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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Gantz: We Do Not Want to Control Another People**
- **Edelstein, Katz Face Off for First Spot in Likud List**
- **Gantz and Lapid Merger Facing Headwinds**
- **Defense Officials: Gaza Health System on Verge of Collapse**
- **US Senate Passes Anti-BDS Bill**
- **Jews, Evangelicals Reach out to Sunni Gulf Arab Leaders**
- **Abbas Asks Europeans to Recognize Palestinian State**
- **AG Rejects Right-wing Appeal against Breaking the Silence**

Commentary:

- **AI Monitor: “Islamic Jihad, New Lord of Gaza?”**
 - By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist
- **Times of Israel: “Changing the Old Israeli-Arab Peace Equation”**
 - By former COGAT Officials Commander Yoav Mordechai and Michael Milshtein

News Excerpts

February 6, 2019

Jerusalem Post

Gantz: We Do Not Want to Control Another People

Israel Resilience Party chair and former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz said Israel must find a solution to the settlement crisis “that does not require us to exercise control over other people.” When asked if he move similarly to 2005 Disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Gantz praised the unilateral move. “All sides had a lot at stake and the state managed to do it without tearing the country apart... We must take the lessons of the Disengagement and implement them in other arenas.”

Ynet

Edelstein, Katz Face Off for First Spot in Likud List

With most of the votes counted in the Likud primary elections, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein and Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz are vying for the first spot, while former minister Gideon Sa'ar is a close third place. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been working to keep Sa'ar from the top spots. Later on the list is Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, Culture Minister Miri Regev, then Ministers Yariv Levin, Yoav Galant, Gila Gamliel, former Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat and MK Avi Dichter. Ranked in the top 20 are Ministers Yuval Steinitz, Tzachi Hanegbi, Ze'ev Elkin, and Deputy Minister Tzipi Hotovely.

Times of Israel

Gantz and Lapid Merger Facing Headwinds

Efforts to form an alliance between Gantz's party and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid have reportedly hit a snag. Lapid is resisting being the number two to Gantz, despite polls showing preference for Gantz. Lapid is reportedly not willing to discuss an alternating joint leadership either. Earlier Tuesday, former IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi, who both parties are reported to be courting, said he was working to forge an alliance between the two centrist parties.

Ha'aretz

Defense Officials: Gaza Health System on Verge of Collapse

Gaza's health system is on the verge of collapse, complicating Israel's ability to fight in the Strip without international intervention, Israeli defense officials said to the security cabinet. The ministers were told that wounded civilians would not be able to receive initial medical care, and therefore it would be difficult receive international support for any operation. The report also showed that 6,000 people with bullet wounds are still awaiting urgent operations.

Reuters

US Senate Passes Anti-BDS Bill

The U.S. Senate passed a Mideast policy bill on Tuesday including a measure that would allow states to penalize businesses that take part in boycotts of Israel. The Senate backed the Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act 77-23 on Tuesday. To become law, however, the bill would need to pass the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, where it is unlikely to move without significant changes because of concerns about the provision addressing the "Boycott, Divest and Sanction" movement targeted at Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. Opponents of that provision argue that Americans' participation in boycotts is protected by the constitutional right to free speech.

Associated Press

Jews, Evangelicals Reach out to Sunni Gulf Arab Leaders

Against the backdrop of the first papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula is an interfaith conference that includes prominent U.S. rabbis and Christian evangelicals seeking stronger recognition of Israel through closer ties with Muslim figures and Arab leaders. Rabbi Marc Schneier from Westhampton Beach, New York is at the forefront -- "We... need to sensitize and educate and expose both Gulf leaders and Muslim interfaith leaders to the fact that Israel again is not a political dimension for the Jewish people; it's at the very core of our religion," he said. The king of Bahrain has appointed Schneier as a special adviser and he's been hosted by Qatar's ruler in Doha and the crown prince in Saudi Arabia.

Times of Israel

Abbas Asks Europeans to Recognize Palestinian State

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas urged European Union countries to recognize a Palestinian state Tuesday. Abbas made the request at a press conference with Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen at the PA headquarters in Ramallah. "While several EU countries have recognized the state, the majority of its members, including France, the UK, Germany, Spain and Italy, have not made such a move. Abbas also repeated a call to establish "a multilateral mechanism" to mediate the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.

Times of Israel

AG Rejects Right-wing Appeal against Breaking the Silence

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit put to bed on Monday the final appeal by right-wing groups demanding that the left-wing anti-occupation group Breaking the Silence be investigated for treason. In a letter, Mandelblit's office said there was "no cause" to second-guess the State Attorney's Office's finding that there was no evidence of criminal wrongdoing on the part of Breaking of Silence. Breaking the Silence has drawn criticism for collecting and publicizing mostly anonymous testimony of alleged IDF mistreatment of Palestinians.

