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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Merkel Visits Amid Calls to Prevent Village Demolition**
- **Former IDF Chief Gantz Exploring New Election Alliance**
- **IDF Bolsters Gaza Border Defense After Rioting**
- **Sinwar: Prisoner Swap is Separate Issue to Truce Deal**
- **Israeli Commanders Warn Israel on Path to One State**
- **U.S. Leaves Treaty Amendment to Block PA Lawsuit**
- **PM Likely to Extend Secrecy of 1948 War Documents**
- **Zomlot: UK Can Play Leading Role in Achieving Peace**

Commentary:

- **AI Monitor: “While US Delays Peace Plan, Israeli Right Builds Support”**
– By Mazal Mualem, Analyst
- **AI Monitor: “Desperate Gazans Protest Against Hamas”**
– By Shlomi Eldar, Analyst

News Excerpts

October 4, 2018

Ha'aretz

Merkel Visits Amid Calls to Prevent Village Demolition

German Chancellor Angela Merkel landed in Israel on Wednesday evening for a traditional bilateral cabinet consultation between the two governments. The German leader attended an official dinner at the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem and signed the guestbook. The visit takes place as the West Bank Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar faces imminent demolition, despite calls from Germany to block the eviction. To mark the visit, Bedouin children demonstrated with pictures of Chancellor Merkel and called for her to help stopping the demolition of the village.

Jerusalem Post

Former IDF Chief Gantz Exploring New Election Alliance

Former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz is reportedly considering a run for the next Knesset under the banner of a new party that was formed three months ago by Yeruham Mayor Michael Biton and Haredi Women's College founder Adina Bar-Shalom, daughter of late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. sources in the party said Wednesday. The party will be called Achi Israeli (my Israeli brother). Other founders of the party include former Labor MK Orna Angel, former Israel Broadcasting Authority director-general Moti Shklar and former IDF senior officers Gideon Shefer, Ruth Yaron and Asaf Lapidot.

Jerusalem Post

IDF Bolsters Gaza Border Defense After Rioting

The IDF will significantly reinforce troops in southern Israel to prevent terror infiltration into Israel from the Gaza Strip, following a situational assessment by IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot and senior IDF and Shin Bet officials. On Wednesday evening at least 1,000 Palestinians violently demonstrated at several locations along the Gaza border fence burning tires and throwing stones at IDF soldiers who responded with crowd-dispersal means. 15 year-old Ahmad Samir Abu Habel was killed by an Israeli sniper near the Erez crossing in the northern Gaza Strip. Another 20 Gazans were injured.

Ynet

Sinwar: Prisoner Swap is Separate Issue to Truce Deal

Hamas' leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, has conditioned a ceasefire with Israel on the lifting of the Gaza blockade and insisted a prisoner swap deal should be reached separately, according to an interview months ago. Sinwar said, "If there is no deal... Hamas will turn the table upside down on the heads of everyone... Everyone is going to suffer." Sinwar said Israeli mothers came to visit him in prison, and they were kind. "A mother is a mother, the Jews don't want to lose their children either," he reportedly said.

Israeli Commanders Warn Israel on Path to One State

An American pro-Israel group has backed a tour of Jewish communities by former top Israeli security officials who argue that Israel is on a catastrophic path to obliterating the two-state solution. Three of the dozens of former officials who belong to Commanders for Israel's Security will meet with leaders of Jewish federations and met with Members of Congress, hosted by the Israel Policy Forum. The former officials are Nimrod Novik, a former top adviser to Shimon Peres, the late Israeli prime minister and president; Col. Shaul Arieli, a former top negotiator with the Palestinians; and Maj. Gen. Avi Mizrahi, a former Central commander.

Times of Israel

U.S. Leaves Treaty Amendment to Block PA Lawsuit

U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton announced on Wednesday that the U.S. has withdrawn from an amendment to the Vienna Convention to keep the Palestinians from suing the U.S. at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Bolton said the U.S. will remain party to the underlying Vienna treaty, but that it will review all international agreements that could still expose the country to ICJ resolutions. Bolton's announcement came hours after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the U.S. was terminating a 1955 treaty reached with Iran after Tehran cited it in an international court ruling against Washington's sanctions policy.

