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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, November 8

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News Excerpts

November 8, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Police Recommend Indicting PM Lawyer in Probe

The Israel Police have completed the investigation into Case 3000, also known as the Submarines Affair, and has gathered evidence against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's lawyer, David Shimron, and a former Naval commander, along with four others. The police noted that there had not been sufficient evidence to indict Netanyahu's former legal adviser Yitzhak Molcho. Zionist Union leader Avi Gabbay called for Netanyahu to resign over the revelations in the case.

Times of Israel

Report: Abbas Agrees to Israel-Hamas Ceasefire

President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi has reportedly received Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's approval for efforts to achieve an initial "period of calm" between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The first period of calm would last two, followed by a six-month period. Sissi told Abbas that after calm is achieved, Egypt will move work to reach reconciliation between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah movement, and a long-term ceasefire for Israel and Hamas.

Ynet

Hamas Launches Rehabilitation Projects in Gaza

Hamas announced a series of large-scale projects in Gaza on Tuesday, including to create temporary jobs for 10,000 university graduates. The Hamas Labor Ministry did not elaborate on the nature of the work, its duration, and its funding sources. Nevertheless, Hamas's announcement might trigger a significant change, since the unemployment rate among Gaza's university graduates is over 50 percent. Two possible funding sources are Qatar and the UN, which promised Hamas financial support in exchange for calm on the Israel-Gaza border.

Ha'aretz

Gaza Protests to Go On, but With Less Violence

The organizing committee for the Palestinian protests in Gaza announced Wednesday that the marches along the border fence with Israel will continue this weekend, despite the diplomatic developments and improved conditions in recent days. A leading activist said that the marches will continue until the blockade is totally removed, but that the level of violence will be limited and the marchers will not approach the fence. Sources in Gaza made it clear that without a lifting of the blockade, recent improvements in conditions would not lead to a substantive change in the lives and future prospects of Gazans.

Midterms Revamp Middle East Policymaking in Congress

Democrats took control of the House during Tuesday's elections, positioning them to exert greater oversight over President Trump's Middle East policies. A Democratic House paves the way for a vote on ending US support for the Saudi-led coalition's bombing campaign in Yemen. Furthermore, Republicans can no longer block Democrats' efforts to subpoena Trump over scandals that could implicate Israel and US allies in the Gulf. Meanwhile, Israel has to contend with three Democratic newcomers in the House who have uncharacteristically pro-Palestinian views. In the Senate, the three key foreign policy committees will be under the control of ardent Trump supporters.

Times of Israel

In Oman, Katz Says Rail from Israel to Gulf 'Makes Sense'

Transportation Minister Israel Katz, in the Gulf State of Oman on Wednesday, pitched plans to link the Mediterranean to the Gulf via Israel, as the country pushes unprecedented public rapprochement with the Arab region. "It makes sense and is beyond political and ideological disagreements," said Katz. Israel currently has diplomatic ties with only two Arab states, Egypt and Jordan, but not the Sultanate of Oman. The "Tracks of Peace" rail link, which Katz said was supported by the Trump Administration, was "based on... Israel as a land bridge and Jordan as a regional transportation hub."

Ha'aretz

Panel Approves 640 Jewish Homes in East Jerusalem

The Jerusalem District Planning Committee committee on Tuesday approved the expansion of Jerusalem's Ramat Shlomo neighborhood, located beyond Jerusalem's 1967 borders. The plan calls for the construction of 640 new housing units, some of which will be built on privately owned Palestinian land. Major opposition to the plan came from the non-profit group Ir Amim, in part on the argument that the new neighborhood would be built on privately owned Palestinian land.

Reuters

Cairo Contests Palestinian Claim of Fisherman's Shooting

Egyptian naval forces fired on a Palestinian fishing boat and killed a fisherman on Wednesday, Gaza's interior ministry said, but an Egyptian military source denied the report. Egypt's navy has in the past shot at Gazans whom it has accused of crossing the maritime border. There was no initial information on whether the fishing boat had crossed into Egyptian waters. Wednesday's incident took place off the coast after dark near the southern border town of Rafah, said Gaza's interior ministry, which is run by officials loyal to Hamas.

