



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 6, 2018

Times of Israel

Russia: Israel Endangered our Troops in Syria Strikes

Russia's top diplomat on Monday accused Israel of breaching its commitment to inform Moscow before it carries out airstrikes in Syria, placing its military personnel in danger "on several occasions" and forcing Russia to respond in a "firm but contained manner." Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's criticism came after Israel-Russia ties soured, following the September 17 downing of a Russian spy plane by Syrian forces during an Israeli air raid. Moscow's defense ministry had blamed Israel for the deaths of its 15 servicemen on the plane, arguing that Israeli jets were hiding behind the Russian aircraft. Israel denies that claim. See also, ["Russia: Attacks in Syria will not solve Israel's security problems" \(Ynet\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Egypt Postpones Brazilian FM's Visit over Decision on Embassy

Egypt has postponed a visit by Brazil's top diplomat, Brazil's foreign ministry said on Monday, in a move that two diplomatic sources said was due to the President-elect's vow to relocate the South American country's embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Aloysio Nunes Ferreira was set to fly to Cairo for a Nov. 8-11 visit, during which he was to meet with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his counterpart Sameh Shoukry. Egypt's foreign ministry postponed Nunes Ferreira's trip, citing problems with senior officials' agendas, the foreign ministry said on Monday. But the foreign ministry sources said no new date has been proposed, signaling Egypt's discontent with Jair Bolsonaro's proposal. See also, ["Egypt shelves Brazil visit after Jair Bolsonaro decides to move Israel embassy to Jerusalem" \(Japan Times\)](#)

New York Times

As U.S. Sanctions on Iran Kick In, Europe Looks for a Workaround

As tough new American sanctions against Iran took effect on Monday, European officials remained determined to go their own way, but their progress on an issue that has sharply divided the United States and its closest allies has been halting, at best. The Europeans consider the 2015 Iran nuclear deal crucial to their national interests, and say they intend to keep honoring it. But to date, they have not managed to put in place a mechanism for sidestepping the sanctions without antagonizing the Trump administration. Their stance has become only more complicated by Denmark's recent accusation that the Iranian government tried to assassinate an Arab separatist living there. France has made a similar accusation. See also, ["Netanyahu Welcomes Renewed Iran Sanctions" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Reuters

Iran Accuses Israel of Failed Cyber Attack

Iran's telecommunications minister accused Israel on Monday of a new cyber attack on its telecommunications infrastructure, and vowed to respond with legal action. This followed comments from another official last week that Iran had uncovered a new generation of Stuxnet, a virus which was used against the country's nuclear program more than a decade ago. "The Zionist regime (Israel), with its record of using cyber weapons such as Stuxnet computer virus, launched a cyber attack on Iran on Monday to harm Iran's communication infrastructures," Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi said. "Thanks to our vigilant technical teams, it failed," he said on Twitter.

Saudi Arabia to Build First Nuclear Research Reactor

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Monday laid the foundation stone for the kingdom's first nuclear research reactor, state media said, as the kingdom seeks to diversify its energy mix. The reactor was among seven projects launched by the prince during a visit to Riyadh's King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, the official Saudi Press Agency reported. SPA offered no details on when the research or non-power reactor — typically used for research, development and education purposes — would be built and at what cost. Saudi Arabia currently draws on oil and natural gas to meet its own fast-growing power demand and desalinate its water. See also, ["Saudi to build first nuclear reactor, eyes nuke weapons" \(The Inquirer\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu to Likud Party: The Occupation is 'Nonsense'

Claims against Israel that it occupies the Palestinians are "nonsense", Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his Likud Party on Sunday, claiming that other superpowers have occupied people and no one said a word. "Occupation is nonsense. Empires have conquered and replaced entire populations and no one is talking about it," Netanyahu said according to a report in the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot. "Power is key. Power changes everything in our policy with Arab countries." Netanyahu told his party colleagues that concessions are regarded as a weakness in the Middle East, that don't bring about lasting change. Instead, "aligning [Arab] interests with Israel, based on Israel being a technological superpower must lead the way", he claimed.

