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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 1, 2018

Ynet

Report: Significant Progress in Israel-Hamas Talks

There has been a significant progress in reaching a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas, brokered by Egypt and the UN over the past few days, Palestinian sources said Wednesday. Egyptian intelligence official Ahmed Abd al-Khaliq and UN envoy to the Middle East Nickolay Mladenov are leading the efforts. According to Hamas officials, a meeting in Gaza with Egyptian Intelligence revolved around the transferring of Qatari money to pay former government workers in Gaza after Palestinian President Abbas slashed Gazan clerks' salaries.

Associated Press

Israel's Outreach to Gulf States Emerges into the Open

A series of taboo-busting public appearances by Israeli officials in Gulf Arab states have thrust the once-secret back channels of outreach into public view. Prime Minister Netanyahu has for years boasted about warming ties with key Arab states that have no diplomatic relations with Israel. But those ties — still largely unpopular among the Arab public — were rarely visible. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains an emotional issue with the Arab public, and relations will likely remain limited without a peace agreement.

Times of Israel

Israel Okays Boost for Palestinian Cell Coverage

The Israeli military this week allowed a Palestinian telecommunications firm to import electronic equipment that is expected to significantly improve cellular service for Palestinians in the West Bank. On Sunday, the Defense Ministry's Civil Administration approved a request by Palestinian communications company Paltel to purchase a number of circuit boards in order to expand the firm's network coverage and speed up cellular internet service, the Civil Administration said. The circuit boards fall into the category of "dual use" goods, which require Israeli approval before they can be legally imported by a Palestinian company.

Jerusalem Post

Lieberman Pledges to Expand Hebron Jewish Housing

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman plans to approve the construction of a new building in the in the Jewish Avraham Avinu neighborhood of Hebron, where the empty Palestinian market stalls are located. It follows the approval given to construct 31 apartment units in the Hezkiyahu neighborhood of Hebron, that is located further up Shuhada Street from Avraham Avinu. The land on which the market stalls sit was owned by members of the former Jewish community in Hebron, that was destroyed in 1929 when Arab rioters killed 67 Jews in the city.

Times of Israel

New Settler Leadership Could Strain Unity

Twenty-two elections were held in Israeli municipalities over the Green Line Tuesday, and while the majority saw incumbents maintain their positions as council chairs, six municipalities woke up Wednesday to new leadership after upsets that could upend the political makeup of the settlement movement. Israel's 2005 pullout from communities in the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank caused a split among settler leaders between those who see lobbying as a unified front for policies benefiting their constituents as most effective, and those believe unity compromises their beliefs.

Times of Israel

Greenblatt Lauds 'Warmer' Ties Between Israel and Gulf

President Trump's envoy Jason Greenblatt said Wednesday that he will be back in Israel later this week and noted approvingly that ties between the Jewish state and some Arab nations in the region were warming up, following a series of high profile visits by Israeli ministers to Gulf cities. Greenblatt's agenda is not yet clear, but he is likely to meet with Netanyahu, though not with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Times of Israel

Report: Iran Hit by Devastating Computer Virus

Iranian infrastructure and strategic networks have come under attack in the last few days by a computer virus similar to Stuxnet but "more violent, more advanced and more sophisticated," and Israeli officials are refusing to discuss what role, if any, they may have had in the operation, an Israeli TV report said Wednesday. The report came hours after Israel said its Mossad intelligence agency had thwarted an Iranian murder plot in Denmark, and two days after Iran acknowledged that President Hassan Rouhani's mobile phone had been bugged. It also follows a string of Israeli intelligence coups against Iran, including the extraction from Tehran in January by the Mossad of the contents of a vast archive documenting Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Times of Israel

PM to Attend Bolsonaro Inauguration in Brazil

An Israeli official said Wednesday that it is "highly probable" Netanyahu will attend the inauguration of extreme right-wing Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro on January 1. If Netanyahu indeed travels to Brazil, he will be the first Israeli prime minister to ever visit the country. Netanyahu spoke with Bolsonaro on the phone Monday and congratulated him on winning the election. He also invited Bolsonaro to visit Israel.

