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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- PA Condemns Deadly Attack at Pittsburgh Synagogue
- Minister Bennett Meets with Mourners in Pittsburgh
- Three Gazan Teens Said Killed in Israeli Strike
- Omani Official Visits Abbas After PM Meets Sultan
- In Oman, Minister Katz to Promote Rail Line to Gulf
- Abbas: No Palestinian State in – or Without – Gaza
- Israeli Official Says State Preventing Palestinian Building
- Oren: Recognize Non-Orthodox Jews After Shooting

Commentary:

- **Ha'aretz: "Gaza Fuse Getting Shorter as PM Risks Losing Control"**
 - By Amos Harel, Senior Columnist
- **Ynet: "Oman is Israel's Link to the Middle East"**
 - By Ronen Bergman, Analyst

News Excerpts

October 29, 2018

Times of Israel

PA Condemns Deadly Attack at Pittsburgh Synagogue

The Palestinian Authority Foreign Ministry on Sunday condemned the deadly shooting attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, calling it “a terrorist act.” “The Foreign Ministry condemns this terrorist act that targeted a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh,” the PA Foreign Ministry said in a statement published by the official PA news agency Wafa. “The ministry condemns the targeting of places of worship by these terrorists who hold fascist and rotten beliefs based on the supremacy and dominance of white people.”

Jerusalem Post

Minister Bennett Meets with Mourners in Pittsburgh

Minister of Education and Diaspora Affairs Naftali Bennett addressed a vigil in Pittsburgh on Sunday. “Nearly eighty years since Kristallnacht, when the Jews of Europe perished in the flames of their houses of worship, one thing is clear,” Bennett said. “Antisemitism is a clear and present danger. But we will prevail.” Earlier on Sunday, Jewish-American writer David Simon slammed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Twitter, claiming that Netanyahu helped President Trump to be elected enabled the rise of American fascism.

Ha’aretz

Three Gazan Teens Said Killed in Israeli Strike

The Israeli military said Sunday that it struck three Palestinians who were attempting to place an explosive device near the border fence in the southern Gaza Strip. But Gaza's Health Ministry said three Palestinian boys were killed in the strike. The Palestine Liberation Organization described the killing as “a clear war crime.” On Friday and Saturday, Israel struck close to 100 Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza as 39 rockets were launched at Israel. The Iron Dome system intercepted 15. No casualties were reported.

Ha’aretz

Omani Official Visits Abbas After PM Meets Sultan

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas received an emissary Sunday from Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said, a few days after Netanyahu made a surprise visit to Oman. The official thanked Abbas for his visit to Oman last week. Ramallah took pains not to openly criticize Netanyahu's visit, but the Palestinian world did not like the visit and the timing. A Palestinian official said that the Omani emissary may have brought reassurances about Israel normalization. The PA expects all Arab countries to commit to the formula set in the Arab peace plan, whereby normalization would occur only in exchange for a two-state solution. Netanyahu's meeting was the first of its kind since 1996.

Jerusalem Post

In Oman, Minister Katz to Promote Rail Line to Gulf

In a sign of warming ties with the Arab world, Transportation and Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz will head to Oman to push for a regional rail line that will link Haifa with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. "The initiative called "Tracks for Regional Peace" is aimed at connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Gulf (the Persian Gulf) by rail via Israel as a land bridge and Jordan as a regional transportation hub," Katz's office said. Katz is expected to present the plan when he address a regional transportation conference, from November 6th to 8th.

Ha'aretz

Abbas: No Palestinian State in – or Without – Gaza

Abbas said Sunday that, "There will be no [independent] state in the Gaza Strip and no state without the Gaza Strip." "I am telling the Gaza leadership that if they accept a state in Gaza they are standing by our enemies who want to dismantle us," Abbas said, speaking at the Palestinian Central Council convention in Ramallah. "The plot against the Palestinian people isn't over. As we have declared, we are against the 'Deal of the Century.' East Jerusalem is our capital, the same capital that was occupied in 1967," Abbas said, referring to President Trump's anticipated peace plan.