i24 News

MK's Demand Official Recognition of Non-Orthodox Movements

The Israeli parliament is expected to hold an emergency session on Wednesday in an attempt to persuade the government to grant official recognition to non-Orthodox movements, Haaretz daily reported on Monday. The session, it suggested, is a response to the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting where 11 people were killed. The recurring clash between Israel's ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox communities erupted shortly after when Israel's Ashkenazi chief refused to refer to the location of the deadly shooting attack in Pittsburgh as a synagogue. Israel's ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox communities do not typically recognize the reform and conservative traditions of Judaism. The session in the Israeli parliament is titled "It's Time For Equality" and was reportedly signed by six Knesset members. "Anti-Semitism won't define us. It is time for a pact of brotherhood, rather than a pact of blood, among all the communities of the Jewish people," the invitation said.

Reuters

Bennett Praises Donald Trump on Eve of US Midterm Elections

Bayit Yehudi leader Naftali Bennett told The Jerusalem Post on Monday he would not interfere in the American mid-term Congressional elections, but he had praise for US President Donald Trump. "It's none of our business," Bennett told the Post at his Bayit Yehudi faction meeting. "It's a fully domestic issue, and we won't interfere." But Bennett also told the faction that Trump's policies were critical for Israel's future. "Thank you for giving us your strong back," Bennett told the faction in English. "Thank you for applying not crippling sanctions, but paralyzing sanctions. Your message is loud and clear: Terror does not pay. Thank you for making the ayatollahs afraid again." Bennett also tweeted the statement in English.

Democratic Midterms Win: Good for Iran, Bad for Israel?

If the Democrats regain control of at least one house of Congress, they would make it harder for Trump to govern and could block further moves he wishes to take against Tehran. For Israel, a Democratic victory could undermine the Trump administration's pressure on the Islamic Republic and pro-Israeli moves.

By Eytan Gilboa, director of the Bar Ilan Center for International Communication

- There's a strong link between the new US sanctions on Iran that went into effect on Monday and the midterm elections taking place the next day. The new and harsh sanctions the Trump administration is imposing on the Iranian oil and gas industry are meant to further exacerbate the economic crisis in the Islamic Republic and consequently increase the public pressure on the leadership in Tehran.
- Unlike the sanctions that preceded the 2015 nuclear agreement, which were imposed by all world powers—including Russia and China—this time the US stands alone. Moreover, the European Union and the other world powers are making every effort to torpedo the American sanctions. The export of oil and gas is Iran's main source of foreign income, and the loss of even a part of it could be critical, especially in the midst of the economic crisis Tehran is experiencing, which is only getting worse.
- The US is hoping the yoke of the sanctions will pose a threat to the ayatollahs regime, intensify the mass protests against the government, or at the very least lead to negotiations over a new nuclear agreement, which will do away with the flaws of the existing deal (that the US has already pulled out of). The new agreement, Washington hopes, will address issues that were left out of the original one, including the testing of long-range missiles that can carry nuclear payloads and Iran's aggression across the Middle East.
- The Iranians are very worried by the destructive ramifications of the new sanctions. They therefore hope for a Republican loss in the midterm elections, working under the assumption that if the Democrats manage to regain control of at least one house of Congress, Trump would have a hard time governing and would have to invest a lot more efforts into passing budgets, laws and decisions. If the Democrats gain control of the House of Representatives, the regime in Tehran hopes, they may launch a process to impeach the president, which could, at the very least, hurt his chances to be elected for a second term in 2020.
- In any case, the Iranian leadership believes that if the Democrats win the midterm elections, they would limit new possible initiatives Trump might wish to take against the Islamic Republic, and so Tehran would only have to hold on for two years against the sanctions. After that, a Democrat might get elected to the White House and completely change the American attitude towards Iran, returning it to what it was in the Obama era. If the Republicans win and maintain control over both houses of Congress—consequently bolstering Trump ahead of the 2020 presidential elections—Iran would have to turn to other options.
- A Democratic win could also harm US-Israel ties. Trump is the most pro-Israeli American president since Ronald Reagan. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, is moving towards the radical left, which will affect the midterms as well. Israel support among Democrats has

plummeted over the past decade, which is evident in public opinion polls, the party's platform, and the positions of some of its veteran representatives as well as of those who might join them in the coming election.

