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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, October 31

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News Excerpts

October 31, 2018

Ha'aretz

Israel Decides to Weaken, Not Overthrow, Hamas

Political and military leaders have reportedly concluded that it would be better for Israel not to overthrow the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. A political source said Israel's policy on Hamas has not changed; the plan to keep the group in power in the Strip stems from a desire to prevent a collapse of Gaza's infrastructure, a problem that could harm Israel as well. The instructions to defense officials are to deter Hamas and weaken it, but in a way that will not put its control of Gaza at risk. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to support efforts to reach an agreement that will restore quiet to the south.

Ha'aretz

Kahlon: Israeli Elections Coming Soon

Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon said in a radio interview on Tuesday that the next Knesset election will be scheduled for early 2019. "I estimate that immediately after the municipal elections, there will be a call for a general election, [to be held] between February and March," Kahlon told Radio Darom. "I don't see the government overcoming all the obstacles facing it," added Kahlon, who is also head of the Kulanu party. "One time it's conversions and another time it's the draft [of ultra-Orthodox men], and there are a few others on the way." The term of the current Knesset is set to end in November 2019.

Jerusalem Post

Lion, Berkovich Advance in Jerusalem Mayoral Race

Jerusalem city councilmembers Moshe Lion and Ofer Berkovitch will go head to head in a run-off race on November 13 after finishing first and second in Tuesday's election for Jerusalem mayor. Neither candidate received the 40% of the vote needed to avoid a runoff. Berkovitch said he hopes ultra-Orthodox voters will help him beat Lion, who is backed by the Shas and Degel Hatorah parties. Jerusalem Minister Ze'ev Elkin lost despite strong support from Netanyahu.

Times of Israel

Electoral Boycott Tested in Arab East Jerusalem

In East Jerusalem, where Palestinian residents have generally boycotted the election, the emergence of the first all-Palestinian list in years generated excitement. For decades, Palestinians in East Jerusalem have boycotted local elections in Jerusalem. East Jerusalem suffers from high poverty, a shortage of classrooms, a lack of permits to build homes, inadequate sanitation services, and several other problems. Although they make up 37 percent of the city's population, the municipality only invests 10% to 12% of its budget in the Arab neighborhoods.

Times of Israel

Haifa Mayor Trounced by Female Rival in Upset

In a major upset, candidate Einat Kalisch Rotem has roundly defeated the incumbent, three-term mayor of Haifa. According to a survey, Kalisch Rotem clinched over 57 percent of the vote, unseating Yona Yahav — who was predicted to have won some 35% — after 15 years in office. It would mark the first time a woman was elected at the helm of Israel's three major cities — Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv — in the 70 years since the state's founding.

Times of Israel

Tel Aviv Mayor Cruises to Fifth Term

Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai looked set to secure a fifth term leading the country's economic hub, appearing to fend off an 11th hour surge from upstart deputy-turned-rival Asaf Zamir. With 35 percent reporting, Huldai held a 45% to 35% lead over Zamir, who had appeared to nearly pull even with the incumbent in polling over recent weeks. Early Wednesday Zamir conceded defeat in a speech to supporters, saying he was "proud of the clean campaign" and vowed to continue working to influence policy in the city.

Times of Israel

Egyptian Intel Officials in Gaza for Ceasefire Talks

Egyptian intelligence officials arrived in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday for the latest round of talks aimed at brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. The new round of talks follows a reported demand by Hamas leaders on Saturday that Israel permit the transfer of \$15 million in cash from Qatar every month in order to prevent further escalation. Israeli officials have roundly rejected the demand. In the document handed to Egyptian officials, the group's Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar said the organization expects Israel to transfer the money by Thursday.

Ynet

Amira Oron Appointed Israel's Ambassador to Egypt

The top appointments committee of the Foreign Ministry has appointed Amira Oron as Israel's ambassador to Egypt. In an unprecedented decision, three other women were chosen by the same committee to serve as ambassadors. Oron will be the first female ambassador to Cairo since the Egypt-Israel peace treaty was signed in 1979. She is the second woman to serve as an ambassador in an Arab state after Einat Klein—who was Israel's top diplomatic representative in Jordan.