Times of Israel

Israeli Official Says State Preventing Palestinian Building

A Defense Ministry official told a Knesset committee Sunday that the government is ordering his office not to approve Palestinian building plans in the West Bank. "In accordance with the directive of the political echelon, there is just about no planning being approved for the Palestinian sector," said Brig. Gen. Achvat Ben Hour of the Civil Administration, the Defense body that authorizes construction in the West Bank. During the session, settler-activist Orit Strock had claimed that all of the Civil Administration's resources have been going to Palestinians. Ben Hour assured Strock that the opposite was the case with regard to construction.

Times of Israel

Oren: Recognize Non-Orthodox Jews After Shooting

Deputy Minister Michael Oren said Sunday that in light of the Pittsburgh massacre, Israel must recognize liberal Jews as a way of strengthening relations between the Jewish state and the Diaspora. "Liberal Jews were Jewish enough to be murdered, but their stream is not Jewish enough to be recognized by the Jewish State," Oren tweeted. "The murder would weaken communities that are already fighting assimilation. Israel must strengthen the communities by tightening the connections with them," he said. "I call on Minister Bennett not to suffice with condolences, but to recognize liberal Jewish streams and unite the people."

Gaza Fuse Getting Shorter as PM Risks Losing Control

By Amos Harel, Senior Columnist

- The massive salvo of rockets from Gaza over the weekend contradicted Israeli intelligence assessments. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who holds out no hope for a deal with Hamas and believes another war in Gaza is inevitable, had expected Friday's protests along the border fence to proceed much more calmly. This view was based on intelligence assessments. In reality, the opposite occurred. Five Palestinians were killed by Israeli army gunfire along the Gaza border on Friday, and in the evening Islamic Jihad began firing rockets at the Negev. By Saturday morning more than 30 rockets had been fired, with the Iron Dome intercepting those deemed dangerous. The rest unfolded as it has in previous rounds: The air force attacked dozens of targets (Hamas, then Islamic Jihad) in Gaza, and Egypt hastened to declare a cease-fire.
- The Israel Defense Forces attributes the rocket salvos to independent action on the part of Islamic Jihad, which doesn't coordinate with the Hamas authorities. There are a few possible explanations for this. It may be due to Iranian instructions to thwart Egyptian efforts to achieve a long-term deal (on Friday there were reports of progress in the negotiations) or it could be reflect Islamic Jihad's desire to maintain its status as the leader of armed resistance against Israel while Hamas apparently weighs compromise. In effect, Iran has been financing Islamic Jihad and recently the organization chose a new leader, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, who is trying to make his mark. But it's worth listening to what Islamic Jihad says publicly.
- Since the weekly protests were launched in March, Hamas has almost totally avoided rocket fire in response to the killings of protesters at the fence. Islamic Jihad is declaring that from now on "there will be shooting in response to shooting, blood for blood." This is its new equation for deterrence. It may be linked to the IDF's rules of engagement along the fence after weeks in which demonstrators have been shot by IDF sniper fire even at a relatively greater distance from the fence. The IDF attacked mainly Hamas targets over the weekend, in accordance with Israel's position that holds the organization responsible for all that goes on in Gaza. This is the case even though the military says that Hamas didn't want the weekend shootings, just as it didn't seek rocket fire at Be'er Sheva and the Tel Aviv area some 10 days ago (was that a thunderstorm?), or the shootings at the Gaza border area earlier this week (rogue groups?).
- It's worth asking whether Israel isn't projecting its own desires on the enemy and isn't adhering just a bit too strongly to the presumption that Hamas doesn't want to risk a war, as the organization continues to move closer and closer to the brink. It's possible that accurately deciphering Hamas' motives doesn't change much. In effect, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have trouble coming to terms with the situation in which rockets are launched once every week or two and incendiary balloons are dispatched almost every day. Netanyahu's

restraint is seen as an abandonment of the residents who live along Israel's Gaza border and his threats and those of his cabinet ministers seem empty.

