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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 14, 2019

Ynet

US Drops 'Occupied' from Palestinian Territories Description

The State Department changed its usual description of the Golan Heights from "Israeli-occupied" to "Israeli-controlled" in an annual global human rights report released by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday. A separate section on the West Bank and Gaza Strip also did not refer to those territories as being "occupied." A US official said that the language did not reflect a change in US policy, and that the word occupied had not been used due to the fact that the report focused on human rights and not legal issues.

Associated Press

Israel Opens Criminal Probe of 11 Deaths in Gaza Violence

Israeli authorities have opened criminal investigations of the deaths of 11 Palestinians who were killed by Israeli fire during protests along the Gaza border in the past year. A recent U.N. human rights report alleges Israeli soldiers intentionally fired on civilians and could have committed crimes against humanity at the border, where live ammunition killed 189 people dead and injured more than 6,000 in violence that began last March.

Ha'aretz

Gantz: As PM, I Would Resume Targeted Killings in Gaza

Blue White leader Benny Gantz said on Wednesday that if he is elected prime minister, he would resume targeted killings in Gaza if Israel being attacked. During a tour of Israeli communities near the Gaza border, Gantz, who was the Israel Defense Forces chief of staff during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, took pride of the relative calm that followed the war. He added, "Other than advancing a barrier [along the Gaza-Israel border], nothing has been done [by the current government]. We will change the lax policy and enact a tough policy."

Times of Israel

AG Urges High Court to Disqualify Ben Ari Over Racism

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit urged the High Court of Justice to disqualify the head of a far-right party from running in the general elections, citing his long history of "severe and extreme" racism. Michael Ben Ari, party leader of Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), has faced multiple appeals to outlaw his candidacy. Ben Ari, who served as an MK from 2009-12 with the National Union party, is fifth on the slate of the Union of Right-Wing Parties, a merger of Otzma Yehudit with the Jewish Home and National Union.

Jerusalem Post

Wakf Announces Temple Mount Golden Gate Renovations

In a move signaling the possible end of the crisis, the Wakf Council announced on Wednesday that it will start “immediate renovation and reconstruction work” at the Golden Gate site on the Temple Mount, also known as Bab a-Rahma. A Wakf official told The Jerusalem Post that the announcement came following understandings reached between Israel and Jordan to solve the crisis surrounding Bab a-Rahma. Israeli and Jordanian officials have been holding intensive talks in the past few weeks to reach understandings to end the tensions on the Temple Mount.

Jerusalem Post

Israel Issues Complaint to UN Over Hezbollah on Border

Israel issued a formal complaint to the United Nations Security Council over Hezbollah's recently revealed "Golan Project," which has positioned operatives along Israel's northern border. Israel's ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon on Wednesday wrote to council members stating that Israel "will not ignore the conversion of Syria and Lebanon to a military front against us and will act with force against the aggression from Tehran," referring to Hezbollah's Iranian backers.

Ha'aretz

Palestinians Fear Israeli Election Will Bring More of the Same

Only a few miles away from Israel, in the West Bank's crowded and impoverished Deheisheh refugee camp, no one is holding their breath about the upcoming Knesset election. This is the case even though whoever is prime minister can affect all aspects of life: From the economy to personal safety to the ability to move around. In short, an Israeli prime minister holds the power to inflict greater misery on the camp's over 16,000 inhabitants, or ease their plight. “It's not important who will win,” says Nader Mana'a, 58, who custom-designs traditional embroidered dresses. “The Palestinian situation gets worse with any Israeli prime minister.”

Al Monitor

Is Jerusalem Cable Car Turning Old City into Disneyland?

Barring significant delays, in two years Jerusalem will roll out a new cable car able to transport 3,000 people an hour to the Old City's Holy Basin. But last September, prominent architects warned the project would be a blight on the unique skyline of the walled Old City. A month later, Ha'aretz published a petition signed by dozens of writers, artists and archaeologists under the slogan “Jerusalem is not Disneyland.” Left-wing groups argue the project is designed to strengthen Israel's hold on the Old City. At the same time, the small Jewish Karaite sect complained the route takes the car over the community's ancient burial grounds and risks desecrating the dead.