Peace Processing 2.0

By Clifford May, President, Foundation for Defense of Democracies

- Tibetans would like a state of their own, as would Uyghurs. China's rulers do not intend to let those peoples go. The Kurds would like a state of their own. The governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria remain determined to prevent them from establishing one. The Chechens would like a state of their own. Russian President Vladimir Putin will allow that when pigs fly. Most famously, of course, the Palestinians would like a state of their own. They could have one. They've been offered one — on several occasions. But, in exchange, they'd have to agree to end their conflict with Israel, negotiate borders and security issues, and embrace peaceful coexistence with their Jewish neighbors.
- Hamas, which rules Gaza, has said clearly that it will never pay that price. Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, who governs the West Bank, claims to favor a two-state solution. But he has never been willing to accept the three concessions listed above. Nor has he ever seriously attempted to prepare Palestinians for peace. Were he to sign a peace treaty, it is doubtful Palestinians would accept it, or that he would be able to implement it. Given this context, you might conclude that President Trump stands no chance of making progress on the Palestinian-Israeli file. A visit to Israel leaves me with a different impression. I think it's possible for him to create new and improved facts on the ground. Actually, he already has.
- In December 2016, during his final days in office, President Obama facilitated the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2334, which declared the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, "Palestinian Territory." Within East Jerusalem lies the Jewish Quarter of the Old City and the holiest Jewish religious sites — places where Jews lived and worshipped for thousands of years before being exiled by Jordanian soldiers in 1949. Jews returned only in 1967, after Israeli troops, fighting a defensive war, drove out the occupying Jordanian forces. UNSCR 2334 sent Palestinians a message: That the ethnic and religious "cleansing" of the Jews was not wrong, and that the Hamas narrative is right. Because if Jews don't belong even in the Jewish Quarter, they don't belong anywhere in the region; they have no history or homeland here; and they are not a people. From that, the de-legitimization of Israel and the dehumanization of Israelis ineluctably follow. That's not the precondition for a two-state solution. It is the precondition for a final solution. The resolution also said to Palestinians: No need to negotiate or compromise. Appeal instead to the "international community" which will demand much of Israelis and nothing of you.
- I'm willing to believe that Mr. Obama intended none of that. The fact, however, is that UNSCR 2334 placed an enormous obstacle in the path of any peace process undertaken thereafter. Repealing a U.N. Security Council resolution is virtually impossible, but President Trump did the next best thing: He moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, thereby reaffirming and re-emphasizing America's support for the legitimacy of Israel and for Jerusalem as its capital.

That doesn't rule out the possibility of Palestinians also having a capital in Jerusalem or immediately adjacent to it. But such an outcome would have to be the result of negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. As they say in the television ads: "Wait! There's more!" President Trump last month ordered the closing of the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington, the de facto Palestinian embassy. The PLO "has not taken steps to advance the start of direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel," the U.S. State Department explained, adding that Palestinian leaders also have "condemned a U.S. peace plan they have not yet seen and refused to engage with the U.S. government with respect to peace efforts and otherwise." Also helpful: In late August, President Trump's slashed funds to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency which provides services to Palestinian refugees — as well as their millions of descendants whom UNRWA also designates as refugees.

- Soon after, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat recently announced that he was replacing UNRWA in East Jerusalem's Shuafat refugee camp. Charging that the agency has "failed utterly" to provide adequate sanitation, health care, education and welfare, and that it not just tolerates but incites terrorism, Mr. Barkat committed the municipal government to assuming responsibility for Shuafat's 30,000 residents who, he said, should be treated "like any other residents" of the capital. If this initiative succeeds, it could constitute a kind of peace process albeit one carried out by people in the streets rather than diplomats in drawing rooms. Over time, it could shift the calculus of Palestinians in the West Bank, and perhaps even those in Gaza. Imagine what it would mean if the next generation of Palestinian leaders did not oppose "normalizing" relations with Israelis. Imagine if jihadist terrorists were no longer glorified as martyrs in Palestinian mosques and media. Imagine if Palestinians willing to work with Israelis for the benefit of both peoples were no longer condemned as apostates and traitors. I don't expect any of that to come to pass while President Trump is in the White House. But he has fixed what his predecessor had broken. And he's made clear that Palestinians can have a state of their own, but only if they recognize that a two-state solution implies two states for two peoples, both willing to peacefully co-exist. That may not amount to the "deal of the century," but it's more than any past peace process achieved.