Ha'aretz

PM Likely to Extend Secrecy of 1948 War Documents

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to sign regulations extending the period of confidentiality for information in the defense archives from 70 years to 90 years. The Defense Ministry requested the extension to prevent the release this year of some materials relating to the period of the 1948 War. The draft regulations state that exposure of some of the archival materials could harm national security. The new rules contradict the recommendations of the supreme advisory council overseeing the Israel State Archives, which recommended extending the confidentiality of only some of the documents for five years.

Times of Israel

Zomlot: UK Can Play Leading Role in Achieving Peace

The new head of the Palestine Liberation Organization's mission in United Kingdom said that the Palestinians believe London can undertake "a leading role" in efforts to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. Husam Zomlot — who took over as the PLO's top envoy in London on Monday, after the Trump Administration shuttered the PLO's DC mission he headed — made the comments Tuesday at an event on the sidelines of the annual gathering of the Conservative Party, the UK's ruling party, in Birmingham. His speech was attended by UK Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt, British lawmakers, Arab ambassadors and others.

While US Delays Peace Plan, Israeli Right Builds Support

By Mazal Mualem, Analyst

- Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman is taking advantage of the nebulous American attitude toward the diplomatic process with the Palestinians to benefit his own election campaign. “I don’t know how to react to a plan I haven’t seen yet and that no one had put on the table yet. What I can say is that I believe in a Jewish State,” he said during an Oct. 2 visit to the hills of the Givat Menachem neighborhood of the settlement of Karnei Shomron. He was responding to journalists who asked what he thought about President Donald Trump’s statement, “I like two-state solution.” Trump made that statement on Sept. 26 at his meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the UN General Assembly session in New York. It reignited a debate in Israel: Will Trump soon present his “deal of the century” and force a two-state solution on Netanyahu?
- The fact is that there is still no diplomatic plan on the table. There are only dribbles and leaks from the White House and generic statements by Trump and his team that a plan will soon be presented to the public. The Israeli right, including Liberman, is left with very convenient political and media spheres to operate in. Its members can take advantage of this situation to benefit their respective campaigns in the next election cycle. If there really were an official American peace plan based on a two-state solution, coalition partners on the right would have to answer to their voters as to why they continue sitting in a supposedly right-wing government that is collaborating in the partition of the country. That is why, when Trump makes general statements like telling Netanyahu, “Israel will have to do something that will be good for the other side,” or “I like two-state solution. Yeah. That’s — that’s what I think — that’s what I think works best,” and then adds that he wants to reach a deal between Israel and the Palestinians during his first term in office, he is serving the interests of Netanyahu and the other leaders of the Israeli right, whether he knows it or not.
- Netanyahu is an old fox when it comes to political maneuvering of this sort. In an interview with CNN on Sept. 29, he was asked whether he could say no to Trump. He responded that he was “certainly going to look at it and look at it with a — with a keen and open mind. ... I always said that I’m willing to look at peace proposals put forward by the United States.” There was good reason that Liberman went on his West Bank tour as soon as the Sukkot holiday was over, on the day that officially marks Israel’s return to routine after a long holiday season. It was more than just a visit by the defense minister to areas that are particularly sensitive from a security perspective. Liberman was also there as the head of Yisrael Beiteinu, a right-wing party with no future, at least according to the polls, and that is therefore fighting for every vote from the right. Like all other players in the political arena, Liberman believes that there is a good chance that the next election will be moved up to early 2019.