The Opposition Must Follow Rotem Sela's Lead

By Ehud Barak, former Israeli Prime Minister

- This is a time in which all of us are being tested. Jewish, Zionist and democratic Israel is facing danger from determined forces that are seeking to distort it. Three draft indictments have been prepared against a man suspected of criminal acts -- of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. In an attempt to save himself, this same individual is trying to destroy the foundations of democracy, the judicial system, the prosecutor's office, the police and the Supreme Court – everything that is basic to a democracy. He is doing this in concert with messianic-racist extremists who also wish to destroy the law, civil society and everything that is self-evident from Israel's egalitarian Declaration of Independence, in an effort to impose their messianic-racist and anti-democratic vision.
- While doing this, he is forsaking the country's citizens, robbing them of what they have accomplished through their talents and hard work and of the resources they would need to provide an education and opportunity to every child, an affordable home to working couples and medical care and a life of dignity to the elderly who have built what we have. He is stealing all of this and giving it to the extremists and to his own associates. History has taught that when people in power attempt to trample democracy and citizens' fundamental freedoms, there are only two options: either fighting and putting an immediate halt to it, or being doomed to years of darkness. It is therefore our obligation to fight – certainly until the April 9 Knesset election – so we know that we have done everything possible for a Zionist and democratic vision of the State of Israel to emerge the winner.
- To do so all the parties of the center-left, and first of all Kahol Lavan, must shift gears, climb into the political boxing ring and confront directly – from up close – the wounded and vulnerable leader who went bad, but who will cross any line to spare himself from having to pay the price of the disgrace. To take the battle into the opponent's territory, to attack the distortion of Judaism and Zionism caused by the racists and Kahanists who are wagging like the tail of a dog under suspicion. To strike and take blows without bending, until the day of victory. Within the sea of words and video clips the public, with its healthy senses, can identify the ones who more determined to win, and is drawn to them. I believed in and worked for an even broader gathering of forces, but given the situation that has emerged, uniting behind a goal and preventing infighting among the different elements of the center-left is essential. This is the role of the leaders of the bloc, and on this they will be judged. This week, Naftali Bennett tied the threat of Hamas to the threat of the High Court of Justice, and Benjamin Netanyahu moved heaven and earth for the Kahanists. It was Netanyahu who spoke of Bezalel Smotrich as education minister and of Itamar Ben-Gvir as a member of the Judicial Appointments Committee. This is an internal danger to our existence, more serious than any other danger.
- I do not take any danger lightly. I spent most of my life facing dangers from the outside. This is a political struggle, but at the same time a moral struggle. Martin Luther King once said, "The

hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.” We must not find ourselves there. For this reason, every citizen must act in the spirit of President John Kennedy: Not to ask what another person or party can do or not do, but to do what one can – volunteer, write articles, put up signs, demonstrate, persuade, everyone according to their abilities. Be Rotem Sela, Gal Gadot or Eyal Waldman. Because when the corrupt government that looks out for itself endangers the achievements of Zionism, this is the time to fight and to act. This is a time of struggle. It’s still not too late. We can and we must win.

Netanyahu, King Abdullah in Bind over Temple Mount

By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist

- One small building in the most volatile spot in the world, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's walled Old City, threatens the stability of Jerusalem and beyond. The tense standoff between Israelis and Palestinians over the ancient, rundown building adjacent to Bab al-Rahma, the Gate of Mercy, could set off an explosion similar to the 2017 clashes that erupted after Israel placed metal detectors at the entrance to the Temple Mount, holy to both Muslims and Jews. At issue are the fragile status quo at the site, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's electoral constraints, Palestinian pride, the authority of the Jordanian-controlled Muslim Waqf that is the custodian of the site and Hamas, which has its fingers in every anti-Israel pie. The movement is taking advantage of the crisis, calling "Muslims everywhere" to defend with their bodies the holy mosque that the "Zionists" are trying to desecrate and shut down. Hamas enjoys the backing of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been seeking a foothold on the Temple Mount in recent years in defiance of Israel's anger.
- With slightly over three weeks to go before Israel's elections, on April 9, Netanyahu finds himself in a bind. On the one hand, he must signal a tough, uncompromising line on this conflict to stem any defections by Likud Party voters to other right-wing parties. On the other hand, the last thing he needs right now is a blowup on the Temple Mount. The events leading up to the latest cycle of violence escaped the attention of various Israeli security agencies including the Shin Bet, Israeli Police and even the Mossad agency responsible for providing intelligence on Jordan. As aforementioned, the building in question is located adjacent to the Temple Mount gate known as Bab al-Rahma, which can only be accessed from the Temple Mount itself. Israel shut down the gate and adjacent building in 2003 under a court order after discovering that the nonprofit organization running the site was not legally registered and was associated with Hamas. The building was locked and empty until last month.
- "The closure order expired," a senior Israeli source dealing with the crisis told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "When the Waqf realized it, they quickly organized a tour of the site for the media and declared the building open for public prayers." Prayer rugs were spread out and prayer services began. Israel realized belatedly that the Waqf was recently expanded to include 18 rather than 11 members. "They added members considered close to the Palestinian Authority [PA] at the expense of Jordan's influence on the custodianship," an Israeli intelligence source told AI-Monitor, speaking on condition of anonymity. The additions to the Waqf, and reports that US President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace would soon be unveiled, created a clear Palestinian interest in illustrating the volatility of the Temple Mount issue and signaling to the United States and the rest of the world that anyone who lays a hand on the Temple Mount risks a regional conflagration.