Israel Looks for Ways to Pump Money Into Gaza

By Amos Harel, Senior Columnist

- Unusual photographs from the Gaza Strip have been surfacing on social media in recent days. Palestinian residents report, to their surprise, about a change in daily living brought on by an increase in the supply of electricity to as much as 12 to 16 hours a day. It's the longest daily power supply for Gazans since 2014's Operation Protective Edge, and more than double the daily average for the past year, ever since the Palestinian Authority imposed sanctions against Hamas. The change was achieved thanks to a steady supply of fuel to Gaza paid for by Qatar. The supply had been delayed a few times by negotiating difficulties and Israeli responses to the violent protests along the border fence. The relative calm along that border in the past week permits fuel trucks to enter Gaza on a daily basis through Kerem Shalom.
- The security cabinet debated the situation in Gaza on Sunday. Headlines from that discussion went to the routine disputes among Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and some of his colleagues. Education Minister Naftali Bennett has initiated another attack on Lieberman, accusing him of being weak against terrorism and demanding he step down. But Bennett, for reasons of political expediency, ignores the real process taking place, which was reinforced by the security cabinet: Israel, under a clear policy led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is seeking long-term compromise with Hamas. It intends to allow further steps by Qatar and Egypt to transfer large sums of money to Gaza to pay civil servants' wages. The person responsible for this is Netanyahu, not Lieberman, who has already voiced his objections to it (yet still remains at his job).
- Despite the leaks from the Palestinian Authority, which claim the opposite, the Israeli defense establishment anticipates that Egypt will approve the plan to transfer the money for the salaries. The momentum for achieving a deal has returned – and it's bringing a certain degree of optimism in terms of preparedness. The danger, as always, is that a local violent incident could overshadow efforts to achieve a deal and lead to another round of bloodshed, despite Israel and Hamas' desire to achieve a long-term ceasefire. The indirect talks between the sides continue apace through all channels, with the in-depth involvement of United Nations Secretary General's envoy Nikolay Mladenov. In Israel, the head of the National Security Council, Meir Ben-Shabbat, holds the "Gaza portfolio" on the prime minister's behalf, and is leading the search for a deal, to Lieberman and Bennett's chagrin (and irrespective of the political infighting between them).
- Shin Bet head Nadav Argaman told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday that the situation in the Palestinian arena is unstable, and that Gaza fluctuates between the possibility of military conflict erupting and the chance of finding a solution to ease the humanitarian crisis. Argaman devoted most of his remarks at the start of the meeting, which was open to media coverage, to issuing warnings against a "misleading calm" in the West Bank and the possibility of seeing an outbreak there, rather than in Gaza.

- Traditionally the Shin Bet is the most conservative agency in the security establishment regarding the easing of conditions for the Palestinians, due to its focus on preventing terrorism and the fear that any leniency can be exploited to launch attacks. But recently, against the backdrop of contacts aimed at achieving a solution for Gaza, the Shin Bet is also showing signs of softening its position, after rejecting the possibility of letting any Palestinians from Gaza work in Israeli border communities. Perhaps if a deal is reached, the Shin Bet will agree to take another look at the issue by running a “pilot” program to allow a small group of Palestinians in for work.
- Despite the leaks by the Palestinian Authority, which claim the opposite, the Israeli defense establishment believes that Egypt will approve the plan to transfer the salaries. Hamas sources said the sides are close to an agreement. The risk, as in the past, is that a local incident could overshadow the efforts toward a deal and renew the cycle of bloodshed, despite the signs of a desire on the part of Israel and Hamas to achieve a long-term ceasefire.