- This is also why Liberman is now making every effort to point out how construction in the settlements has been gaining momentum. Pointing to the new homes under construction in the Neve Menachem neighborhood, he turned to the journalists accompanying him and said, “Can you see how construction has been gaining momentum? In this neighborhood alone, we approved the construction of 220 units last year. This neighborhood, which is now home to 260 families, will have at least 700 families next year. I think that even with all the talk, it is important to pay attention to what is actually being done.” He claimed that there are about 1,000 housing units currently under construction in the West Bank and another 11,000 units in various planning stages, as well as roads getting built and other projects being completed after being on hold for years.
- Liberman also fired off a carefully planned barb at HaBayit HaYehudi's chairman, Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who has been accusing him over the last few days of having leftist tendencies and of being responsible for a failed strategy in Gaza. “I would suggest to all the big talkers, including those who live in [the Tel Avivian suburb of] Ra’anana, and one resident of Ra’anana in particular, to come here and see what ‘doing’ is all about and what the difference is between doing and talking,” said Liberman. Bennett lives in the town of Ra’anana. Liberman also noted that unlike Bennett, he lives in the settlement of Nokdim in the Judean Desert.
- Liberman is not the kind of person who speaks off the cuff. He is a man of methodical planning. For years, he was careful to work closely with the American Jewish election consultant Arthur Finkelstein, who died about a year ago. Finkelstein was thought to have the ability to translate in-depth polling of Israeli society, particularly of the Israeli right, into a precise electoral strategy. Once a year, Finkelstein would conduct a vast, in-depth study for Yisrael Beiteinu, assessing changes in voting patterns. He would then use his findings to prepare a political strategy that fit Liberman perfectly: Should he turn sharply to the right or shift slightly toward the center? Liberman’s statements, his party’s proposed legislation and even the political rivals he picked were always based on Finkelstein’s findings. Now, even though Finkelstein is gone, Liberman is continuing to base his actions on the polls (or as he likes to call them, “the research”).
- His West Bank visit is a clear indication of the direction that Liberman plans to take in the next election. Unlike the 2015 election, in which he tried at first to shift toward the diplomatic center by criticizing Netanyahu’s “status quo,” he is now putting everything he has into an appeal to the right. Ultimately, this means that his main battle will be against Bennett, and it will be impassioned and ugly. Liberman will try to prove that he is more pragmatic and experienced and that he is closer to the settlers. In practice, Liberman will take advantage of every situation and development and harness them to benefit his overall strategy. The Americans’ lack of specifics about Trump’s peace plan and the reasonable possibility that by the time some plan — any plan — is finally put on the table, Israel will already be in the midst of an election campaign, are the kind of raw material that the defense minister can use to his advantage. He can point freely to the growing momentum of construction in the settlements and take credit for it without worrying that the White House will react aggressively, as it would during the Barack Obama administration. In fact, the current administration may even embrace it.

Desperate Gazans Protest Against Hamas

By Shlomi Eldar, Analyst

- Violent demonstrations along the border fence with Israel in recent days took yet another heavy toll on residents of the Gaza Strip. On Sept. 29, Israel troops fired at thousands of protesters who massed along the fence, killing seven Palestinians — among them a 12-year-old boy. Palestinians hurled a large number of grenades and other explosive devices at Israeli soldiers. Israeli and international media reporting on such incidents generally focus on the number of Palestinian casualties, on assessments by senior defense officials regarding Hamas motives in increasing the frequency of the anti-Israel demonstrations, and — according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson — on the number of protesters who heeded Hamas' calls to clash with Israeli troops at the border fence.
- Those following the weekly events in Gaza since the US Embassy moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in mid-May might think that all 2 million Gaza Strip residents had mobilized for the campaign against Israel. Hamas' leadership has reinforced this impression by pitching the demonstrations as “popular protests” and appearing to focus international public opinion with great success on events in Gaza and on Israel's 11-year siege of the enclave. However, virtually all Israeli and international media outlets were unaware of other protests in recent weeks that were generated by opponents of Gaza's Hamas rulers. One of the main reasons for this lack of publication is that Palestinian media in the Strip does not dare publish “the banned things” to which almost every Gaza resident has been exposed in recent weeks. What are these “banned things”? They are the underground activities taking place alongside the public protests against Israel while residents openly and almost fearlessly express themselves against Hamas. They are protesting against the terrible reality imposed on them by Hamas since it took control of Gaza by force in 2007.
- Al-Monitor has learned that dozens of Palestinians demonstrated in recent weeks in the Khan Yunis refugee camp and the adjacent Abasan neighborhood. They called on Hamas to take care of its people or “disappear” — a few waved signs against what they termed Gaza's “dictatorial regime.” Similar protests took place some two weeks ago in the Shabura camp in the southern Gaza town of Rafah and in the northern Gaza refugee camp Jabalia. Some protests turned into altercations between Hamas supporters and protesters. The latter claimed Gaza's rulers had taken the Strip back to the Middle Ages; supporters accused the demonstrators of treason and aiding the Zionist enemy.
- Tensions between Hamas supporters and opponents have intensified following the US decision announced Sept. 1 to stop funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and uncertainty over the future of the organization that provides food and schooling for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Protests against the aid agency erupted around UNRWA compounds in southern and northern Gaza, and threats were made against the lives of senior agency