- The fight between Israel and Iran will move to Washington with the midterm elections. Just as Iran hopes for a Democratic victory, Israel wishes for a Republican win, which will allow Trump to continue his pressure on Iran and his pro-Israel moves. And so, the midterm elections' results could have a significant impact on Israel's security and welfare.

SUMMARY: the Iranian leadership believes that if the Democrats win the midterm elections, they would limit new possible initiatives Trump might wish to take against the Islamic Republic, and so Tehran would only have to hold on for two years against the sanctions. After that, a Democrat might get elected to the White House and completely change the American attitude towards Iran, returning it to what it was in the Obama era. If the Republicans win and maintain control over both houses of Congress—consequently bolstering Trump ahead of the 2020 presidential elections—Iran would have to turn to other options. A Democratic win could also harm US-Israel ties. Trump is the most pro-Israeli American president since Ronald Reagan. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, is moving towards the radical left, which will affect the midterms as well. Israel support among Democrats has plummeted over the past decade, which is evident in public opinion polls, the party's platform, and the positions of some of its veteran representatives as well as of those who might join them in the coming election.

American Jews May Never Forgive Israel for Its Reaction to the Pittsburgh Massacre

Over the past week, American Jews expected comfort and support. Instead, Israeli government officials offered carefully honed political talking points, choosing Trump over them

By Allison Kaplan Sommer, Ha'aretz correspondent

- One stunning encounter that took place during Diaspora Affairs Minister Naftali Bennett's visit to the United States last week encapsulated the distance between Israeli officialdom and American Jews reeling after the worst attack on their community in the country's history. That moment came for Bennett during an appearance at the Council on Foreign Relations, after he winged his way to the United States to attend the funerals of the victims of the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh.
- After paying his respects, Bennett was quickly off to New York to make the rounds of the studios and conference rooms of major Jewish organizations to take full advantage of his unexpected trip to North America to raise his profile – after all, he makes no secret of his aspirations to the prime ministership.
- From the moment he landed on U.S. soil, Bennett in his discussion with council members insistently defended President Donald Trump against accusations that the poisonous xenophobic tone and outlandish conspiracy theories he peddles bore any connection to the massacre in Pittsburgh. Bennett paired this with an equally problematic message that the threat of anti-Semitism in America was overblown. "This is not in any sense Germany of the '30s, it doesn't resemble that in any possible way," Bennett declared confidently, according to a report in the Jewish Insider.
- He was confronted by 89-year-old Edward Bleier, a former Warner Bros. president, media pioneer and Jewish philanthropist who, disgusted by Bennett's observation, gave him the schooling he badly needed. He noted that the Israeli minister is poorly educated when it comes to the Jews of the Diaspora, their history and sensitivities. "Some of us are older than you are and we recall the pre-war period in America when the Nazis convened in Madison Square Garden and paraded on 96th Street with brown shirts and swastikas. And the rallying cry of the anti-Semites was 'America First.' So my hair stands on end when I hear an American president invoke that line," Bleier told him.
- It was a rare moment: An American Jew confronting one of the pack of Israeli officials who saw it as their role to act as Trump's political armor, shielding him from any responsibility for Pittsburgh. Most grieving American Jews were polite and deferential to Bennett and the parade of other Israeli officials whose remarks inspired headlines like "Israel Defends Trump Amid Synagogue Shooting Criticism," "Israeli Minister Calls it Unfair to Link Trump With Synagogue Shooting" and "Trump Finds Support After the Pittsburgh Massacre, From the Israeli Government." The fury, resentment and disgust of American Jews toward Israel's representatives only came pouring out afterward, in private conversations and across social media.

