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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, October 30*

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- **IDF Launch Criminal Investigation into Gaza Medic Killing**
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# News Excerpts

October 30, 2018

## Reuters

### **Official: Israel has Struck in Syria Since Russia Plane Downed**

Israel has carried out attacks in Syria since the accidental shooting down of a Russian surveillance plane last month, a senior Israeli official said on Monday. The Sept. 17 downing by Syrian anti-aircraft fire, after Israeli jets attacked a suspected Iranian arms shipment to Syria, caused a diplomatic rift between Israel and Russia, and Moscow blamed Israel for the incident. The Israeli official did not give details of the nature of Israel's actions since the shooting down of the IL-20 aircraft near Latakia, in which the crew of 15 were killed, or the number of times it had attacked. "The IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) have attacked in Syria, including after the downing of the Russian plane. Military coordination with the Russians continues as before," said the senior official, who could not be named. See also, ["SENIOR OFFICIAL: ISRAEL HAS ATTACKED SYRIA SINCE RUSSIAN SPY PLANE DOWNED" \(JPost\)](#)

## I24 News

### **PLO Announces End to Security Coordination with Israel**

The Palestinian Central Council issued a decision Monday night to terminate security coordination with Israel and suspend recognition of the state of Israel until it recognizes the state of Palestine. A statement at the closure of the two-day meeting said that in light of Israel's "denial" of its obligations under agreements signed with the Palestinians, the PCC authorized the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority to "end their obligations... towards their agreements with the occupation authorities (Israel)." However the decisions included are "suspended", as they require the signatures of Abbas as well as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in order to be implemented. See also, ["PLO Votes to Suspend Recognition of Israel Until It Recognizes Palestinian State" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Israel Decides Not to Topple Hamas in Gaza, Seeks to Weaken It**

Political and military leaders have concluded that it would be better for Israel not to overthrow the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, officials who took part in the deliberations told Ha'aretz. 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. Accordingly, 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.

## Ynet News

### **IDF Launch Criminal Investigation into Gaza Medic Killing**

The Military Police Criminal Investigation Division (MPCID) will question the IDF soldiers who shot dead 21-year-old volunteer medic Razan Ashraf Najjar east of the south Gaza city of Khan Yunis in June. The IDF said Monday that the findings of the incident's operational investigation as well as the General Staff operational debriefing have been transferred to the Military Advocate General. Najjar was killed during one of the "March of Return" riots along the Gaza border fence. In her line of duty, she treated Palestinian casualties.

## **Israelis Head to the Polls as Local Elections Kick Off**

Israelis are heading to the polls to elect their local and regional politicians into office on Tuesday, with a newly instituted vacation day seeking to challenge widespread voter apathy and raise the country's traditionally low turnout rates. Some 6.6 million Israeli citizens and residents over the age of 17 are eligible to cast their votes in the local elections, electing officials to some 251 city, town, and regional councils nationwide. Voters are casting two ballots: one for mayor (a five-year term), and another for the party list they wish to represent them on their hometown council. If no single mayoral candidate receives over 40 percent of the vote on Tuesday, a runoff election — pitting the two contenders who garnered the largest shares against each other — will be scheduled for November 13. See also, ["Barkat was promised Jerusalem Ministry if Elkin elected mayor – Likud sources" \(TOI\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **Report: Israel Sold \$250M. of Spy Systems to Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia and Israel held secret meetings which led to an estimated \$250-million deal, including the transfer of Israeli espionage technologies to the kingdom, Israeli media reported on Sunday, citing an exclusive report by the United Arab Emirate news website Al-Khaleej. Some of the spy systems, which are the most sophisticated systems Israel has ever sold to any Arab country, have already been transferred to Saudi Arabia and put into use after a Saudi technical team received training in operating them, the report added. The exclusive report also revealed that the two countries exchanged strategic military information in the meetings, which were conducted in Washington and London through a European mediator. Such cooperation would not be the first of its kind between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

### I24

## **Jerusalem Elections Highlight City's East-West Divide**

It's a thin line that separates East from West Jerusalem, but social divides in city the run deep and Palestinians in East Jerusalem complain the municipality has abandoned them, neglecting the upkeep of their neighborhoods. Before 1967, East Jerusalem was under Jordanian rule but, after the Six Day War, Israel exerted control over the Eastern half of the city. Neighborhoods in the east suffered from lack of investment in infrastructure, education, housing and municipal services. Some historians believe Israeli political leadership assumed this area of land would be inevitably exchanged in a future peace deal with the Palestinians and thus avoided investment in its upkeep. Others say the ongoing neglect is a product of a biased policy which seeks to emphasize Jerusalem's Jewish character while marginalizing the Arab population. Either way, the gaps between east and west are clear.

