



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, November 5

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News Excerpts

November 5, 2018

Times of Israel

Fatah Said to Back Egypt's Bid for Israel-Gaza Calm

In an apparent break from its previous stance, the Palestinian Fatah party has reportedly given Egyptian negotiators the go-ahead to mediate an agreement to quell violence between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. But Palestinian officials continue to insist that any formal ceasefire can only be inked after Palestinian factions achieve a reconciliation deal. Palestinian sources said Sunday that Fatah officials gave their approval to the Egyptians in Cairo during a meeting with Hamas leaders.

Jerusalem Post

PM Receives Coalition Backing for Presidential Limits

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will not initiate a new election for the Knesset until a law is passed limiting the power of the president, Likud sources said Sunday. Netanyahu has reportedly obtained the support of his coalition partners for a bill that would prevent the president from asking an MK who is not a party leader to form a government. The bill is intended to prevent a hypothetical scenario in which President Reuven Rivlin would bypass Netanyahu following an indictment of the prime minister and instead ask former minister Gideon Sa'ar to form the next government. Such a bill would change a current Basic Law, making it relatively difficult and time consuming to legislate.

Ha'aretz

Abbas Meets With Sissi to Discuss Israel-Hamas Deal

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas Saturday to discuss an Egyptian mediated Israel-Hamas deal, and efforts to promote reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The leaders met in Sharm el Sheikhan at an international conference for youth.

Times of Israel

After Years in the Dark, Gaza's Power Woes Ease

The lights are going back on in Gaza, in a rare piece of positive news from the area. In recent days, residents say they have received up to 16 hours of power from the grid per day, compared with as little as four previously. It is the result of a landmark six-month deal, part of efforts to end unrest along the border between Israel and Hamas that has raised fears of a fourth war since 2008. The fuel agreement, whose first deliveries arrived on October 9, has provided the most power to Gaza residents in years.

Jerusalem Post

PM Backs Bill Calling for Death Penalty for Terrorists

Netanyahu has reportedly given his blessing to advance a bill that seeks the death penalty for terrorists. According to Israel's public broadcaster Kan, a Knesset committee will begin preliminary discussions on preparing the law for the first reading, after the heads of parties agreed on the advancement of the bill on Sunday. The bill, which was initiated by Yisrael Beiteinu, wants to allow a simple majority among judges to suffice to punish terrorists with the death penalty. Bayit Yehudi chairman Naftali Bennett brought up the bill in the party heads meeting, requesting it be moved forward after telling Netanyahu there is no reason to hold it back. Just last week, Yisrael Beiteinu chairman Avigdor Liberman accused Bayit Yehudi of intentionally holding up the bill for political reasons.

Times of Israel

Thousands Rally to Mark Rabin Assassination Anniversary

Thousands of people were in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square Saturday evening at the annual memorial rally for slain prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated at a similar rally on November 4, 1995. Saturday's event included speakers from the left and the right, among them Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi (Likud), opposition leader Tzipi Livni (Zionist Union), Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid, Zionist Union chief Avi Gabbay, and Meretz chief Tamar Zandberg.

Ha'aretz

Teens from Gaza Border Towns Protest Security Situation

Over a hundred teenagers from Israeli communities along the Gaza border plan to launch a five-day march to Jerusalem on Sunday in protest against the security situation in the south and to accuse the government of abandoning their safety. Residents have debated several possible initiatives to raise public awareness in the country about their security issues, since a recent escalation in rocket fire and firebomb attacks on their communities. Southern residents have already held protests blocking traffic and shouting slogans condemning government policy.

Times of Israel

Israeli Forces Raid PA Offices, Sparking Clashes

Israeli security forces raided the Palestinian Authority's Jerusalem Governorate headquarters and Jerusalem Affairs Ministry on Sunday, the official PA news site Wafa reported. In late October, Israeli security forces arrested PA Jerusalem Governor Adnan Ghaith and Jerusalem director of the PA General Intelligence Services Jihad Faqih on suspicion they helped abduct a Palestinian-American resident of Jerusalem over his involvement in the sale of a home in Jerusalem's Old City to Jews. PA courts have previously prosecuted Palestinians for selling land to Jews.