Trump's Middle East Prospects Depend on Midterms

By Daniel Shapiro, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel

- Middle East policy is unlikely to determine the outcome of next week's mid-term elections in the United States. Voters will more likely be motivated by their sense of their economic well-being and prospects, the social and political tensions dividing America, and whether they want a more unleashed or a more constrained President Donald Trump. But it bears evaluating how Trump's Middle East record stacks up at the halfway point of his term, and considering the paths it is likely to take depending on the election results. On a range of issues, Trump has achieved at least a partial success.
- In Syria, U.S. and allied forces have nearly completed the campaign to destroy ISIS, and U.S. strikes on Assad following chemical attacks seem to have deterred the dictator from resorting to the use of those weapons (although not other atrocities against regime opponents). Trump's Iran gambit, withdrawing from the nuclear deal and imposing harsh unilateral sanctions, is generating far more pressure on the Iranian economy and regime than many observers predicted could be achieved by this point. Even tougher blows are still to come when full oil sanctions are restored in November.
- In Israel, Trump enjoys widespread popularity, a product of his unstinting support, his warm relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Iran decision, and his historic relocation of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. Regionally, the United States maintains partnerships with a coalition of Israel and Arab allies, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan, and has pushed hard for openings toward normalization between Israel and Arab states. Netanyahu's visit to Oman and the Israeli athletic teams competing in the UAE are recent dividends on that strategy.
- Each of these areas of progress, however, are incomplete, and many run parallel to ongoing challenges. Some initiatives drift with low prospects of resolution. Trump's ability to consolidate the gains and advance further toward his goals, will be tested in 2019. In Syria, the Assad regime has been stabilized through brutal crushing of the opposition, and Russia has emerged as the dominant player. Israel is working hard, with U.S. support, to protect its interests by acting kinetically to disrupt Iran's ongoing efforts to entrench threatening military assets in Syria. But Russia's willingness to accommodate Israeli action is being tested following the downing of a Russian military aircraft by Syrian air defense units. Overall, the United States is largely absent from efforts to shape the post-war Syrian reality now emerging, raising questions about its ability to ensure that U.S. and Israeli interests are protected.
- The Iran strategy, so far, involves the United States acting alone. While acquiescent to some secondary sanctions, no European country has followed the United States out of the nuclear deal. And the desired endgame is far from clear. After sanctions impose a further bite on Iran,

then what? Will the United States entertain negotiations with Iran on a new nuclear agreement, and if so, what kind of agreement would be considered success? What are the chances one could be reached? And if Iran pulls out of the agreement and resumes uranium enrichment to the threshold of nuclear breakout it was at before the JCPOA, would the United States pursue a military option or give Israel a green light to do so? If Trump has answers to these questions, they remain opaque.

- The Israeli-Palestinian peace effort, meanwhile, seems hopelessly stuck. That is not Trump's fault, given the deep and abiding mistrust between the two sides, but the extreme Palestinian reaction to the Jerusalem announcement, and subsequent blows by the administration against the Palestinians, cutting off nearly all U.S. non-security assistance, has left the United States unable to conduct even a rudimentary dialogue with a Palestinian partner. With no channel to one of the parties, no prospects for a deal or even negotiations between the current leaders, and Israeli elections around the corner, Trump may simply decide never to present his plan for the ultimate deal. And while the regional partnerships have borne fruit, they are also susceptible to the whims of unreliable players.
- The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, on the heels of Saudi missteps with Qatar, Lebanon, and Canada, and a grinding war with devastating civilian suffering in Yemen, raise questions about the reliability and effectiveness of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is supposed to be the strategic anchor of the U.S.-led anti-Iran regional coalition. Can Trump rally to advance on this complex agenda? Sustained attention is one challenge. His foreign policy interests run toward consolidating his friendship with Russia's Vladimir Putin and reaching a nuclear agreement with North Korea's Kim Jung Un. He will soon turn his focus toward his own reelection campaign. And in the coming months, Special Counsel Robert Mueller may issue a report that could derail his presidency.

Meanwhile, if Democrats gain control of even one house of Congress, their ability to clip Trump's wings, through hearings, investigations, and subpoenas, will be formidable. Under these circumstances, Trump and his national security team will be tested in a way they have not been yet: Building bipartisan support in Congress for controversial foreign policy initiatives. To succeed on rolling back Iran's nuclear program further, to ensure a robust U.S. military presence in Syria as leverage for the diplomatic endgame of the civil war, to effectively pressure and incentivize the Palestinians to come back to the negotiation table, and to keep the newly troubled relationship with Saudi Arabia on track, Trump will need Congressional help. Democrats, if they finally control the gavels, may be slow to provide it. If, on the other hand, Republicans maintain full control on Capitol Hill, Trump will have few, if any constraints. A full-on confrontation with Iran, an unrestrained Saudi Arabia, a collapsed Palestinian Authority, and a fully Russian-dominated Syria could all come to pass. Americans often choose divided government as a way of keeping the parties' policy agendas in balance. With the Middle East in a delicate phase, and U.S. decisions that can inflame it or keep it calm still pending, there may be wisdom in that approach.

