



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, October 26

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News Excerpts

October 26, 2018

Reuters

Jordan: Peace Treaty Unaffected by Scrapping Land Deals

Jordan said on Thursday its commitment to uphold a peace treaty with Israel was not in question despite ending a 25-year special regime that allows its neighbor to use two parcels of land along its borders under its sovereignty. Jordan formally notified Israel on Sunday it would not renew the deal over Baquora where the Yarmouk River flows into the Jordan River and in the Ghumar area in the southern Wadi Araba desert where Israeli farmers have large plantations. King Abdullah, who stressed the territories were Jordanian lands and would remain so, said the move was made in the “national interest” at a period of regional turmoil. See also, [“Jordan says peace treaty unaffected by scrapping land deals” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

18 Die as School Trip Swept Away in Jordan Flooding

Flash floods unleashed by heavy rains swept away a group of middle school students and teachers visiting hot springs near the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea on Thursday, killing 18 and injuring 35 as the torrent carried some for several kilometers, Jordan said Thursday. A child was killed by flooding in Israel northern Negev desert earlier in the day, Israeli rescue officials said. In Jordan, a dramatic rescue operation involving helicopters and divers continued into the night. Israel’s military said it dispatched a search and rescue team at the request of Jordan’s government. Thirteen people escaped without injuries, said Brig. Gen. Farid al-Sharaa, speaking after nightfall as large spotlights illuminated the flooded area. See also, [“ISRAEL SENDS ELITE RESCUE UNIT TO JORDAN AFTER FLOOD” \(JPost\)](#)

i24 News

Hold on to Your Citizenship, Abbas Tells Israeli Arabs

Arab Israelis would do well to hold on to their Israeli citizenship and not waste time holding out hope for moving to a future Palestinian state, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas told a gathering of Arabic-language Israeli journalists on Thursday. The leader called on Palestinians living within Israel to act “rationally” and exercise caution while protesting. “What purpose is served by raising the Palestinian flag at a protest against the nationality law,” the leader asked. He emphasized that the Palestinian leadership, however, places great faith in the Arab residents of Israel to support the Palestinians in their struggle to establish a nation state.

Ha’aretz

Mideast Envoy to Visit Israel Ahead of Peace Plan Unveiling

Jason Greenblatt, President Trump’s special envoy for the Middle East peace process, will visit Israel next week as part of the administration’s preparations for releasing its peace plan. Greenblatt will meet with senior Israeli officials in Jerusalem. He is not yet scheduled to visit other countries in the region and will not meet any Palestinian officials during his visit, since the PA and the Trump White House continue to hold no contacts with each other. The administration’s peace plan still has no publication date. After multiple reports during the summer that said it was close to being revealed, the White House continues to hold it back. See also, [“US Middle East envoy to visit Israel next week” \(i24 News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Activists Protest at GA to Force Talk About Israel-Pal' Conflict

For about 10 young protesters outside the convention halls of the Jewish Federations of North America's 2018 General Assembly in Tel Aviv this week, the conference, which hosted leaders of the Diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities, was sorely incomplete. Though the symposium's theme — "Let's Talk" — was aimed at confronting the widening chasm between Israeli and Diaspora Jews, the subject that the protesters believed was most responsible for this trend was nowhere to be heard: the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank. As conference participants came and left over three days, the activists from All That's Left held up signs such as, "Federation dollars are funding activist blacklists."

Jerusalem Post

Pal' Activist Calls for Arms Embargo Against Israel at UNSC

Member states of the United Nations Security Council must impose an arms embargo against Israel in cases where the weapons could be used for human rights violations, Palestinian activist Randa Siniora Atallah told the member states in New York on Thursday. UNSC "member states continue to trade arms and offer political support to Israel, while Israel continues to enforce policies and practices that are in clear violation of international law," Siniora Atallah said. She was one of two women who briefed the council at the start of its debate on Women, Peace and Security and is the first Palestinian woman to do so. Siniora Atallah is the director of the Palestinian based Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling. She was invited to brief the UNSC debate by Bolivia, which holds the rotating UNSC presidency this month.