Don't Expect Dems to Obstruct Trump's Mideast Policies

By Jonathan Tobin, Editor, JNS

- The 2018 U.S. midterm elections were a mixed bag for U.S. partisans. But critics of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu believe the Democrats' capture of the House of Representatives is the start of a process by which Israel will be made to pay dearly for its government's decision to tie itself so closely to President Donald Trump and the Republicans. Yet though the outcome will alter the political landscape in Washington, the notion that Netanyahu's tilt to the GOP will come back to bite him anytime soon doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Even under new management, politicians who are resolutely pro-Israel, and by no means unfriendly to the government in Jerusalem, will still lead the House. Nor will the Democrats be in any position to impede Trump's Middle East policies that please Jerusalem.
- Even more to the point, the assumption that the midterms are the beginning of the end for Trump, and the first step toward the election of a president who will be more hostile to Israel, aren't necessarily bolstered by the results of the midterms. The idea that the Democrats are eager to use their new power to punish Netanyahu for his love affair with the American right rests on assumptions about the party that have been fostered by Jewish conservatives who have sought to paint the Democrats as hostile to Israel. What's true is that the two American political parties have more or less exchanged identities on Israel in the last half-century. In the mid-20th century, the Democrats were predominantly a pro-Israel party while the Republicans were split on the Jewish state. That changed in the last 30 years, as Republicans became the lockstep pro-Israel party, and Democrats are now divided about support for it.
- Liberals wrongly accuse Jewish right-wingers and Netanyahu of disrupting what was once a bipartisan consensus about Israel by embracing conservative Christians. But this shift occurred with relatively little assistance from the Jews; evangelicals and their allies gained ascendance among Republicans, while the intersectional left, that is unfriendly to Israel, became a factor to be reckoned with among Democrats. The change among Democrats seemed to have accelerated this year with the victories of a crop of new left-wing candidates who are clearly uncomfortable with or hostile to Israel like the socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib (the first Palestinian-American elected to Congress) and Ilhan Omar (the first Somali-American elected to Congress). But as much as their presence in the House will provide a platform for radical critics of the U.S.-Israel alliance, and might be a harbinger of a shift to the left, the notion that Democrats are about to become the moral equivalent of the Jeremy Corbyn-led British Labour Party is a fantasy.
- While the left has gained strength, the leadership of the Democrats, especially in Congress, remains solidly pro-Israel, including presumptive House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Whip Steny Hoyer. Those expecting the House to impede policies such as a cutoff of aid to the Palestinian Authority also forget that the ranking member and likely new chairman of the House Foreign

Affairs Committee is Elliot Engel of the Bronx, New York who is more or less a Likudnik on Middle East issues. Some in the new House majority will make noise about Netanyahu or sign letters Israel won't like (such as those signed this past year by a minority of Democratic representatives and senators supporting the lifting of the blockade of Gaza). But they lack the power to hinder Trump's ability to conduct foreign policy.

- Just as important as who won in the midterms is who lost. For all of the attention given to the victories of left-wingers, those critics of Israel running outside of deep blue urban districts tended to lose - such as Leslie Cockburn in Virginia and Scott Wallace in Pennsylvania. The icing on the pro-Israel cake is that among the Republicans' House losses was Dana Rohrabacher, the California representative who was among the handful remaining in the GOP who are not ardent friends of Israel. An even more sobering thought for those fantasizing about the demise of Trump and Netanyahu's comeuppance is that nothing in the midterm results makes it more likely that the president will fail to be re-elected. The victories of GOP candidates who were Trump clones over attractive liberal Democrats in the Florida and Georgia gubernatorial races, as well as other victories in red states that produced Republican gains in the Senate, should make it clear that the president's path to re-election by an Electoral College majority may be steep - but by no means an impossible climb.
- The new Democratic House will harass Trump with investigations, and liberals are still counting on the probe into collusion with Russia being led by Robert Mueller to somehow make the bad dream of 2016 go away. That might happen, but Democrats shouldn't count on it. If Democrats do their base's bidding and concentrate on trying to impeach Trump, such overreach will - depending on the viability of the Democratic nominee - make a repeat of Trump's 2016 victory possible. As their reaction to the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting showed, the Netanyahu government sees no reason to step back from a close relationship with Trump and the Republicans. As Netanyahu learned after 2012, when his preference for Mitt Romney over Barack Obama was obvious, or during the debate over the Iran nuclear deal, if he allows himself to be used as a pawn in American partisan battles, Democrats will resent it. But the costs of those gambles turned out to be minimal. No matter what happens in the next two years, or who wins in 2020, there is no reason to believe that the U.S.-Israel alliance is in any real danger.