### Ynet News

## **Anti-Semitic Incidents Were on the Rise Even Before US Shooting**

Jews make up only about 2 percent of the US population, but in annual FBI data they repeatedly account for more than half of the Americans targeted by hate crimes committed due to religious bias. The Anti-Defamation League identified 1,986 anti-Semitic incidents in the US in 2017, up from 1,267 in 2016, and also reported a major increase in anti-Semitic online harassment. Anti-Semitism surfaces often in the research conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks various US hate groups, including neo-Nazis, white nationalists, skinheads and others. "They're all anti-Semites—that's the tie that binds them," said Heidi Beirich, director of the center's Intelligence Project. "They believe Jews are pulling the strings behind bad things happening in this country."

## **Guns, Trump and Anti-Semitism: Pittsburgh Shooting Highlights Vast Divide Between Liberal U.S. Jews and Israel**

By Amir Tibon, columnist at Ha'aretz

- On Sunday night, two letters addressing the terror attack against the Jewish community in Pittsburgh were made public. The letters – one written by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the other by a small group of Jewish activists in Pittsburgh – provided useful glimpses into how Saturday's tragedy at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue is being perceived in Israel versus how it is viewed by many Jews in the United States. The two reactions could not have been further apart.
- In a public letter to Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, Netanyahu chose to praise President Donald Trump for his reaction to Saturday's mass shooting that killed 11 Jewish worshippers. "I want to express my appreciation to President Trump for unequivocally condemning this heinous crime and for pledging to fight those who seek to destroy the Jewish people," the prime minister wrote.
- A short time after his letter went public, 11 activists from the Pittsburgh branch of Bend the Arc – an organization for progressive Jews focused on social justice – published an open letter in which they urged Trump to stay away from the city unless he changes his rhetoric on racism and violence in politics.
- "President Trump, you are not welcome in Pittsburgh until you commit yourself to compassionate, democratic policies that recognize the dignity of all of us," the activists wrote. Continuing to address the president, they added that "for the past three years your words and your policies have emboldened a growing white nationalist movement. You yourself called the murderer evil, but [Saturday's] violence is the direct culmination of your influence." Their open letter made national headlines in the United States and has so far been co-signed by over 21,000 people online.
- These two anecdotes tell a larger story about how the Pittsburgh tragedy is being viewed by the current right-wing government in Jerusalem and by the overwhelmingly liberal American-Jewish community. In conversations with Jewish residents in Pittsburgh over the past two days, it was common to hear complaints and direct accusations aimed at Trump – especially regarding the violent rhetoric at his political rallies, such as the calls to "lock up" his political rivals, or his recent praise of Republican Congressman Greg Gianforte who physically attacked a journalist last year.
- Jewish residents of Pittsburgh who spoke with Haaretz also expressed concern about Trump's constant use of phrases that have a history of anti-Semitic connotations, such as "globalist." In addition, national Jewish groups – most notably the Anti-Defamation League – have warned of the constant attacks by Trump and other prominent Republicans against Jewish philanthropist George Soros, who is portrayed in far-right conspiracy theories as a "puppet master" who secretly controls U.S. immigration policy.