Islamic Jihad, New Lord of Gaza?

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist

- Who's leading whom in the Gaza Strip? Does Hamas lord over the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a militant movement supported by Iran, or is it the other way around? Over the past few months, Israeli security forces have noted the growing influence of the Islamic Jihad on Hamas. Seeking to avoid problems with Iran, the Hamas leadership feels it has little choice but to follow the Islamic Jihad's dictates in their actions when dealing with Israel and Egypt. This was exacerbated following the appointment of Ziyad al-Nakhalah as secretary-general of the Islamic Jihad in September 2018. Nakhalah replaces Abdullah Ramadan Shalah, who has been in a coma ever since he suffered a stroke in April 2018.
- Born in Khan Yunis, Nakhalah spent 14 years in Israeli prisons until he was released in the 1985 prisoner exchange called the "Jibril deal." He was later expelled to Lebanon, where he was brought into the Islamic Jihad leadership by the movement's founder, Fathi al-Shaqaqi. Shaqaqi was killed in Malta in 1995 in an attack attributed by foreign news sources to the Mossad. The hit was allegedly in retaliation for a terrorist attack at the Beit Lid intersection in January 1995 in which 21 soldiers and a civilian were killed. Ramadan Shalah was lecturing in the United States at the time of the assassination, but he was called back to take over as the movement's secretary-general. He then appointed Nakhalah as his deputy.
- Throughout all of these years, Ramadan Shalah had been loyal to Iran, which funded PIJ to the tune of \$70 million per year, drawn from the budget of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Under him, Islamic Jihad found itself trapped between a desire to appease Iran, which, in turn, wanted a significant foothold in Gaza, and its tenuous relationship with Hamas, which actually controlled the Gaza Strip. Given these conflicting interests, Ramadan Shalah was extremely cautious during his tenure. He recognized the inherent limitation facing a small organization with about 1,000 armed fighters and always sought to find a balance between the interests of Islamic Jihad and Iran in Gaza and the reality on the ground, where Hamas maintained absolute control and enjoyed full operational ability. Inevitably, the relationship between Islamic Jihad and Hamas was complicated. On one hand, the two groups fully cooperated operationally in times of emergency and during armed conflicts with Israel. On the other hand, Islamic Jihad competed with Hamas over Palestinian public opinion, particularly when it came to the question of who was more loyal to the idea of a genuine armed jihad against Israel.
- The newly elected Nakhalah appointed Mohammad al-Hindi, who lives in the Gaza Strip, as his deputy. I met Hindi on several occasions during the second intifada (2000-2005), and he even agreed to be interviewed for Israeli television. I interviewed and held discussions with him about the group's role in Gaza, even before the Hamas coup in 2007 when the Palestinian Preventative Security Forces under Mohammed Dahlan hunted down senior members of Islamic Jihad's military wing. The impression I came away with then was that Hindi knew the

exact place and strength of the militant Islamist movement as it entered the vacuum left by Hamas, which had become a popular political movement that was sometimes forced to compromise, given the complicated reality of dealing with Israel. In this way, Islamic Jihad became a contractor for Hamas on more than one occasion. In some cases, it fired rockets at Israel just to ensure there would be no Hamas fingerprints on the operation. At other times, Islamic Jihad tried to challenge Hamas in an effort to prove to the people of Gaza and their custodians in Tehran that their magnanimous funding was being put to good use.

- As clear as the rules of the game were, they started changing in the last few months. Nakhalah succeeded in transforming Islamic Jihad from an organization that takes its cues from Hamas to an activist group that initiates its own activities. On Jan. 22, a Palestinian sniper in Gaza shot an Israel Defense Forces officer in the head during a riot along the border fence. As if by miracle, the bullet was stopped by the officer's helmet, and he only suffered minor injuries. Islamic Jihad took responsibility for the incident on Feb. 3 and released a video clip of the shooting. The group's spokesman, Daoud Shihab, explained that the reason the documentation was released was to uncover some of Israel's daily violations of Palestinians' "most basic human rights." In other words, Islamic Jihad will not be leaving the right to defend Palestinians to Hamas alone.
- The Israeli security establishment has marked Bahaa Abu al-Ata, commander of the military wing of Islamic Jihad in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, as someone working to create a new reality on the ground and interfere with the unofficial truce between Hamas and Israel. Israel sent a message about him to Hamas through its Egyptian middlemen and at the same time released his photo to the Kan news organization on Jan. 30, claiming that he was responsible for violating the state of calm in Gaza and for the sniper attack. In response, Islamic Jihad warned Israel not to do "anything stupid against the commanders of the military wing of Islamic Jihad, since that would lead to devastating consequences." It then released footage of the sniper firing his shots. The film clip wasn't intended for a Palestinian audience, nor was it part of some effort to brag to Israel about what the group was capable of doing. It was actually aimed at Egypt after Israel sent a message to the Egyptians that if Hamas does not rein in Islamic Jihad, it would pay a steep price. "If the quiet is not maintained in Gaza, even during the campaign period, we will not hesitate to act," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Hamas at the start of this week's Cabinet meeting on Feb. 3.
- So far, it looks like Islamic Jihad is managing to bend Hamas to its will. In the past, any shooting — which would have posed a problem to Hamas and led to the collapse of its understanding with Israel and Egypt — would have resulted in the arrest of the people who fired the shots or even of the people who sent them. This was true even when Ramadan Salah stood at the head of Islamic Jihad. Instead, head of the Hamas political bureau Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Cairo on Feb. 4, together with Nakhalah, for discussions with Egyptian intelligence officials on ways to maintain calm with Israel. According to a report in Al Akhbar newspaper, Islamic Jihad wants to create a situation in which the organization would respond to every Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip or any Israeli violation of the terms of the truce. It is doubtful that Egypt will accept this, but one thing is clear: Nakhalah arrived in Cairo with Haniyeh as an equal and a peer.

