduate student held in detention at Ben-Gurion Airport for the past week over allegations that she supports a boycott of Israel. Alqasem, had a valid student visa but was barred from entering the country and has remained in custody while she appeals, although Israel says she can leave the country. The week-long detention is the longest anyone has been held in a boycott-related case. More than 300 academics penned a letter in the British Guardian Wednesday calling the case "an attack on academic freedom."

## Reuters

### **Rare Compromise Raises Hope for UNESCO**

Israeli and Arab diplomats agreed to resolutions on Jerusalem and Palestinian education at the U.N. cultural agency on Wednesday, a rare show of consensus as UNESCO seeks to convince Israel to change its mind about quitting. The US and Israel announced a year ago that they would quit UNESCO over what they described as persistent anti-Israeli bias. France's Audrey Azoulay, who was named days later as the head of the body, has sought to persuade them to reconsider pledging to restore the relevance of the which has been hobbled by regional rivalries and a lack of money.

## Jerusalem Post

### **Pompeo Calls Mideast Peace Plan Historic**

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo teased the Trump administration's upcoming peace plan on Wednesday as a "truly historic" effort to broker an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, accepting an award from the Jewish Institute for National Security of America in Washington. Pompeo also announced that he had denied a \$165 million transfer of aid to the Palestinian Authority earlier in the day, over its failure to adhere to the Taylor Force Act, a law that bars the State Department from continuing aid to the PA unrelated to security cooperation unless Ramallah ceases its practice of compensating the families of terrorists.

## Ha'aretz

### **Israel Bars American Jewish Doctors From Gaza**

Israel has refused entry to the Gaza Strip to two members of a U.S. medical delegation because they are Jewish. Initially, entry was refused to the entire group, from the Washington branch of Physicians for Social Responsibility. Among the reasons given were the Jewish origins of most of the delegation's members and the organization's alleged involvement with the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment (BDS) movement. The state's final response is due Friday.

## **Russia Rejects Israeli Sovereignty Over Golan**

Two days after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stood on the Golan Heights and declared that it will remain under Israeli sovereignty, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said changing the status of the plateau would be a violation of Security Council resolutions. The disagreement comes following a setback in Israel-Russian ties triggered by last month's Syrian downing of a Russian intelligence plane – which Moscow blamed on Israel – and Russia's decision to supply Syria with S-300 advanced anti-aircraft missile batteries that limit Israel's maneuverability in Syrian skies.

## **Hamas Leader to be Released from Israeli Prison**

Hassan Yousef, a Hamas leader in the West Bank, will be released from Israeli prison on Thursday, a spokesman for the Prisons Service said Wednesday. Yousef, a co-founder of the Hamas terror group and a Palestinian lawmaker, was arrested in December 2017 for “advancing and promoting Hamas activities” in the West Bank. For the past 10 months, he has been held under administrative detention. The measure allows Israel to hold certain suspects indefinitely without charge. The Shin Bet did not immediately provide a reason for the decision to allow Yousef to go free.

## **Palestinians Refuse to Go Silently as US Closes Mission**

Palestinian representatives on Wednesday vowed not to stay silent as they closed their mission in Washington on orders of President Donald Trump. “This is an attempt to shut down your voice; this is an act of censorship,” said Hakam Takash, a diplomat at the Palestine Liberation Organization's Washington office. The Trump administration in September announced it was closing the mission, accusing the Palestinians of refusing to negotiate peace with Israel. It officially closed on September 13, the last day of ambassador Hossam Zomlot, but the employees had another month to finish their work.

## **Incendiary Balloon Lands in Jerusalem's German Colony**

Israel Police were called in Wednesday to neutralize an incendiary device attached to a balloon that landed in a construction site for a kindergarten in the heart of Jerusalem. The tactic of sending airborne incendiary devices into Israeli territory has been used almost daily by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip since the start of weekly border protests there in March, but it is unlikely this balloon device was launched from the coastal enclave. Police reiterated a call for the public to be extremely careful around any such objects — balloons and kites — as they could contain dangerous explosive or inflammatory material.