Gazans Are Bending Israel and Hamas to Their Will

By Zvi Bar'el, Senior Columnist

- The Egyptian delegation to Gaza arrived on Friday to watch Hamas work its magic on the demonstrators. They were indeed enthralled. There were fewer protesters – thousands, not tens of thousands. They kept a greater distance from the border fences and there were no fatalities. The Egyptian and Israeli conclusion is that Hamas not only holds the knobs on the stove, it can also adjust the height and intensity of the flames. If it chooses, the thousands will confront the Israel Defense Forces, and if it chooses, they will stop the attacks on the fence. But this is a conclusion that did not need any proof, certainly since Israel constantly claims that Hamas is the sole responsible party in the Gaza Strip and controls everything that happens there. This conclusion should have made Israel realize years ago that trying to foment a civil revolt against Hamas in Gaza through a blockade and sanctions on Hamas is simply not realistic. The theory that replaced it said that while the punishments shouldn't cease, they should be reframed as a means of pressuring Hamas and putting it in a position where it was liable to lose its legitimacy and public support if it didn't do what Israel wanted, which would lead to an easing of Gaza's living conditions.
- In fact, it was the same theory and strategy as its failed predecessor. The real threat is the two million Palestinians who have been living under a brutal siege for 11 years. Both Israeli pressure on Hamas from above by reducing its ability to rule, and the attempt to provoke public protest against Hamas from below, relied on a role that the Gaza public was supposed to play. But the public in Gaza turned into a strategic force that led even the IDF to speak up about the severe living conditions in the Strip, and in the end forced Hamas to pursue an arrangement that is still being negotiated. For six months, tens of thousands of people were enlisted in a show of force called the March of Return. Some 20,000 to 30,000 people, young and old, women and children, take their lives in their hands, and they don't come to the confrontation line just because Hamas orders them to. They are the force that represents two million people who have nothing to lose.
- One could ask why tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of more don't join them, but it's the same question that could be asked of the Arab Spring demonstrations in Egypt, which in the best case drew half a million to a million people representing some 90 million citizens. If you compare the size of the Egyptian and Gazan populations, one could say that 20,000 Gaza demonstrators are equal in force to a million people, around half the Strip's population. The consistency and devotion exhibited by the demonstrators in Gaza have an enormous power that proved to Israel and Hamas that this was not a temporary show of strength, but a phenomenon unprecedented in Gaza or the West Bank since the second intifada ended, or at least since Hamas seized control of the Strip in 2007. Israel chose to ignore this public display and aimed its sharpshooters at those launching balloons or who were identified as leaders of the demonstrations, or who dared to come too close to the fence. Thus it could bypass the

substantive reason for the demonstrations by portraying its mission as the defeat of an “armed” enemy endangering Israel’s security.

- There is no disputing that the balloons caused great damage and put lives at risk; this enabled Israel to present the conflict as a struggle against a terrorist organization and not as a confrontation with a civilian population. At the same time, it neutralized the danger of war, because who is going to launch a war against balloons? One can heap praises on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for abstaining from war, but what prevented war was the nature of the conflict, which did not provide the required legitimacy for a full-scale military campaign. The issue of an arrangement that has been accompanying the confrontation all along – and which has shattered the established view that one doesn’t negotiate with terrorist groups – turned the talks with Hamas into talks with Gaza’s population. The permit to bring in fuel, arranging for salaries to be paid through Qatar, the emerging willingness to allow 5,000 Gazan laborers to come work in Israel, the promise to build a port and to enlarge the fishing zone – these are all civil steps aimed at calming the Gazan public and giving Hamas means of control.
- Israel isn’t demanding that Hamas disarm or that it disarm other groups such as Islamic Jihad and the Popular Committees, nor is it demanding that Hamas give control over the border crossings or tax collection to the Palestinian Authority. PA President Mahmoud Abbas is making those demands of Hamas, not Israel. From this we see that the question of “strengthening” or “weakening” Hamas is no longer relevant, since Israel gave up testing the organization’s power when it abandoned the diplomatic process and went over to a policy of splitting the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which makes preserving Hamas’ power important. This policy requires Israel to be concerned about Gaza’s welfare, not for humanitarian or altruistic reasons, but as a strategic decision that ascribes power to this exhausted and impoverished populace, which has managed to fashion a diplomatic relationship between Israel and Hamas that even includes undeclared security cooperation.
- This strategy cannot tolerate any more delays. It requires declaring the intent to totally lift the blockade, subject to practical security restrictions, to open the gates to large investments, to create jobs for thousands of Gaza residents and to implement the rehabilitation plan that was agreed on after Operation Protective Edge, and which Egypt and Israel agreed upon again a few weeks ago. The conflict is no longer with Hamas, but with a large population that has proven its strength.