- Politically, the longer the brief bursts of violence persist, the closer we get to a more serious Israeli military response. It may happen. It's also possible to see a lot of logic in Netanyahu's hesitation to launch a general operation, which may not achieve anything. In the background, tensions are rising among the politicians especially between Lieberman and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, who the defense minister says is leading the prime minister to adopt too soft a policy towards Hamas. Ben-Shabbat specialized in the struggle against Hamas during his time at the Shin Bet security service, whose southern region he commanded.
- The Gaza escalation has overshadowed the diplomatic achievement of the prime minister, who returned on Friday from a visit to Oman in the Persian Gulf. The Omanis have for decades had security and economic ties with Israel and during the years in which the Oslo Accords were seen as a chance for regional peace, they even agreed to maintain these links in public. The fact that Netanyahu was received in such a way during his visit and that the emirate is happy to publicize it, is more than a small achievement. It's an important political message when such a visit occurs two days after the military chief of Azerbaijan, Iran's northern neighbor, arrives on a visit to Israel. The warming relations between Israel and Iran's neighbors should be viewed against the backdrop of the American plan, whose main points were presented by the Pompeo document some five months ago: to isolate Tehran and pile on greater political and economic pressure. Sultan Qaboos of Oman has a clear interest in making the Trump administration happy.
- But the Sultanate of Oman doesn't survive in such a sensitive and dangerous region by putting all its eggs in one basket. For years Oman has had close relations with Iran, put its banks at the country's disposal, and even let the Iranian Revolutionary Guards keep heavy water in its midst as part of the nuclear agreement signed in 2015. Beyond the diplomatic and political benefits of holding a public visit in Oman, Netanyahu can use the Omanis as an indirect channel to convey messages to the Iranians, and the Palestinian arena. But all these are opportunities and hopes for the long term. In the short term, Netanyahu has more urgent problems – by far the worst of them, risk of losing control in the handling of the conflict in Gaza.

Oman is Israel's Link to the Middle East

By Ronen Bergman, Analyst

- In the fall of 1979, two Israelis carrying foreign passports arrived on a flight to Muscat, the capital of Oman. One of them was Reuven Merhav, a senior Mossad official dealing with matters concerning the Middle East, who will later become the director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The other was a member of the IDF's General Staff, Maj. Gen. Menachem (Mendy) Maron. After landing, the two were transferred to a luxurious villa in Muscat and from there flown on a royal jet to meet with Sultan Qaboos at an encampment outside the capital. They were amused by the fact the bathroom on the plane, including the toilet itself, was made of gold. The discussions lasted into the night, following which the guests went on a covert visit to a tiny Omani enclave called Ras Musandam, which is at the edge of the Musandam Peninsula, which essentially controls the Strait of Hormuz—the global oil gateway.
- "The importance of that meeting was in its very existence," Merhav recounted on Saturday. "These are direct ties, though covert, with an important Arab country at a highly important strategic location." This meeting was one of many held since the early 1970s between senior Israeli officials and officials in Oman. The ties with Oman opened the door to important covert ties with other countries in the gulf, primarily the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The public visit and the royal reception Prime Minister Netanyahu received over the weekend is the result of four months' work, led by the Mossad. It's safe to assume Mossad Director Yossi Cohen visited Muscat to finalize the details of that visit.
- Some of the Israeli officials involved in the covert ties with Oman could not help but wonder why is the sultan suddenly willing to have such a public and broadly covered visit now? The answer to that will not be found in Jerusalem. Qaboos wants to show a different side of his country to the West: a more liberal and tolerant side. Netanyahu's visit was scheduled before the Khashoggi assassination, but that terrible event definitely served the sultan's needs in showing the world that Oman is different. Israel's possible gain from this visit is threefold: Primarily, Oman can serve as a channel to many countries—including Iran, Qatar and Syria—and is seen by all as an honest broker. Through Oman, Israel could establish covert ties with any player in the region. This, of course, is conditional upon the agreement of that player, but under Qaboos' sponsorship, things are a lot simpler. A senior Israeli official even said that he doesn't "rule out the use of Oman to open a secret channel with Iran and Syria." Secondly, the hope is that other countries would take courage from this visit and also expose their own covert ties with Israel.
- Finally, for Netanyahu, exposing the ties with Oman is another layer in his Middle Eastern strategy, which includes creating covert alliances—and public ones whenever possible—with moderate Sunni nations and movements, in an effort to prevent Iran's spread throughout the region, as well as undermine Tehran's regional power, all the while proving that Israel can normalize its ties with Arab nations even without solving the Palestinian issue. There is no doubt

Netanyahu's public trip to Muscat is an important diplomatic achievement, but it's doubtful it could lead to normalization with many other Arab countries. It would be far more convenient and safe for the rulers of most of these countries to have close ties with Israel, but quietly, for fear of enraging their citizenry.