- The contested building served as an ideal trigger for stirring up anger and highlighting Palestinian sovereignty claims to the site. Israeli intelligence did surmise that the Palestinians would try to stir up unrest in Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount ahead of the US peace plan presentation, but no one pointed to the specific building that would set off the clash. The expansion of the Waqf passed under the radars, taking Israel by surprise. Now Netanyahu is trapped. Hard-liners are accusing him of being soft on the Palestinians and trying to contain the conflict without insisting that the building be shuttered once again. On the other hand, he does not really want to set fire to Jerusalem and possibly the entire area just weeks before the April 9 elections. Netanyahu has tasked the head of his National Security Council, former senior Shin Bet official Meir Ben-Shabbat with handling the delicate issue. Over the past two weeks, Israeli delegations have visited Jordan, perceived as the only party able to restore calm. The Jordanians have reciprocated with visits to Jerusalem. Earlier this week, the palace in Amman issued an urgent order to the Waqf to exercise restraint and de-escalate tensions, but the unrest continued.
- Hamas is doing its best to open a “second front” with Israel in East Jerusalem. Erdogan’s Turkey is enthusiastically adding fuel to the flames. Hamas, which received March 11 its latest cash aid installment from Qatar, via the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, is restoring calm in the Gaza Strip but needs an external front on which to keep harassing Israel without paying a price. The Temple Mount is an ideal solution. Since the PA cannot afford to be far behind Hamas in confronting Israel, it too has entered the fray and is trying hard to fan the flames. Israel is now gearing up for Friday, March 15, when tens of thousands of Muslims will converge on the Temple Mount for weekly prayers, fearing the event could spark riots. “On any other day we can prevent them from breaking into the building with relative ease because there aren’t too many people there,” a senior Israeli diplomatic source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. “But on Friday, with the Temple Mount filled with tens of thousands of people, thousands of police will be required to control the situation.”
- Right now, no one in Israel is willing to deploy thousands of Israeli police officers to face off the Friday Muslim worshippers. Netanyahu is trying to buy time. Israel went back to the Magistrate’s Court in Jerusalem to ask for an extension of the closure order that expired to allow it to shut down the building once again. The Shin Bet has issued an opinion justifying this move on security grounds. On March 12, the court rejected the state’s petition. At the same time, a compromise is in the works that would not allow the building to be turned into a mosque and leave Israel and Jordan to decide its fate together. Jordan’s monarchy is also in a bind. King Abdullah does not want riots on the Temple Mount, presenting him as a weak ruler. On the other hand, he cannot appear to be doing Israel’s bidding. Abdullah and Netanyahu are in fact in a similar bind — both want calm restored, neither can afford to compromise and appear weak.
- Given this state of affairs, everyone is gearing up for Friday prayers. On March 12, a firebomb was thrown from the Bab al-Rahma building at the Israeli Police position on the Temple Mount, slightly injuring a policewoman. Police vacated the site and violence broke out, but did not spread beyond the compound. No one is prepared to promise that similar violence will not erupt

this coming Friday when the Temple Mount is packed with Muslim worshippers and Israeli Police.