- Robert Bowers, the suspected Pittsburgh shooter, shared anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that accused Jewish Americans of trying to flood the United States with illegal immigrants. That theory was very similar to the conspiracy theories targeting Soros – including some that were spread by prominent right-wing, pro-Trump commentators. Yet almost none of these comments came up in remarks offered by Israeli government officials in the days after the attack. To the contrary, Israeli officials have made sure not to even hint at any form of criticism toward Trump or anyone in his political-ideological orbit. Instead, Israeli officials have thanked Trump for denouncing the incident and ordering U.S. flags in government institutions to be lowered to half-staff.
- On Sunday, Dani Dayan, Israel’s consul general in New York, emphasized in an interview on Israeli radio that Bowers had criticized Trump for being “controlled by Jews.” Dayan said the anti-Semitism espoused by Bowers in social media posts was not ideologically different from a November 2012 statement by a Democratic congressional nominee in Minneapolis, Ilhan Omar, who wrote that Israel had “hypnotized the world.”
- The consul general arrived in Pittsburgh on Saturday night and was the first Israeli official to visit the community and crime scene. He enjoys good relations with the leaders of the local Jewish community, as well as with Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto. (The city falls under the diplomatic “jurisdiction” of Dayan’s consulate.) “I like this community a lot,” Dayan told Haaretz during a late-night visit to the Tree of Life synagogue. “It has wonderful and inspiring people. Our job right now is to be here for them and to see how we can support them. When something like this happens to Jews in another country, it is considered an internal issue for Israelis. Whenever Jews are attacked for being Jews, Israel as a country needs to be involved,” he said. His words were appreciated by the leadership of the local community, but they also clearly showed how different the Israeli reaction to the event has been from the widespread sense of anger among many community members.
- For Israel, anti-Semitism is the only issue that played a significant role in the Tree of Life massacre. And in an interview with MSNBC on Sunday, Israel’s ambassador in Washington, Ron Dermer, said that “when people attribute anti-Semitism to one side of the political debate, they make a very big mistake. To simply say that this is because of one person [and] only comes on one side, is to not understand the history of anti-Semitism or the reality of anti-Semitism.” But for many Americans Jews, in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, there are other issues that should also be discussed, from gun laws to right-wing extremism and incitement to political violence.
- Aaron Bisno, a Reform rabbi at a synagogue located a mile away from the Tree of Life congregation, told Haaretz that he was not surprised by the attack, linking it to “a culture filled with guns and angry rhetoric.” At a vigil Saturday night held not far from the site of the attack, the crowd erupted in chants of “Vote” – emphasizing the importance of next week’s midterms for anyone who wants to see a check on Trump’s rhetoric, or a change to current laws that allow people like Bowers to purchase semi-automatic rifles. Many of the crowd were Jewish residents of the Squirrel Hill neighborhood where the shooting occurred. When asked how the incident would impact the community, one woman in her 50s, who lives a block from the synagogue, told Haaretz that “it would make everyone here even more likely to vote.”
- The woman, whose name could not be transcribed due to a technical difficulty, explained that “this is a voting community. But after this incident, people aren’t just going to vote. They’re

going to make sure every person they know is voting. They're going to do everything they can to put a check on this madness."

- Clearly, Israeli officials cannot be expected to espouse such rhetoric. They are no different in that regard from diplomats from other countries stationed in the United States. For some American Jews, though, the obvious differences between the Israeli response and the widespread Jewish-American response is yet another indication of the widening gap between the world's two largest Jewish communities. Following the attack in Pittsburgh, journalist Julia Ioffe wrote, "A word to my fellow American Jews: This president makes this possible. Here. Where you live. I hope the embassy move over there, where you don't live was worth it."
- Television writer David Simon was more blunt, calling on Israeli Diaspora Affairs Minister Naftali Bennett to stay away from Pittsburgh after the right-wing leader announced his intention to visit the city on behalf of the government. "Go home," Simon tweeted, adding that Israel's government had failed the American Jewish community by embracing Trump. Bennett didn't take that advice. He arrived in Pittsburgh on Sunday morning, met with leaders and members of the community, and laid a wreath at the site of the massacre. While he was warmly welcomed by many leaders and members of the community, one prominent local Reform rabbi, Jamie Gibson of Temple Sinai, told Haaretz he wasn't interested in hearing from Bennett.
- His reason had little to do with Trump or American politics, though. Instead, it was a protest over the government's discrimination against non-Orthodox Jewish movements in Israel. Bennett's party has been supportive of that policy for the entire duration of the current government, despite verbal statements about the importance of respecting the American-Jewish community. "He doesn't recognize me and my colleagues as rabbis – certainly not in Israel," Gibson told Haaretz. "I think it's hypocritical." Gibson added he believes the entire Jewish community in Pittsburgh, across all religious denominations, needs to come together at this time.
- The difference, he noted, is that local conservative, Orthodox and Reform Jews all acknowledge and respect one another. The Israeli government, however, doesn't. Bennett said during a public appearance in Pittsburgh that the shooter did not care "who is who" among the Jews he attacked. Netanyahu expressed a similar message in a previous statement. The limitations of these statements became clear a day later after Israel's Chief Rabbinate refused to refer to the Tree of Life congregation as a synagogue, because it isn't Orthodox. Steven Strauss, a professor at Princeton University, encouraged Bennett in a tweet to "maybe do something about this." And New York Times Op-Ed staff editor Bari Weiss tweeted that "it's time for a mass Jewish movement to abolish Israel's Chief Rabbinate."
- As long as the current right-wing, religious coalition is in power in Israel, though, such a step is nearly impossible. Israeli officials will continue to express support and solidarity with Jewish communities in the United States at times of tragedy, just like many American Jews do when Israel suffers terror attacks. There is clear potential, though, for the shooting this weekend to have the same impact that the far-right violence in Charlottesville had on Israel's relationship with the American-Jewish community last year: After the hugs and words of support, the gap between the two sides will only be more clearly defined.

