



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, November 26*

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# News Excerpts

November 26, 2018

Ma'ariv

## **Report: PM Attempting to Cancel Trump's Peace Deal**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reportedly taken steps to postpone the release of Trump's peace plan. "Basically, he is trying to get it canceled," say high-ranking figures in the New York Jewish community who are with White House officials and the prime minister. "As Netanyahu sees it, the peace plan is a nightmare, and he intends to do everything he can to prevent it from being released," said the source who is known as the spokesperson for the Jewish community's right wing camp. The ones who are spearheading efforts to postpone the plan's release are Israeli Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer and US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, and had previously delayed the first draft's publication a year ago.

Jerusalem Post

## **Report: Netanyahu's Prosecutor to Recommend Indictment**

The prosecution team working on Cases 1000 (the Illegal Gifts Affair) and 2000 (the Yediot Ahronot-Yisrael Hayom Affair) against Netanyahu for corruption has sent its recommendations to State Attorney Shai Nitzan, Channel 10 reported late Sunday. The report suggested that Division Director Liat Ben Ari's recommendations were for an indictment for bribery, which would be consistent with public comments she made in May 2017. Nitzan will then make recommendations to Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit, who makes the final decision.

Times of Israel

## **Qatar Said to Reconsider Gaza Transfers Amid Backlash**

Qatar is reportedly considering whether to end cash payments to Gaza in favor of an alternative method, due to internal fears that by paying the salaries of Hamas members, it could be seen as supporting terrorism. According to a report on the Walla news site, a document circulated internally among Qatari officials argues that the cash transfer "only reinforces the negative view of Qatar as a financier of terror acting against the Sunni states."

Times of Israel

## **Hamas Hunting for Gaza 'Collaborators'**

Hamas is reportedly on the hunt for suspects it believes may have aided the Israeli special forces in a raid two weeks ago, and is looking for a small van spotted in surveillance footage, according to a Saturday report in the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar. On November 11, a group of Israeli soldiers was discovered deep in southern Gaza during an operation that went awry, resulting in a deadly clash that left one senior IDF officer and seven Palestinian fighters dead.

## **Barak Meets Livni, Ya'alon Amid Unity Speculation**

Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak reportedly met separately with opposition leader Tzipi Livni and former defense minister Moshe Ya'alon at his Tel Aviv home on Thursday, as speculation grows over the possibility of a political unification move for the country's center-left camp. On Saturday Ya'alon told the audience at a cultural event in the Eshkol Regional Council that "what is happening right now with the political situation is an existential threat to Israel."

## **Israel Said to Be Seeking Ties with Bahrain**

Israel is trying to establish a diplomatic relationship with Bahrain, according to Channel 2 and Walla! reports on Sunday night. Government sources have confirmed that Israel and Bahrain are in talks to establish official diplomatic relations between the two countries. Earlier on Sunday, Netanyahu had hinted to further developments with establishing ties with Arab countries at the press conference with the president of Chad. Bahrain, which has 1.4 million residents in the Persian Gulf, has no diplomatic relations with Israel.

## **USAID to Close West Bank and Gaza Operation by 2019**

The United States Agency for International Development announced that half of its employees in the West Bank and Gaza will be let go in the coming weeks and by early 2019, the operations will be completely shut down. The U.S. federal government agency handles civilian assistance to various countries around the world. The chapter in the West Bank and Gaza began operating in 1994, focusing mainly on economic issues including water, infrastructure, education and health. USAID has invested about \$5.5 billion in the West Bank and Gaza in the construction of roads, schools, clinics and community centers.

## **Soldiers Wounded in Car Attack in West Bank**

Three Israeli soldiers were wounded in a car-ramming attack on Route 60, near the Gush Etzion Junction, in the West Bank, south of Jerusalem. Israel Defense Forces spokesperson said a terrorist rammed his car into three soldiers while road work was underway. One of the soldiers shot the terrorist. Two months ago an Israeli-American, Ari Fuld, was killed in a stabbing attack at the entrance to a mall near the junction.