- In the opinion pages and comment sections of Jewish outlets, commentators like former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro opined that Israelis had one job while America was “sitting shivah” – to listen, not lecture them on how they should feel or who they should blame, and certainly not on the eve of critical U.S. elections. Shapiro recalled how, as ambassador, he was always careful not to bring politics into houses of mourning. And yet, long before this Shabbat, when we marked seven days since the murderous Pittsburgh attack – a symbolic shivah – American Jews got an earful from their Israeli brethren as to which political leaders they should or shouldn’t blame.
- It is something they have always made an effort not to do when the shoe is on the other foot. In their countless “solidarity missions” over the years when Israel was feeling attacked, broken and vulnerable, American-Jewish leaders always held back from telling Israel what to do as it mourned and buried its dead, after the all-too-frequent wars and terror attacks. Whenever Diaspora Jews have dared step out of line, speak out, disagree or point out missteps by their Israeli counterparts, they are always scolded and shut down. The typical reaction to such chutzpah is: “How can anyone who hasn’t lived in Israel, hasn’t served in the IDF or sent their children to serve, who hasn’t huddled in a shelter as missiles have fallen, seen friends and neighbors die in terror attacks, possibly understand what Israelis are going through?”
- Daring to voice a partisan opinion on what is happening while parachuting in for a photo opportunity is seen as unacceptably audacious by people who, while they may be fellow Jews, have no skin – or blood – in the game.
- Over the past week, when American Jews expected comfort and support, Israeli government officials instead offered carefully honed political talking points: It is “unfair” to assign responsibility to the president, they lectured. Trump is the best friend Israel has ever had in the White House. He has Jewish family members, therefore any implication that he is either anti-Semitic himself or encourages anti-Semitism with his populist “America First” rhetoric is outrageous. These arguments were inevitably followed up by the “both sides” defense: That Farrakhan-style leftist anti-Semitism is equally as bad and dangerous as white supremacist Soros-bashing xenophobia.
- The relationship between Israel and the overwhelmingly liberal non-Orthodox American-Jewish population has been no picnic in recent years. Memorable low points in the relationship: The crisis over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressing Congress in order to lobby against the Iran deal, over the objections of the Obama White House; and the furious reaction by liberal non-Orthodox streams after what they viewed as betrayal over the Western Wall deal. But until this moment, nothing has left American Jews feeling that they are being physically abandoned by their Israeli brothers. Never before has the State of Israel so blatantly demonstrated that it will protect its own political interests at the expense of American Jews.
- Not only did Israel’s leaders choose Trump over American Jews, but they did so easily, naturally, without hesitation, leaping to the defense of a political leader who is actively and openly fanning the flames of hatred that now has an unprecedented death toll. That they did this, and did so before the bodies of 11 American Jews – brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers – were even buried, was experienced as a stab in the back that, even if it does heal one day, will leave a scar.

- The image of the president touching down in Pittsburgh against the wishes of the mourners, no national congressional leaders or local politicians agreeing to be seen greeting him, accompanied only by Israeli ambassador Ron Dermer as a political flak jacket will remain an indelible image. Like Bleier's memories of the Brownshirts in Madison Square Garden, it may fade but will never be forgotten.

SUMMARY: The relationship between Israel and the overwhelmingly liberal non-Orthodox American-Jewish population has been no picnic in recent years. Memorable low points in the relationship: The crisis over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressing Congress in order to lobby against the Iran deal, over the objections of the Obama White House; and the furious reaction by liberal non-Orthodox streams after what they viewed as betrayal over the Western Wall deal. But until this moment, nothing has left American Jews feeling that they are being physically abandoned by their Israeli brothers. Never before has the State of Israel so blatantly demonstrated that it will protect its own political interests at the expense of American Jews. Not only did Israel's leaders choose Trump over American Jews, but they did so easily, naturally, without hesitation, leaping to the defense of a political leader who is actively and openly fanning the flames of hatred that now has an unprecedented death toll. That they did this, and did so before the bodies of 11 American Jews – brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers – were even buried, was experienced as a stab in the back that, even if it does heal one day, will leave a scar.