## Student's Detention Exposes Campaign Against Free Speech

By Gershom Gorenberg, Israeli historian and journalist

- As I write, Lara Alqasem, a 22-year-old American student of Palestinian descent, is sitting in a “detention facility” at Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport. She has been there for a week. She arrived to begin a master’s degree in human rights at Hebrew University. Unexpectedly, her graduate work began with a case study: Israeli immigration authorities refused her entry, alleging that she had been involved in the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. While she waits for a court to hear her appeal, she remains locked in limbo at the airport. There aren’t enough synonyms for “absurd” for me to properly describe what is happening to Alqasem. What is even scarier for Israelis worried about the country’s eroded democracy is that her case is no fluke. It’s part of a trend by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government to turn law enforcement, and the law itself, into tools for policing opinions.
- Alqasem was denied entry based on information from Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs — information gleaned from a right-wing U.S. website and some Facebook links that supposedly identify her as a boycott activist. Reality check: One prominent part of the BDS campaign has been seeking to isolate Israeli academia. Alqasem is showing her devotion to BDS by, uh, seeking an advanced degree at an Israeli university. The larger pros and cons of the BDS movement are the stuff for another article. But if one part of the movement’s effort is clearly self-defeating, it is the boycott of Israeli academia and cultural activity. Universities should be the space for discussing ideas, not cutting off communication. What’s more, Israeli academia is the source of some of the most cogent criticism of the occupation, to the horror of Netanyahu’s government. Alqasem has shown academic openness. Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan and company have responded by blocking her entry — effectively forcing her to boycott Israel.
- The legal basis for barring Alqasem is a law passed by the Knesset in March 2017. It prohibits entry to foreigners who publicly act to boycott Israel or Israel’s West Bank settlements. Whether you support or utterly oppose the boycott campaign, it is clear that it is composed of political ideas and nonviolent tactics. Theoretically, it could hurt Israeli companies’ bottom line, but it will not put anyone in the hospital or a grave. The law tries to lock people with boycott ideas out of Israel, based on the illogic that boycotting the boycotters will change their minds.
- This is just part of the government’s effort to hamper legitimate political activity. For a number of years, the Shabak security agency (whose proper mission is to prevent terror and espionage) has been targeting Israeli human rights and anti-occupation activists with summonses. The agency delivers “warning talks” that technically don’t break the law. The obvious intent is to deter them from activism. Israel’s Supreme Court ruled last year that the Shabak must inform people that they have the right to refuse the summons. In at least one reported case, the agency ignored the ruling. Many cases show how the political policing has turned acute. Last month, Julie Weinberg-Connors, an American Jewish activist in the process of moving to Israel,

was detained at Ben Gurion Airport and nearly put on a plane back to the United States, apparently because of her previous visits to Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank. Only after Knesset members intervened was she allowed to enter Israel.

- In August, American journalist Peter Beinart, a Zionist critic of the occupation, was questioned by a security official at the airport when he arrived. A couple of weeks earlier, Moriel Rothman-Zecher, an Israeli author living in the United States, got the same treatment. Among other questions, he was asked about his support for the anti-occupation Israeli veterans' group Breaking the Silence. Reza Aslan, the American religion scholar, was questioned for hours when he crossed into Israel from Jordan. One question related to his views on Netanyahu. American Jewish activist Simone Zimmerman got similar treatment, including questions about Netanyahu, when crossing from Egypt into Israel. In July, Meyer Koplow, a prominent donor to pro-Israeli causes, was grilled on his way out of Israel. He had participated in a Palestinian-Jewish dialogue program in the West Bank city of Bethlehem. Koplow is the chairman of Brandeis University's board of trustees.
- For many years, I could describe Israel as a flawed but functioning democracy within its pre-1967 borders. The Netanyahu government is expanding the flaws and shrinking the democracy in its effort to suppress criticism of what goes on beyond those borders in occupied territory. Not by coincidence, political policing has become more blatant since Donald Trump became president. Rather than intervening, even on behalf of U.S. students, America has become a beacon of illiberalism. For an Israeli, the answer to the government's actions is to keep speaking out. For others concerned with what's happening here, my plea: Don't let Netanyahu keep you away. Come to our universities. Flood our airports. Staying away will only help the machinery of silence.