In Pittsburgh, Israeli Diplomats Add Insult to Injury

By Chemi Shalev, Columnist

- Israeli government representatives, from Benjamin Netanyahu on down, have expressed Israel's heartfelt condolences in the wake of Saturday's massacre of 11 elderly Jews at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue. Unfortunately, their message of sympathy is being undermined by the shameful effort of Israel's top diplomats in the U.S. to absolve Donald Trump of any responsibility for fomenting an atmosphere of right-wing hate and, even more outrageously, to implicate anti-Semitism on the left instead. For many American Jews, Trump's cardinal sin is the false equivalence he created between neo-Nazis and leftist demonstrators in the wake of the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, in which Heather Heyer was killed.
- There are "fine people" on both sides, Trump said, infuriating Americans in general and American Jews in particular. This did not deter Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer and New York Consul General Dani Dayan, however, from using the same odious analogy. Rather than focus on the neo-Nazi credentials of Pittsburgh perpetrator Robert Bowers or on Florida's serial pipe-bomber Cesar Sayoc's endless admiration for Trump, Dermer and Dayan opted to muddy the waters. The two senior diplomats emulated the U.S. president by obfuscating the clear-cut white supremacist backdrop of the Pittsburgh atrocity and, in Dermer's case, by commending Trump's statement after the attack. The statement was "the strongest ever made by a non-Israeli leader," Dermer said, without batting an eyelid. "I see a lot of people who attack Jews on both sides," Dermer added, as if Bowers' mass murder, the worst anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history, was commensurate in any way shape or form with other recent anti-Jewish and/or anti-Israeli attacks.
- Both diplomats cited Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan's despicable Jews-as-termites slur, ignoring the fact that, given the opportunity, both Bowers and Sayoc would have probably shot Farrakhan on sight. Dayan even mentioned Minnesota Congressional candidate Ilhan Omar, who said that Israel is "hypnotizing the world," as if Bowers or Sayoc had ever heard of her, never mind being influenced by Omar's disturbing rhetoric. Dermer and Dayan could have easily skirted the issue entirely and refrained from blaming either Trump or right-wing incitement for Bowers' actions. As diplomats, all they had to say was that, as foreign diplomats, they preferred to stay out of America's internal political debates. Instead, they pushed the same kind of preposterous theories and immoral equivalences routinely championed by Trump, as if they were voicing talking points issued by the White House. Given their performance, it's not unreasonable to expect Dayan and Dermer to now follow up on Trump's tantrum tweet on Monday, in which he blamed the "Fake News Media" for sparking "the flame of anger and outrage."

- Dayan and Dermer's concerted efforts to shield Trump from criticism can't be a coincidence. Both are implementing a deliberate policy decision to curry favor with Trump, even if at the risk of exacerbating Israel's already tense relations with the American Jewish community. While Netanyahu waxes empathetic from Jerusalem, going so far as to confront Orthodox Israeli rabbis who refuse to describe Tree of Life as a proper Jewish synagogue, his two senior spokespersons in the U.S. are actively defending Trump, who many American Jews view as the main catalyst for their growing insecurity and fear.
- Not that either Dayan or Dermer were speaking out of character, mind you. Like Trump, the Israeli right, inspired by Netanyahu, habitually downplays right-wing incitement and routinely magnifies leftist dissent to monstrous proportions. They conveniently ignore the fact that all – not most, but all – of Israel's political violence in recent decades has emanated from the right, from the settlers' Jewish Underground through Hebron mass murderer Baruch Goldstein to Rabin's assassin Yigal Amir and many others in between. Like Netanyahu and his acolytes, the two diplomats intentionally conflate classic anti-Semitism, which Bowers' exemplified in a particularly evil manner, with current anti-Israel agitation on campuses and elsewhere. Needless to say, Bowers did not shoot elderly Jews in cold blood because he rejects the occupation, supports BDS or opposes Netanyahu. On the contrary, his murderous rampage was sparked by the widespread American Jewish support for immigrants and refugees, which Netanyahu and others view as naive and self-destructive, in Israel as in the U.S.
- The two diplomats also reflected the converse view, widely held in the Israeli right, that Trump's support for Netanyahu's right-wing policies somehow absolves the U.S. president a priori of encouraging or espousing anti-Semitism. Trump's anti-Semitic assertion in December 2015 that Jews only support candidates that they can buy with money; his loud anti-Semitic dog whistle in a political ad on the final day of the presidential campaign; his Charlottesville statements and his dogged refusal to clearly condemn white supremacist groups and other troubling incidents are all swept under the carpet by Israel's official representatives. After all, Trump moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and turned his back on the Palestinians – what more could a proud Israeli Jew ask for?
- Dermer also rejected the claim, acknowledged by a growing number of American Jews, that attacks on George Soros, which have proliferated since Trump began to tear into the Hungarian-born billionaire, are "necessarily" anti-Semitic. He didn't have much of a choice, given that Netanyahu and other right-wingers regularly savage Soros as the sinister mastermind behind critics of their policies. And yes, in their particularly Israeli way, their attacks also carry the stench of latent anti-Semitism, albeit one limited to fellow Jews who share Soros' views. Rather than using the shock and grief that has gripped American Jewry since the attack to mend fences and renew dialogue, Dermer and Dayan chose to add egregious insult to the critical injury suffered on Saturday by American Jewry. Both are intelligent men and must surely realize their statements could enrage many American Jews, in their time of anguish and pain. Though a minority of American Jews probably agrees with Dermer and Dayan, for many, if not for most, the message conveyed by the Israeli diplomats was loud and clear. Between a

controversial U.S. president who serves Netanyahu's purposes and a grieving Jewish Diaspora in need of reassurance and consolation, Netanyahu and his agents left no doubt which side they're on.