Egyptian Pressure, Qatari Aid Bring Gaza Deal Closer

By Amos Harel, Senior Columnist

- For the first time in months, the quiet in the Gaza Strip this weekend looked like the real thing. Egyptian pressure on both sides led to a significant reduction in violence along the border during the weekly March of Return demonstrations. Many things could still go wrong, and some undoubtedly will. But for now, at least, the Egyptians have managed to move events in the right direction. The gradual reduction in violence allows for measures to improve Gaza's dire economy. Qatar has been recruited to pay the salaries of Gaza's civil servants. Islamic Jihad is sitting on the fence – and not playing spoiler as it did a week earlier. It's even possible that the Palestinian Authority will stop trying to thwart a deal in Gaza. All this explains the Israeli government's willingness to continue a policy of restraint even though it might do damage politically.
- The Egyptians took an unusual step this weekend. Egyptian intelligence officials, headed by a senior general, came to Gaza and patrolled the sites of the demonstrations. An Egyptian official also came to Israel. On Friday Hamas, under the guests' watchful eyes, deployed its security forces a few hundred meters west of the border fence to prevent the demonstrators from getting near it. The Israel Defense Forces also evidently exercised greater restraint. Unusually for the past several months, no Palestinians were killed and only a handful were wounded by sniper fire, though dozens suffered from tear gas inhalation.
- On Sunday, all the Palestinian factions are due to meet in Gaza to discuss the Egyptian proposals. Hamas' demonstrated desire to reach an agreement may also be linked to the fact that Islamic Jihad challenged it by firing rockets and mortar shells at Israel a week ago, and afterward by holding demonstrations outside the homes of senior Hamas officials. If Hamas doesn't seal a deal soon, it could lose control of events. For now, Islamic Jihad isn't openly opposing the emerging agreement. The organization that's openly opposing any deal with Israel, even an indirect one, is the relatively small Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.
- Arab media outlets have begun reporting details of the agreement, though Israel's government has offered no information about it to its own citizens (and has even denied any involvement). The goal is a three-year cease-fire. The reduction in violence would enable more significant measures to improve Gaza's economy, including expanding fishing zones, opening the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, and allowing more Palestinians to enter Israel. The Palestinians have once again raised an old idea – letting 5,000 Gazans work in Israeli communities near Gaza. This proposal was raised after the 2014 Gaza war, but was vehemently opposed by the Shin Bet security service for fear that it would be exploited to carry out terror attacks. Thus it's hard to believe it will actually be implemented now, and certainly not in the agreement's first stage. Later on the deal also calls for large infrastructure projects like a port and airport, the news reports say.

- These reports have upset the families of the two Israeli soldiers whose bodies are being held by Hamas. On Friday, Lt. Hadar Goldin's parents met with IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot and released a statement that claimed to quote him. The IDF was forced to take the unusual step of issuing a semi-denial. The family said the IDF opposes the deal. Eisenkot's position is almost the diametric opposite. He considers an agreement desirable but thinks its final stage – large infrastructure projects – shouldn't be implemented without resolving the problem of the soldiers' bodies and the missing civilians held by Hamas. Qatar has emerged as a key player because any deal depends on its agreement to finance civil servants' salaries in Gaza and buy fuel for the territory for a substantial period of time. The Qataris may be hoping to reap an additional benefit from this.
- For more than a year, Qatar has been under blockade by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But Qatar's assistance in Gaza may spur the United States and Europe to pressure the Saudis, who are already in deep trouble over the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, to resolve the quarrel that led them to impose the blockade. The IDF has drawn three main conclusions from the events of the past weekend. First, when Hamas wants to, it can stop the violence. Second, Hamas indeed is interested in a deal right now. And third, there is now an opportunity to restore the situation along the Gaza border to what it was before March 30, when the March of Return demonstrations began.
- From a military standpoint, even though residents of communities near Gaza feel that their security has been eroded, the army has basically fulfilled its mission. Masses of Palestinians didn't succeed in breaking through the border fence, and no Israeli civilians were hurt due to the demonstrations. (One Israeli soldier, Staff Sgt. Aviv Levi, was killed by Palestinian sniper fire during the protests.) But from a strategic standpoint, the outcome may well look very different. If Hamas achieves an agreement as a direct result of the diverse types of violence it has employed – from firing rockets to trying to send masses of Palestinians across the border – it will have significantly improved its position. Not only will the blockade of Gaza be eased, but Egypt, the United Nations, Qatar and effectively the entire international community will have begun treating it as a legitimate partner rather than demanding that anything done in Gaza be done via the Palestinian Authority.