**SUMMARY:** The difference is that local conservative, Orthodox and Reform Jews all acknowledge and respect one another. The Israeli government, however, doesn't. Bennett said during a public appearance in Pittsburgh that the shooter did not care "who is who" among the Jews he attacked. Netanyahu expressed a similar message in a previous statement. The limitations of these statements became clear a day later after Israel's Chief Rabbinate refused to refer to the Tree of Life congregation as a synagogue, because it isn't Orthodox. Steven Strauss, a professor at Princeton University, encouraged Bennett in a tweet to "maybe do something about this." And New York Times Op-Ed staff editor Bari Weiss tweeted that "it's time for a mass Jewish movement to abolish Israel's Chief Rabbinate."

## **Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties divided as municipal elections approach**

By Danny Zaken, contributor to AI Monitor

- The upcoming municipal elections have heightened frictions within ultra-Orthodox parties and between them. “I have a hard time believing that we’ll be able to heal the enormous rift caused by the municipal election. The final split is taking giant steps forward,” one ultra-Orthodox Knesset member told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. According to him, “The ultra-Orthodox Big Bang,” the split of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox party Yahadut HaTorah, could happen any minute. Furthermore, closer cooperation between the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox Shas Party and the Lithuanian Degel HaTorah faction of Yahadut HaTorah could lead to a future merger of those two groups into a single party or some other format.
- Without joining forces in one way or another, the ultra-Orthodox parties can be expected lose strength, and with it their bargaining power in future coalition negotiations. Yahadut HaTorah is a combination of the Degel HaTorah faction, whose most prominent representative in the Knesset is Finance Committee chair Moshe Gafni, and the Agudat Yisrael faction, which represents several Hassidic courts such as Gerrer (represented by Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman), Vizhnitz and Belz.
- The unified party was formed just before the elections for the 13th Knesset in 1992 and has run as a united front ever since. Its two factions share positions on most issues. The party has six seats in the current Knesset, but in practice, they are much more powerful. They wield enormous influence on government policy, particularly in matters of religion and state.
- The leaders of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox community have long been a group of elderly rabbis known as the “Great Sages of the Generation.” The political leaders followed their instructions to the letter. But then these rabbis began to pass away: Eliezer Menachem Shach died in 2001 at the age of 102, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv in 2012, also at the age of 102, and Rabbi Aharon Leib Shteinman in 2017 at the age of 103. Yet even before they died, there were already signs of friction within Yahadut HaTorah attributed to their rabbis’ great age, at a time when the ultra-Orthodox community faced changes due to the rise of the digital era and the emergence of an independent ultra-Orthodox press.
- The ensuing friction received attention over the last year due to issues such as the supermarket law, work on the Israel Railroad on the Sabbath and the conscription law. In each of these cases, Knesset members from Agudat Yisrael took a more extreme position than their partners from Degel HaTorah, most conspicuously in the debate over the conscription law. Litzman opposed the proposal put forth by the Israel Defense Forces, while Gafni of Degel HaTorah and Shas leader Aryeh Deri supported it. The law was approved in its first reading despite Litzman’s threats, and it is scheduled to have its second and third readings in the next few weeks, during the Knesset’s winter session.
- The real rift, however, is happening right now, on the eve of nationwide municipal elections set for Oct. 30. The ultra-Orthodox sector is split between the Lithuanian and Hassidic camps in almost every town with an ultra-Orthodox community. The divide is particularly noticeable in

Jerusalem. While the Hassidic sector is running Hassidic Deputy Mayor Yossi Deutsch as its candidate, Degel HaTorah and Shas both announced that they will not support him. Instead, they will support candidate Moshe Leon, who is not ultra-Orthodox.