Hamas Leaders Disagree on Israel Arrangement

By Shlomi Eldar, Analyst

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu summed up succinctly this week Israel's dilemma vis-a-vis Hamas: War or truce? "We are working to prevent [Gaza] forces getting into Israel to harm our soldiers and communities," Netanyahu told reporters Oct. 29. "But for there to be calm, the problem that could lead to humanitarian collapse (in Gaza) must be resolved." There is no certainty that either of these options will resolve the problem, but Netanyahu seems intent on exhausting all other avenues before deciding on an extensive military operation in Gaza. That same day, an Israeli political source confirmed that Israel and Hamas had been on the verge of a limited cease-fire deal, as reported earlier by AI-Monitor, but the escalation of Palestinian border protests Oct. 26 and the massive rocket fire later that night scuttled the understandings.
- For now, Netanyahu is busy deflecting right-wing pressure from his top ministers, such as Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, to deliver "the hardest blow we can" (against Hamas) and to conquer Gaza. A political source was quoted as saying Oct. 29 that even if Israel were to conquer Gaza and replace Hamas, "There are no volunteers to take Gaza off our hands." Israel, obviously, does not want to be saddled with taking care of 2 million Palestinians and dealing at the same time with terrorism and resistance. This raises the question of whether a cease-fire arrangement with Hamas — whether limited or broad — is achievable. There is no guarantee. As mentioned above, a few days ago, Hamas and Israel were on the verge of understandings over a limited deal that would allow Hamas to keep holding protests along the border with Israel but would prevent Palestinian attempts to infiltrate into Israel and to attack Israeli soldiers. At the same time, Israel and Egypt would ease their blockade of the Strip. Then the border protests escalated and the Islamic Jihad fired dozens of rockets at Israel, even brazenly admitting responsibility for the rocket barrages, which it has rarely done in the past.
- At the same time, Hamas issued an ultimatum, conveyed through Egypt. Hamas Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar warned that unless Israel allows the monthly transfer of \$15 million in cash for payment of salaries to Hamas officials, the organization would escalate its violence against Israel. Netanyahu obviously rejected the threat, saying at the start of the weekly Cabinet meeting Oct. 28: "There is no way Israel will accept this offer. We will continue to act only according to Israel's interest and for the sake of Israel's security." So what went wrong with the understandings reached with Hamas? AI-Monitor has learned that the military and political wings of Hamas are locked in a seemingly intractable conflict. While the political wing wants Hamas to accept Egypt's proposals for a deal with Israel, the armed wing favors continued armed struggle — with violent border protests, the use of incendiary kites and balloons and the firing of rockets, believing this will force Israel into making far greater concessions. Some factions within the military wing believe Israel is on the verge of caving in and lifting the siege it imposed over 11 years ago, while any cease-fire deal reached at this point would perpetuate the blockade. These groups also feel that easing some restrictions without lifting the siege would

not make a significant difference in the humanitarian-economic crisis in the enclave, and would certainly not improve Hamas' prospects of continuing to rule Gaza.

- Sinwar, who issued Israel with the ultimatum on the transfer of \$15 million for salaries for political and military officials, actually supports a deal with Israel and has said so publicly. A political source within Hamas told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that Sinwar is in a bind. He is under tremendous pressure by the military wing and the hawkish faction within Hamas led by, among others, Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar, to keep up the struggle with Israel along the border fence until it caves. In order to deflect the pressure and bring around opponents to a cease-fire deal, Sinwar has promised to exhaust all negotiation options, including the demand for money to pay Hamas employees. Sinwar and Netanyahu find themselves in a similar plight, both having to fend off heavy pressure to opt for violence while they would rather exhaust all options and reach an agreement with the other side. Netanyahu's Oct. 29 briefing of reporters did not stem from a need to update the public about the problem with Gaza, but to ease the pressure from his top ministers and to make clear that the "magic bullets" being proposed by Liberman, hawkish Education Minister Naftali Bennett and others are not realistic.
- Sinwar, on the other hand, changed the rules of the game Oct. 26 when he ratcheted up the intensity of the border protests against Israel and issued threats against it in an attempt to show his opponents that he can wring concessions out of Israel without giving in. Another Hamas political source tells Al-Monitor that the military wing opposes a political solution to the standoff with Israel, certainly one that does not hand Gazans the prize of lifting the siege. The leaders of the military wing have thus far managed to torpedo all attempts to reach a Hamas-Israel agreement. On Oct. 17, for example, two Grad rockets were fired into Israel and one scored a direct hit on a house in the city of Beersheba. The armed wing of the Islamic Jihad carried out the attack with the approval, tacit or otherwise, of Hamas. As aforementioned, the Islamic Jihad openly accepted responsibility for the Oct. 26 rocket attacks on Israel, which it carried out with the approval of the Hamas military wing, perhaps even under its orders. It appears that Netanyahu's desire to avert another war with Hamas notwithstanding, a cease-fire deal is not guaranteed. Too many factions within Hamas have an interest in scuttling it.