Toward a Change in the Old Israeli-Arab Peace Equation

By former COGAT Commander Yoav Mordechai and former COGAT Official Michael Milshtein

- Since the early days of the Arab-Israeli conflict, relations between Israel and the Arab world have been tightly linked to relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Over the years, a strategic equation emerged between Israel and the Arab world that posits there will be no progress in normalization between the two sides without direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians toward a political settlement. Another element of the formula was the threat that any serious crisis between Israel and the Palestinians would automatically impinge on Israel's relations with the Arabs and even cause severe deterioration between the two sides. That old strategic equation began to erode in the late 70s, after Egypt prioritized its own national interests by pursuing a peace agreement with Israel, despite the absence of Israeli-Palestinian negotiation. This pattern of Arab behavior has accelerated and expanded in recent years. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's precedent became the formal and informal policy of a large group of Arab leaders.
- The roots of this dramatic change can be found in certain strategic developments underway in the Middle East over the past decade: the increasing threat of Iran in the region considered by the Sunni Arab world as the main threat, leading them to go so far as to see Israel as a potential strategic ally; the Islamic challenge from within Arab states that compelled them to focus on their own internal problems and seek Israeli assistance in order to defeat them; the rise of new young Arab leaders who feel less commitment to the Palestinian issue; growing Arab disappointment in the positions and the policy of the Palestinians and their leaders; and President Trump's Middle East policy, which is based on an effort to strengthen relations between Israel and the Sunni Arab world.
- The change in relations between Israel and the Arab world finds its expression in several arenas: formal visits of senior Israeli officials in Arab states (such as Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Oman in November 2018), and informal meetings between high ranking officials; growing cooperation between Israel and Arab states (particularly Egypt and the Gulf states); and expanding economic activity between Israeli and Arab business leaders and companies. All these developments are taking place not only in the absence of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but at a time of deep crisis between the two sides and in the shadow of possible escalation in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.
- Despite these changes, some obvious caveats must be mentioned. The first consideration is that these changes are limited to the leaders and the political elite in the Arab world, while ordinary citizens and public opinion influencers still demonstrate deep hostility toward Israel and oppose any expression of normalization. Second, the changes depend mainly on current conditions. Any change in them will affect relations between Israel and the Arabs, for example reduction in the threat of Iran or ISIS, internal changes inside Arab states, a possible change of

the American Administration and even the rise of a new Palestinian leader after Abu Mazen who will be more compatible with the Arab world and the international community.

- Israel therefore still has an opportunity to expand its relations with the Arab world in several areas, particularly the strategic and economic ones. At the same time, it's evident that it's not possible to dispense entirely with old equation, and that Israel will be unable to achieve full normalization with the Arabs without any progress in the Palestinian sphere. In order to reap the greatest benefit from the current window of opportunity now open in the Middle East, Israel should consider steps such as these: Create a framework for direct negotiations with the Palestinians. Even without achieving agreement in the near term, this could assist efforts to stabilize the Palestinian arena and also ease Arab leaders' attempts to develop relations with Israel; Expand cooperation with Arab states in order to stabilize the situation in the Gaza Strip; Avoid any change in the status quo around the Temple Mount in Jerusalem that could inflame the atmosphere among Muslims and Arabs; Develop channels of engagement with the Arab public in order to change their traditional, popular image of Israel.
- These steps can help make it possible for Israel to turn the dramatic earthquakes that have shaken the Middle East over the past decade into a shared, golden opportunity for all the peoples in the region.