Times of Israel

Mandelblit: Knesset Solution for Migrants, Legal 'Black Hole'

Knesset bill due to be discussed by the government's ministers on Sunday – which would effectively remove the migrants issue from the High Court of Justice's authority – would create a black hole in Israel's legal system, said Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit in a preemptive strike against the initiative. In a statement confirming his "vehement opposition" to the bill, he said the idea of stating that laws relating to migrants can violate the constitutional rules of proportionality and rationality has another name: eliminating individual rights for migrants. While Mandelblit has supported other initiatives to further the government's goal of getting most of the remaining 35,000-plus African migrants (down from 60,000) to leave, he said this bill went way too far and would be a slippery slope to permitting the government to isolate specific groups as having no rights.

Ynet News

New York Haredi Community Compares IDF Draft to Holocaust

As part of their struggle to prevent the draft of young ultra-Orthodox men and women to the IDF or national service, radical Haredi activists in New York have recently put up pashkevils (posters on public walls) featuring the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, comparing the legislation meant to draft them to the Holocaust and calling on the public to continue the fight against the bill proposal. The amendment to the Israeli Defense Service Law passed its first hurdle in the Knesset in July. The legislation includes planned cuts to the yeshivot's budgets and the use of economic incentives to pressure the Torah study institutions to encourage enlistment to the IDF, but no criminal sanctions.

Netanyahu Losing His Diplomatic ‘Magic Touch’

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor

- **After a long period of time in which it seemed that all of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s dreams were coming true, the winds have shifted in recent weeks. Netanyahu’s magic touch has eroded, and clouds are starting to darken the prime minister’s horizons on almost all sides. These include his relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, freedom of action on the Syrian front, the stinging crisis with Jordan and the Khashoggi affair. To all of this, we add the first sounds of discord from the Washington-Jerusalem axis and an additional heating up of Israel’s southern front; the latter has elicited sharp criticism from Netanyahu’s right-wing base, criticizing his seemingly restrained approach to Gaza.**
- **Netanyahu’s life had been on easy street ever since President Donald Trump entered the White House in January 2017. Whatever he dreamed of at night came true the next morning. Despite all the talk about a peace program, Trump put the Palestinians into freezer-mode, recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and caused Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to slam the door on US negotiators Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt. On the northern front, the Israeli air force enjoyed absolute freedom in Syrian skies and carried out more than 200 assaults on Iranian bases and other Iranian strongholds in Syria. Israel’s Mossad smuggled out Iran’s nuclear archives to Tel Aviv, Trump abandoned the nuclear agreement with Iran, relations with Egypt went up another notch and Netanyahu’s popularity in the polls went sky high. However, sometimes dreams come to an end and waking up to reality is difficult. We have the impression that an imposing flock of black swans is making its way past the blue skies above Netanyahu.**
- **It all began with the downing of a Russian plane over the Mediterranean Sea by Syrian anti-aircraft batteries that targeted Israeli air force activity on Sept. 17. Moscow blamed Jerusalem for the incident. Today we know for sure that this incident was what changed the rules of the game — rules that had tilted toward Israel. No more. Now the Russians have changed the rules: They quickly transferred three S-300 air defense missile systems to Syria. These missiles are operated by Russian teams in a way that will not allow Israel to attack them, even if they should try to knock out Israel’s planes.**
- **In spite of Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman’s statements that Israel continues to operate in Syria, there is no evidence that this is true. Even if there is some truth to it, everyone knows that things have changed and Israeli activity in Syria is much more limited and calculated. Moreover, Netanyahu bragged about his close relationship with Putin, but we get the impression that this, too, is not what it once was. More than two weeks have passed since Netanyahu announced that he’d be meeting with Putin soon, yet no date for a meeting has been made public. In the past, when Netanyahu wanted to meet with the Russian leader or announced it, the meeting was held within a few days. No longer. The winds from Moscow to Jerusalem have become frosty, and Israel is aware of the problem.**
- **Some members of Israel’s security system play with the idea of continuing to operate in the skies above Syria and not be deterred by the idea of friction with the Russians. There are those who fondly recall when Israel’s air force knocked out five Soviet MiGs in 1973 above Syrian**

skies. But fond memories are one thing — reality is another. There is no decision-maker in Israel today who will dare even think about clashing with Russia.