## Netanyahu's Vision for the Middle East Has Come True

By Anshel Pfeffer and David Lerner, Senior Correspondents

- Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Qatar, listed the Middle East's main problems at the MED 2018 conference in Rome last Thursday. Naturally, at the top of the list he put Saudi Arabia's ongoing blockade of his family's little kingdom. Next were the bloody wars in Yemen and Syria, the chaos in Libya and the political unrest in Lebanon. That was it. Missing was another regional conflict in which the Qataris have been deeply involved: the Palestinian issue, and more specifically the question of Gaza's future, in which the Emirate is now investing \$15 million a month, in cash. Al Thani wasn't the only one to downgrade the Palestinian issue at the conference - Ahmed Aboul Gheit, secretary-general of the Arab League, also began his talk by listing possible reasons why the region is still broken, saying it could have been the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's 1990 occupation of Kuwait, 9/11 or the American invasion of Iraq. According to Gheit, who served as foreign minister in Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt until 2011, it was most probably "the so-called Arab Spring that caused the destruction of the Arab world."
- At first, he didn't mention Israel-Palestine, though later on he said that along with Iran's "encroachment" on the Arab states, the Palestinian issue was still one of the two problems haunting the region and that "without a settlement to [the Palestinian issue] the turmoil [in the region] will continue." But listening to other representatives of Arab League member states at the conference, who either ignored or downplayed the Palestinian issue, Gheit's words sounded like lip-service. Instead, on the stage and behind the scenes, there seemed much more appetite for normalization with Israel. Oman's Foreign Minister said it quite clearly when he called on the Arab world to "come to terms with the reality that Israel is a fact of life in the region," and therefore should have its share of "rights as well as obligations."
- The degree to which Israel and the Palestinians were no longer a central issue was evident even in the appearance of Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who focused his criticism on the Saudis and the United States, and refrained from mentioning Israel in his talk. Even Zarif seemed to realize that this wasn't a venue for Israel-bashing. A veteran editor of an Arab news organization explained that he simply no longer had the strength to deal with the issue. "It's fatigue, fatigue. It's been going on since I was born, it's coming out of my ears. There's no progress on the issue, there's nothing we can do about it, [Israel is] a fait accompli, it's realpolitik. It's the reality. We have bigger fish to fry." "The only reason now not to speak publicly with Israelis," said one Lebanese pro-democracy activist at the conference, "is social media. It's bullshit, but a selfie with an Israeli on Instagram can still get you in trouble. There will be a pile-on with people saying nasty things. But everyone knows that is just another stage toward normalization."

- The conscientious organizers of the annual conference, which is hosted jointly by Italy's foreign ministry, the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), and public broadcaster RAI, devoted a couple of sessions to the Palestinian issue, but even they had an air of quiet desperation to them. The onstage interview with the Palestinian Authority's foreign minister, Riyad Maliki, was a long and barely-concealed rebuke of the international community and the Arab nations for forsaking the Palestinians, which could be summed up with his warning that the Palestinian issue "will stay there knocking on the door of each and every one of you." Maliki promised that the Arab states would not "normalize" with Israel as long as there was no end to the occupation of the Palestinian Territories. But at MED 2018 there was about as much chance of hearing about potential cooperation with Israel on energy and desalination, as of the enduring conflict.
- One senior Middle Eastern diplomat listening to Maliki commented that "the basic fact is that for better or worse, the world isn't bothering Israel anymore about the Palestinians. It's a total change of paradigm." This fact that was borne out by the interview with the senior Israeli representative, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein; it contained just one question tangentially connected to the Palestinian issue, regarding his expectations of the Trump peace plan (pretty low). The rest of the talk revolved around how Israeli technology can help the region, and the threat of Iran – what else? At a small side-session devoted to the future of Gaza, speakers seemed more focused on the need for a rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah as a way of solving Gaza's multiple crises, than on pressuring Israel on the matter.
- One leading European expert on the Middle East, who has spent decades writing about Israel and the Palestinians, echoed the widespread underlying feeling. "It's hard for me now to convince editors and think-tank directors of the need to write papers on Israel and Palestine. No one can see any point, and quite frankly, I'm not sure I can either." "It looks like Netanyahu's dream come true," observed a former Israeli diplomat at the conference. "He always tried to get the Palestinians off the agenda. But careful what you wish for. The Palestinians aren't going away, and this issue will come back to haunt us with a vengeance."