officials. Mass clashes broke out between Hamas supporters and opponents over who was responsible for this state of affairs. The demonstrators accused leading Hamas officials and activists of corruption and of favoring the core of their supporters over the general population — most of which is unemployed and demoralized from counting its unbelievable number of dead and injured every week. The scope of these protests is small, but they echo the January 2017 protests over the power blackouts crisis in the Gaza Strip, which were violently suppressed at the time by Hamas security forces.

- A Khan Yunis resident told Al-Monitor Oct. 2 that the protests in the southern refugee camp began about a month ago. At first, dozens of Palestinians held a spontaneous protest after Friday prayers, parallel to the weekly demonstrations along the fence with Israel. The number of protesters grew to several hundred in the ensuing days. “The barrier of fear has been shattered; we are going to die in any case, so what does it matter if we die of hunger or war or as a result of shooting or blows by Hamas?” the Palestinian asked, speaking on condition of anonymity. The protesters, he said, are not a small group of dissatisfied residents; rather, they are the majority of the refugee camp denizens who feel Hamas has brought them to the brink. Sadly, he adds, not everyone is willing to take a risk by demonstrating. “If there had been more [protesters] like there were in Egypt, we would have more confidence against them [Hamas]. What will they do? Shoot us all? Hamas knows that eventually many others will join the protests because people will realize that even though they’re still afraid, they have no choice. Hunger will force them to get up and demonstrate. All is lost, life is ending and we are dying.” He repeated the word “dying” many times during the conversation.
- When I asked to speak with other Khan Yunis residents, the man put me in touch with his neighbor at the camp, who then agreed to be identified only by the letter “Y”. Y is 30 years old and the father of five young children; the youngest of them is 2 years old. “They [Hamas] take care of their own people who are given work and food and gifts,” he told Al-Monitor. “They even share electricity generators among themselves while the people are being crushed by the terrible burden. We were supporters of Fatah [the larger rival Palestinian movement], but today there is no more Fatah [in Gaza] and there is nothing. There are only those in favor of Hamas and those who are against it. They send people to die while the commanders [Hamas leaders] enjoy power supplies and luxuries. As far as they are concerned, anyone who opposes them can die. The people have had enough.” Y says Hamas security forces did not intervene in the protests at the camp, but Hamas supporters swore at the protesters and accused them of treason and support for “the Zionists,” in his words. “Each of the families has at least one son who works for Hamas and gets paid by Hamas,” he says. “They guard their jobs and that’s what they care about — protecting themselves.”
- The conversations with the camp residents took place on Facebook where they say they feel safer to speak. Asked why they were afraid to speak by phone with a journalist but were not afraid to protest and issue public calls against Hamas, they answered that speaking with a Jewish journalist could be considered an act of treason or espionage — both punishable by death. An Israeli security source speaking on condition of anonymity confirmed that pockets of

popular resistance against the Hamas leadership had developed in recent weeks. The economic pressure, lack of hope of conciliation with Fatah and especially the large number of Palestinian casualties on the border have generated opposition among the weakest groups in Gaza — those living in the refugee camps. According to his assessment, this burgeoning protest is unlikely to develop into a mass insurrection that will bring down Hamas. “The Palestinians in Gaza are tired, exhausted and hungry. In Egypt, the army protected residents. In Gaza, the ‘Hamas army’ will not hesitate to use live fire against protesters. Gaza is not Egypt, and Palestine Square is not Tahrir Square.”