



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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March 11, 2019

Washington Post

Wonder Woman Takes on PM with Anti-Racism Post

On Sunday, after news anchor Rotem Sela asked on Instagram, “When the hell will someone in this government let the Israeli public know that this is a country for all its citizens and that every person is born equal?” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded on Facebook: “Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people — and the Jewish people only.” The prime minister’s post upset many in Israel, including “Wonder Woman” actress Gal Gadot, who wrote to her 28 million Instagram followers, “The responsibility for hope is on us to create a brighter future for our children. Rotem, my sister, you’re an inspiration for us all.”

Jerusalem Post

Bickering in Blue-White Amid Drop in Polls

Bickering between the Israel Resilience and Yesh Atid parties that make up the Blue and White list has intensified, as has frustration following the past week’s drop in the polls, sources in Blue and White told The Jerusalem Post on Sunday. In an official statement, Blue and White responded saying that there are wonderful relations and teamwork between the party leaders and their advisers and that the reports were “gossip and political spin.” One poll published Sunday gave Blue and White 33 seats, down from 36 a week ago.

Times of Israel

PA Announces Austerity to Address Budget Crisis

Palestinian Authority Finance Minister Shukri Bishara announced a series of austerity measures on Sunday, including salary cuts to government workers, to confront a budgetary shortfall. Bishara made the announcement after the PA refused to receive tens of millions of dollars in tax revenues that Israel collected on its behalf, to protest a new Israeli law that seeks to push Ramallah end its policy of issuing payments to security prisoners and the families of dead terrorists.

Reuters

Abbas Picks Loyalist Shtayyeh as Palestinian Prime Minister

Economist Mohammed Shtayyeh, aide to President Mahmoud Abbas, was named prime minister on Sunday, six weeks after Rami Hamdallah resigned his post. The end of Hamdallah’s unity government was another sign of the failure of Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah to implement a power-sharing deal.

Axios

WH Working to Reassure Evangelicals on Peace Plan

Ahead of the launch of President Trump's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, the White House has been engaging with Evangelical leaders to reassure them about the plan. On Thursday a group of Evangelical leaders met at the White House, where several leaders raised concerns about the peace plan, especially the possibility it will give the Palestinians a capital in parts of East Jerusalem. Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt reportedly told the group the plan will be fair and can benefit both sides — but both will have to make compromises.

Ha'aretz

Hamas Says it Wants Calm, Israel Must Ease Restrictions

The next two weeks will be crucial in determining whether a violent escalation is looming in the Gaza Strip, according to a senior Hamas official. The group's main goal is a significant easing of the blockade placed on Gaza, and Hamas will not alter its policy if an agreement is not reached on the issue, the official said. A delegation of Egyptian security officials visited Gaza this weekend, with the Hamas leadership telling them that the group wishes to avoid an escalation but is unwilling to accept Israeli dictates regarding conditions for preserving calm.

Ha'aretz

Tensions High as Police Disrupt Temple Mount Prayer

A video spreading through Arab social media outlets shows Israeli police officers refusing to remove their shoes upon entering the disputed Bab al-Rahma building in Jerusalem's Temple Mount on Saturday, trampling prayer rugs at the site. Since the beginning of the crisis surrounding the disputed prayer site, police officers regularly patrol the site, but usually look in from the doorway without entering the building. Despite tensions surrounding the reopening of the building by the Waqf three weeks ago, prayer services were conducted in relative peace Friday. About 100 Muslim worshippers who had been barred from entering the Temple Mount complex by police order prayed outside the gates of the complex.

Jerusalem Post

Zandberg and Abbas Meet and Reaffirm Two-State Support

Forging a peace agreement with the Palestinians is Israel's "supreme interest," Meretz chair Tamar Zandberg said as she met with Abbas in Ramallah on Sunday. "Any government that is formed must commence negotiations." Abbas said he would be willing to reach out to any Israeli government ready to negotiate a peace agreement on the basis of the post-Six Day War borders. "As you know, we have turned to peace and we have no other option," said Abbas.