## **Israel's Tolerance Is Tested and Found Wanting**

By Zev Chafets, former Aide to Israeli Prime Minister Begin

- Israel likes to see itself as a tolerant, brave and smart country. But in the case of the American student Lara Alqasem, these virtues have not been on display. Alqasem is a 22-year-old student from Florida who has been locked up for a week in a detention facility at Ben-Gurion Airport. She is accused of being an activist in BDS, the Palestinian movement dedicated to fomenting international boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions against the Jewish state. Since 2017, it has been illegal for foreign BDS activists to enter Israel. There is a blacklist at the airport and Alqasem's name was on it.
- This is not a case of mistaken identity. As an undergraduate at the University of Florida, Alqasem headed a chapter of National Students for Justice in Palestine, an affiliate of BDS. She now says the chapter was small — just four or five members — and ineffective. Her most radical activity was boycotting an Israeli brand of hummus (the company survived). Alqasem also claims that she no longer believes in boycotting Israel. As evidence, she offers the fact that she has enrolled in graduate studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She arrived in the country with a student visa issued by the Israeli Consulate in Miami. She is free to leave, but has decided to take the ban to court. Israelis reading about Alqasem's case may loathe BDS. They may be skeptical of Alqasem's sudden conversion story and suspect that she has come to Israel to materially support her cause. None of this remotely justifies banning her from the country.
- The Alqasem case is an example of what happens when cynicism meets moral panic. The panic began a decade or so ago, when BDS arrived on U.S. campuses and began forging alliances with student groups with various grievances: western capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, sexism and whatever other ill was selling on the quad. Students are natural activists, so this was no hard sell; many were happy to add anti-Zionism to the litany. These campus alliances have not amounted to much: a few toothless student council resolutions against Zionism, attempts to disrupt lectures by Israeli officials, some unsuccessful efforts to get universities to disinvest in Israeli companies. But they have succeeded in making pro-Israel Jewish students feel uncomfortable on some campuses and in influencing the anti-Israel tilt of area studies departments at many universities.
- The backlash, though, has been almost worse than the misguided activism itself. The BDS activity set off alarm bells in the American Jewish community, which led to fundraising letters and emergency meetings. New organizations, devoted to slaying the BDS dragon, sprang up. Many Jewish parents became convinced that their college-aged kids were in a hostile environment. Israeli politicians were attuned to this concern and only too happy to help. A Ministry of Strategic Affairs was formed. Tens of millions of dollars were budgeted and intelligence networks, like the one that fingered Lara Alqasem, were constructed in the U.S. and

elsewhere. This summer, anti-BDS fever reached a new level, when Israel convened an international conference in Jerusalem. In an impassioned speech, Minister of Strategic Affairs Gilad Erdan, an ambitious young politician, denounced BDS as “perpetrators of the hate campaign who derive their ideology from the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.” Their ultimate goal, he said, is “destroying the state of Israel.”

- BDS does, indeed, hate Israel and the Jews who support it and shares the Palestinian dream of someday destroying the Zionist state. But the minister wildly exaggerated the danger, not surprisingly given it's an election year in Israel. Leading a crusade against foreign anti-Semites is a noble and vote-getting cause. In reality, BDS poses no serious threat to American Jews, much less to Israel's internal security. Lara Alqasem (or a battalion of Lara Alqasems) on Israeli campuses would make no impression. Israel already has an abundance of homegrown anti-Zionist activists, both Arab and Jewish. The Hebrew University is standing by Alqasem. Its reasons are not entirely disinterested. It fears that an Israeli ban on BDS student activists will undercut its international academic standing. Upsetting a bunch of professors is almost as good for minister Erdan's career as nabbing a BDS agent. He has said he'd consider letting her in only if she condemns BDS and expresses regret. He calls the university's stand “another act of politicization of the Israeli academia for the sake of someone who actively works to harm the State of Israel and its citizens.”
- And yet one Lara Alqasem, caught and deported by the intrepid Minister of Strategic Affairs, does more harm to Israel than all of these. The law that enabled the banning of Lara Alqasem, and the mechanism that implemented it, are dishonorable and self-defeating. They mock Israel's claims to tolerance, bravery or simple common sense. Hopefully the Tel Aviv District Court will uphold Alqasem's appeal and allow her to study in Jerusalem. I think she will like the Hebrew University. She will certainly find more supporters of BDS there than at the University of Florida.