- **Jordanian King Abdullah II announced Oct. 21 that his kingdom would not extend the leasing agreement with Israel for another 25 years. This arrangement was included in the 1994 peace agreement in which Israeli farmers cultivate two enclaves under Jordanian sovereignty. The Jordanian announcement fell on Jerusalem like a thunderbolt, even though anyone who bothered to listen to the voices in Amman over recent months knew that this was inevitable. In fact, Netanyahu has in recent months been lacking attentiveness and tools for confronting such structural failures. His office has long since emptied. His lawyer and confidant, Yitzhak Molcho, stepped back due to police investigations, and most of Netanyahu's advisers have also left. Even the National Security Council is emptying out and functions more as a body providing support and services for the prime minister rather than as an entity tasked with uncovering and dealing with crises of these sorts (such as the Jordanian crisis). Netanyahu took Jordan for granted and did not recognize the storm clouds overhead, even after the prime minister was photographed with the Israeli security guard who shot and killed two Jordanians in Amman in July 2017. This incident caused a deep rupture in relations with the king and forced out of Amman the Israeli ambassador there, Einat Schlein.**
- **But the trials and tribulations have not ended here. On the contrary, they are only beginning. Even Jerusalem's close alliance with Washington and Netanyahu's fruitful cooperation with — and tremendous influence over — the chaotic White House now seem vulnerable. According to Channel 10 on Oct. 22, Trump held a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron in which he sharply criticized Israel. Trump continues to talk about the "deal of the century," and there are leaks insinuating that the American offer will include recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of two states — all of which has aroused great anxiety in Jerusalem. To this, we add American concern over the strengthening of Israel-China ties (China's Vice President Wang Qishan visited Israel on Oct. 23), and we are left with much tension and nervousness on the diplomatic front.**
- **According to a senior Israeli Cabinet member, the reason Netanyahu is forced to capitulate to Hamas in Gaza is to avoid inflicting a military blow on them and instead "contain" the violence on the border fence — to the chagrin of his voters. The main reason for that is because he is waiting tensely for Trump's peace program. Meanwhile, Netanyahu does not want a flare-up on the Palestinian front, as he fears this would create a false impression of emergency and goad Trump into publicizing his program. The prime minister is playing for time, and this foot-dragging arouses criticism from his voter base.**
- **Netanyahu's Garden of Eden is showing signs of wilting on the internal front as well. The police have finished their investigations. The investigators are now writing up their recommendations regarding Case 4000 (the Bezeq telecommunications scandal), and, evidently, they will be submitted before the end of the year. Even the "Submarine Affair" (Case 3000) — in which many of Netanyahu's close associates are expected to be put on trial — is nearing completion. Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh, Netanyahu's appointee who morphed into one of the Netanyahu family's most hated individuals, will leave no open files or debts behind. The educated guess is that Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit will make his final decisions on Netanyahu's files in the first quarter of 2019. Meanwhile, Netanyahu continues to ponder whether to call for early elections — before the attorney general makes his decision. According to an Oct. 24 Israel Today**

report, the reason for Netanyahu's indecision is that he suspects that even if he wins the elections, President Reuven Rivlin (another Netanyahu nemesis) will not offer Netanyahu the option to assemble a coalition because of the bill-of-indictment cloud hanging over his head. Now Netanyahu is weighing whether to try to change the law quickly to limit the president's freedom of action (in Israel, the president tasks the person he estimates most likely to succeed with assembling a majority coalition).