A State for Some of Its Citizens

By the Editorial Board

- What Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wrote on his Facebook page Sunday in response to an Instagram post by actress Rotem Sela constitutes a public admission that, thanks to the Basic Law on Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, Israel has ceased to be a democracy. On Saturday, Sela published a courageous post in which she challenged the delegitimization of the Arab community's political representatives. "Miri Regev sits down and tells Rina Matzliach that the public must take care, because if Benny Gantz is elected, he'll have to set up a government with the Arabs," Sela wrote, referring respectively to the culture minister, a journalist and the head of the Kahol Lavan joint ticket. "Rina Matzliach was silent. And I wonder why Rina didn't ask her in shock, 'And what's the problem with the Arabs???' God in heaven, there are also Arab citizens of this country. When the hell will someone in this government tell the Israeli public that this is a state of all its citizens?"
- In response, Netanyahu wrote a Facebook post in which he sought to correct her. "Israel isn't a state of all its citizens," he wrote. "According to the Basic Law on the nation-state that we passed, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, and it alone. "There's no problem with Israel's Arab citizens; they have equal rights just like the rest of us," he continued, agreeing with Sela on this point. He also noted the extra funding his government had allocated to the Arab community. But he made it clear that this was the extent of the favors Israel was willing to grant the Arabs. In the legislature, they are worth less. Or as Netanyahu put it, Gantz and his political partner, Yair Lapid, have no way to form a government without the support of the Arab parties, "and any such government would undermine the security of the state and its citizens." The ugly, naked truth has been exposed: The nation-state law was meant to make it clear to Israeli Arabs that the state views them as second-class citizens. Admittedly, they have "equal rights just like the rest of us," but they should know that the state doesn't belong to "all its citizens." Moreover, since Israel isn't a state of all its citizens, any government that includes the Arab parties "would undermine the security of the state and its citizens."
- Even though nobody disputes that Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, Netanyahu has now admitted that the nation-state law enshrines Jewish supremacy in law and declares that the state belongs more to a Jew who's an American or Belgian citizen than it does to an Arab citizen born in this country. Through his post, he has revealed the real reason why the law, in contrast to the Declaration of Independence, didn't cite the principle of equality as one of Israel's foundational principles. And he has pulled the rug out from under the foundations of Israel's democratic system of government. Given Netanyahu's statements, supporters of the nation-state law no longer have any way to continue defending it and claiming that it doesn't undermine democracy. It's regrettable that the generals of the Kahol Lavan ticket lack Sela's civic courage and go on collaborating with Netanyahu's delegitimization of the Arab Knesset members.

If Hamas Wants Calm, Will Islamic Jihad Cooperate?

By Elinor Levy, Senior Columnist

- Hamas did not stage riots or confrontations along the Israel-Gaza border on Saturday night, for the first in months of nightly incidents at the friction points along the security fence. Earlier in the day, however, a mortar shell was fired at the Eshkol Regional Council and exploded in an open area; a cluster of balloons carrying the warhead from an anti-tank missile was found in a forested area of the Negev; and a bullet fired from the northern Gaza Strip hit a house in Netiv HaAsara in the Hof Ashkelon Regional Council. There were no casualties in any of the incidents.
- Sources familiar with the details told Ynet that the lack of nightly confrontations at the fence constitutes a form of confidence-building measures on the part of Hamas, in order to prove its willingness to move forward with the proposed understandings with Israel. These understandings include a lull in the violence in exchange for Israel easing restrictions on Gaza, and are the result of mediation by a delegation of senior Egyptian intelligence officials, who have been shuttling between Israel and Gaza over the past few days.
- The current Israeli assessment is that the Islamic Jihad is trying to torpedo these attempts at calm, and is responsible for the rocket and mortar fire as well as the explosive balloons dispatched over the weekend. The Egyptian delegation, headed by the country's deputy intelligence chief General Omar Hanafi, left Gaza on Friday. As far as is known, the team is still in Israel where they are holding talks with security officials to re-establish the understandings that will lead to calm. It is as yet unclear whether the halt in clashes along the border is a one-off or will last over the next few nights. The substantive overnight offensive by the IAF against targets belonging to the Hamas military wing, together with the pressure being exerted by Egypt, has led the organization to understand that Israel has run out of patience and as such the chances of a relatively large military confrontation are higher than ever.
- Nonetheless, Hamas is still dabbling in psychological warfare to achieve its ends. It is using various sources to leak to the Palestinian media a range of demands for easing conditions in the Gaza Strip. These demands include issues relating to the electricity supply and infrastructure development, as well as increasing the fishing zone for Gaza's fishermen. As far as is known, the Egyptian-brokered indirect talks between the two sides to formulate these understandings have not yet borne fruit, but there does seem to be some progress. On Friday, not long after the Egyptian delegation set out from Gaza, a 23-year-old Palestinian was killed by IDF fire during clashes along the fence in the southern Gaza Strip. This led to the mortar shell being fired at Israel on Saturday evening, which exploded in an open area of southern Israel.
- Indeed, it is not inconceivable that the Islamic Jihad is also behind the Saturday night rocket fire, given that it is not committed to the understandings that are being formulated by Egypt, and

actually may also oppose them. According to assessments in Gaza, Islamic Jihad is opposed to the agreements currently between brokered and launched the rocket fire in an effort to torpedo the negotiations. Meanwhile, Qatari envoy Mohammed al-Emadi is expected to arrive in the Gaza Strip this week, bringing a lifeline of more than \$100 million for the impoverished families living there.