- Similarly, in the ultra-Orthodox town of Elad, there is a heated competition between the Lithuanians and the Hassidim. The current mayor, Yisrael Porush, is son of Deputy Minister Meir Porush of Agudat Yisrael. He decided to run again, despite a prior agreement to give up his seat to a Lithuanian candidate. The Lithuanians responded by bringing in Jerusalem's Deputy Mayor Yitzhak Pindrus as a candidate, but he was disqualified by the Supreme Court because he does not live in Elad.
- In Haifa, each ultra-Orthodox party supports a different candidate for mayor. In Safed, which has a large ultra-Orthodox population, there are several candidates for mayor, including two from the ultra-Orthodox community. One is Hassidic, while the other belongs to the Lithuanian sector. According to the Knesset member who spoke with Al-Monitor, the long list of party splits is evidence that the ultra-Orthodox have "more that divides them than unites them," at least when it comes to choosing tactics to fight for the objectives they hold dear.
- At the same time, Shas is facing another kind of crisis. After the death of its spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef five years ago, Deri took control of the party, leading its former chairman, Eli Yishai, to leave Shas and form a rival party called Yachad. It received almost 3% of the vote in the last election, but that was not enough to pass the electoral threshold. In contrast, Shas won seven seats, but current polls now show that it is also teetering on the electoral threshold. One of the main reasons is that the party's non-ultra-Orthodox supporters have been abandoning it in droves. While they admired Yosef, they do not identify with Deri or his policies.
- Deri himself opposes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's initiative to lower the voter threshold. Nevertheless, he is still looking for ways to ensure that he has a seat in the next Knesset. The idea of joining forces with Degel HaTorah was first raised in 2014. It gained momentum over the last year because of the decline of Shas' power and the potential split in Yahadut HaTorah. It's not a bad idea as far as Degel HaTorah is concerned. It would also have a hard time passing the voter threshold to get into the Knesset on its own because a schism within that faction, led by the more extreme Jerusalem group, which is expected to merge with Agudat Yisrael.
- The results of the municipal elections will certainly have an impact on potential splits in the ultra-Orthodox camp and create new partnerships for the upcoming Knesset elections. If the polls are right and the ultra-Orthodox candidate for mayor of Jerusalem loses, the conflict within Yahadut HaTorah can be expected to worsen. Renewed debate in the Knesset over the conscription law and continued opposition by Litzman and the other members of the Hassidic faction will also speed a split in the party.
- Some on the center-left hope that a united list made up of Degel HaTorah and Shas would be more moderate on the diplomatic front and help form a center-left coalition. The chances of this happening, however, are slim, largely because the ultra-Orthodox oppose any partnership with Yesh Atid, which is expected to be the biggest party in the center. It would be more likely to join a coalition headed by Netanyahu, but then the split in the ultra-Orthodox camp would weaken them and allow Netanyahu greater flexibility in reaching coalition agreements.

**SUMMARY** The results of the municipal elections will certainly have an impact on potential splits in the ultra-Orthodox camp and create new partnerships for the upcoming Knesset elections. If the polls are right and the ultra-Orthodox candidate for mayor of Jerusalem loses, the conflict within Yahadut HaTorah can be expected to worsen. Renewed debate in the Knesset over the conscription law and continued opposition by Litzman and the other members of the Hassidic faction will also speed a split in the party. Some on the center-left hope that a united list made up of Degel HaTorah and Shas would be more moderate on the diplomatic front and help form a center-left coalition. The chances of this happening, however, are slim, largely because the ultra-Orthodox oppose any partnership with Yesh Atid, which is expected to be the biggest party in the center. It would be more likely to join a coalition headed by Netanyahu, but then the split in the ultra-Orthodox camp would weaken them and allow Netanyahu greater flexibility in reaching coalition agreements.