- Thus, Netanyahu is challenged by a tremendous workload on all sides. People who work with him daily see signs of stress on the part of the greatest sorcerer of Israeli politics. Nevertheless, as Netanyahu has demonstrated many times in the past, he is far from throwing in the towel.

SUMMARY: In spite of Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman's statements that Israel continues to operate in Syria, there is no evidence that this is true. Even if there is some truth to it, everyone knows that things have changed and Israeli activity in Syria is much more limited and calculated. Moreover, Netanyahu bragged about his close relationship with Putin, but we get the impression that this, too, is not what it once was. More than two weeks have passed since Netanyahu announced that he'd be meeting with Putin soon, yet no date for a meeting has been made public. In the past, when Netanyahu wanted to meet with the Russian leader or announced it, the meeting was held within a few days. No longer. The winds from Moscow to Jerusalem have become frosty, and Israel is aware of the problem.

We Sit and Wait for it to Blow Up in Our Face

By Giora Eiland, former head of Israel Security Council

- It appears as if the last Jordanian move—King Abdullah's decision not to renew Israel's lease on the lands in the Arava and Naharayim—has come to us as a total surprise. I don't like to quote myself, but will make an exception and cite from an [article I published](#) here over a year ago, following the tension with Jordan over the Temple Mount events, in which an Israeli security guard shot and killed (among others) a Jordanian citizen.
- I finished the article saying this: "For many months now, we are living in a situation according to which, no diplomatic activity happens unless the Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu leads it himself. As talented as he may be, this is not the way to handle foreign affairs, and the crisis with Jordan is only one example." It has been more than a year and it seems the current crisis has similar characteristics. There are two reasons for this crisis, beyond what it was that caused Jordan to decide what it had.
- The first reason is the weakness of all Israeli governmental bodies, other than security forces and the prime minister himself. In Jordan's case, we are talking about three such organizations: The first is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The crisis with Jordan last year and the fragility of the peace treaty with this strategic country, call for extra attention on our side. In the article I just quoted, I advised that our ambassador in Jordan be one of exceptional political and security background and status, so he or she can be in direct contact with both the king and Israeli high officials. This did not happen.
- The second organization is the National Security Council, whose role is to be a dominant body in determining the agenda of government and cabinet discussions. However, I think that de facto, this is not the case. There are too many tactical debates about Gaza, while the less noisy but more important matters are being neglected.
- The third body is the Ministry for Regional Cooperation. Over 80 percent of its activity concerns with Jordan. None of these three bodies identified the problem, despite the long lasting Jordanian public and political debate regarding the lease to Israel. Like I said—if the prime minister doesn't initiate things, it appears no one does.
- The second reason lies in the bad Israeli habit to wait until a crisis blows up in our faces, and only then recall to respond and react. An example: in March 2009 a first case of swine flu was identified in Mexico. A month later it was declared an epidemic in the US. It went on for three months, and in Israel nothing was done in order to prevent this from happening here.
- Only in July of that year, after 30 Israelis had died of swine flu, the government urgently convened and took a number of historical decisions, like acquiring millions of Shekels worth vaccines—some of which had already been proven ineffective.
- And another example: in February 2010, Israel had concrete intelligence regarding the intentions of the IHH organization and of Turkey to send a large flotilla to break the Israeli siege on Gaza. The flotilla arrived near the Gaza shore region on May 31st that year. A government discussion with the prime minister took place only four days before that, and when it did, Israel's options

were already limited to one—a noisy IDF takeover of the ship. If a debate would have taken place three months prior to that, much better ways to handle the situation could have been planned.

- And back to the current Jordan crisis: I assume that before King Abdullah's declaration, Israel could have had a discrete dialogue with him and reach a reasonable compromise. The prime minister said on Sunday that we will negotiate with Jordan, after the Jordanian king had already committed in public not to prolong the lease. This reflects well the typical Israeli way to go about things—to deal with the right issue, but at the wrong time.

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