## **Hamas, Israel in Intelligence Duel**

By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist

- The Nov. 11 clash between Hamas and an Israeli Special Forces unit operating within the Gaza Strip is not really over. The firefight that almost resulted in war has been replaced by a digitalized campaign and battle of wits that peaked Nov. 22 in an absurd incident. Hamas invested tremendous efforts in collecting information and publishing photos of those it claimed had taken part in the botched undercover operation in southern Gaza. In an unprecedented move, Israel's military censor urged Israeli media outlets and the public not to share the photos Hamas posted online, not to react to them online and not to disseminate them so as not to help the Hamas crowdsourcing effort that could be harmful to Israel's national security. As of now, the Israeli public is displaying surprising self-control and the social media buzz that Hamas Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar and his people had hoped to create has fallen flat.
- Hamas and Israel are engaged in a protracted war. The organization does not recognize Israel, its charter calls for Israel's annihilation; Israel also does not recognize Hamas and tries to avoid any direct contacts with its people. That state of play, however, belongs in the past. Nowadays, in this new era, the military wing of Hamas, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, has Hebrew-language Telegram and Twitter accounts, and even a "tattle" hotline of the type provided by authorities to catch tax evaders, which Israelis can call anonymously to report information. Hamas fires rockets at the Israeli power station that supplies Gaza with electricity and funds a multipronged, complex terror network with millions of dollars in cash delivered to the Gaza Strip in armored trucks under Israeli supervision. What a crazy world.
- Now Hamas is trying to do to Israel what Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, head of General Security for the Emirate of Dubai, did in 2010 when he exposed an undercover Israeli team sent to kill senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh. Israel is still traumatized by the affair, in which Khalfan's agency used digital surveillance and Israeli-developed security cameras to expose the 11-member team it claimed was working for the Mossad. For days, Khalfan embarrassed Israel — which has never admitted to the operation — by publishing more and more photos of the operatives of Kidon, the Mossad's mythological assassinations department, and portrayed Israel in a ridiculous light. The clandestine Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip revealed almost two weeks ago is still shrouded in secrecy. Hamas claims it has managed to reconstruct the activity of the Israeli commandos, to find the house they rented near the town of Khan Yunis and the two vehicles they used. At the end of the firefight between the Israeli force and Hamas, Israel's air force bombed these vehicles and destroyed them, albeit not totally. It now turns out that a gun with a silencer was left intact at the scene, which Sinwar held up proudly last week, as well as quite a few items that enabled Hamas to figure out what the Israeli force had been doing undercover for quite some time deep inside Gaza.

- The rare step taken by the military censor stemmed from a simple calculation: Israel believes that for now, Hamas is feeling its way in the dark. It may have photos of people it thinks took part in the operation but it has no other information. Spreading the photos all over social media would play into the hands of Hamas and provide it with information. Israel is a small country, and people might start identifying the faces in the photos, sharing their life stories with the public, thereby damaging national security. The identity of members of Israel's undercover units is rarely revealed, even if they are killed in battle. Such, for example, is the case with Lt. Col. M. who was killed in the Gaza firefight Nov. 12 after saving his friends. The military chief of staff will probably award him a medal of valor posthumously, but other than his family and close friends, Israelis will never know who he was and will be unable to mourn him, lest publication of his name or photo reveal to the enemy other undercover operations in which he took part.
- Military officials are praising the self-control displayed by the Israeli public, which for the most part ignored the photos posted by Hamas online under the headline "Wanted." Nonetheless, security and intelligence officials understand that while Israel defeated Hamas in this round — killing seven of its people, and the Israeli fighters were extricated from the scene in a heroic air force operation without leaving behind a body or a kidnapped soldier — Hamas has the upper hand in terms of public awareness of the botched operation. The exposure of the operation could be disastrous for Israel's methods of operation behind enemy lines. The extent to which Hamas succeeded in reconstructing the team's activity and its goals could force Israel to undertake a strategic shift in the way it conducts clandestine intelligence operations, and perhaps even threaten the supremacy it enjoys in this field over its enemies.
- Nonetheless, no one in Israel is having second thoughts about the secret operation. "This is a dangerous business," a senior intelligence source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "We carry out hundreds of clandestine operations every year, on all fronts and in places no one would even imagine. The rate of exposure and failure is virtually nil. The public only hears about the failures. The successes will forever remain veiled, which is a good thing," the source said. Israelis are hearing about the Gaza failure and surprisingly managing to distance themselves from the uproar on social media and from Hamas' efforts to draw them into the fray. A sticker spreading like wildfire on social media says it all: "They protected us, now we have to protect them," urging restraint on the part of Israelis, who are generally quick to blab information. For now, it's working.