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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, March 7*

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# News Excerpts

March 7, 2019

Ha'aretz

## **Blue White Platform: Separation But No Disengagement**

Blue White, the new party headed by Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, released its party platform on Wednesday, committing the party to pursuing a regional conference with Arab countries to “deepen the processes of separation from the Palestinians, while uncompromisingly protecting the security interests of the country and the Israeli army’s freedom of action everywhere.” The platform states that there will be no additional “disengagement,” a reference to the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The party will “strengthen the settlement blocs and enable normal life anywhere Israelis live.” The Jordan Valley will be the eastern security border of Israel, and a united Jerusalem will be Israel’s eternal capital, the platform states.

Times of Israel

## **In Recording, Gantz Warns Against Binational State**

Gantz vowed to an off-the-record gathering of party activists on Sunday that major settlement blocs would not be evacuated, but he nevertheless sought ways to separate from the Palestinians. “We don’t want to control the Palestinians,” he said. “What do you want? To expel them? Working on the assumption that they live on that land, and that there are millions here on both sides, in the end we have to reach an arrangement of some sort. And we can’t let that arrangement endanger our security... [New Right Leader Naftali] Bennett and farther to his right risk turning Israel into a binational or nondemocratic state. One of the two. We don’t want either one. We don’t have a choice except to look for a responsible, safe, non-unilateral diplomatic arrangement.”

Ha'aretz

## **Lapid Outlines Demands for Peace With Palestinians**

On Wednesday, Lapid said, “We need to separate from the Palestinians, and we need to do it on four terms that to me are essential... Israeli security should stay in Israeli hands,” enabling the army to enter Palestinian territory if they are aware of terrorists planning an attack on Israelis. The second was that the Jordan Valley should remain in Israeli hands. Thirdly, “there is no such thing as the right of return,” said Lapid, referring to the Palestinian demand to return to pre-1948 lands. The final demand is that Jerusalem remain undivided, “because countries do not divide their own capitals... It will be a very tough agreement that we are going to reach, and then your [younger] generation will have to take this into something more. But we need to start,” Lapid said.

Times of Israel

## **Elections Committee OKs Jewish Extremist, Not Arab List**

The Central Elections Committee on Wednesday disqualified the Arab-Israeli party Ra'am-Balad from running in the upcoming elections. The committee, staffed by Knesset lawmakers, also voted to disqualify a member of the Arab-Jewish party, Hadash-Ta'al. The Supreme Court will have final say on both decisions, which ignored recommendations from the Attorney General. Earlier Wednesday, it rejected petitions to disqualify the Jewish extremist party Otzma Yehudit.

Jerusalem Post

## **Saudi Report: US Plan Divides Jerusalem and Old City**

Reporter Hadeel Oueis for the Saudi paper Al Riyadh, claimed that President Trump's peace plan will divide Jerusalem. She tweeted that "the Old City of Jerusalem will be divided... the Arab and Christian quarters will go to the [Palestinian Authority], while the Jewish and Armenian quarters will fall under Israeli control." Oueis added that "Arab areas adjacent to Palestinian Area A and B will go to a future Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem."

Times of Israel

## **Israel, Jordan Holding Talks to End Temple Mount Conflict**

High-level Israeli and Jordanian officials held talks Wednesday evening in an effort to end the conflict over a contested religious area on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The closure of an area near the Golden Gate has ignited tensions between Palestinian worshipers and Israeli police. Worshipers have forced it open and entered on several occasions. Jordan oversees the Waqf, the Islamic custodians of the Temple Mount.

Gallup

## **Support for Israel Falls Among Democrats and Republicans**

A new Gallup survey found that the 59% of Americans say they sympathize more with the Israelis than the Palestinians, down from 64% in 2018 and marking the lowest number since 2009. The percentage of Republicans saying they sympathize more with Israel fell from 87% to 76%, while Democratic sympathy fell from 49% to 43%.

Times of Israel

## **Jewish Home Leader Apologizes for LGBT Slurs**

The leader of the Union of Right Wing Parties appeared to compare LGBT people to dogs in an interview Wednesday and then swiftly apologized for his remarks. Rabbi Rafi Peretz whose Jewish Home party recently merged with the extremist Otzma Yehudit, said that while he didn't mind gay people expressing their sexuality in private, he objected to the visibility in Israel.

## Why Netanyahu is Ignoring Tensions with Palestinians

By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist

- A consensus continues to grow in Israel that another round of violence with the Palestinians is in the offing. The signs are evident in a series of events and escalations on all fronts. Despite this evidence and warnings by professionals and the heads of Israel's security agencies, no one is lifting a finger to prevent a conflagration despite the potential for heavy losses on both sides. Why? Israel's April 9 elections. At any other time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — a generally responsible leader with an aversion to adventurism — would have convened the Security Cabinet and security chiefs and attempted to douse the flames. These, however, are not normal times. Netanyahu is in the throes of a desperate battle for political and personal survival that leaves him disinclined to extinguish such fires. In this fight, Netanyahu is competing for the support of right-wing voters against the likes of the New Right's Naftali Bennett, HaBayit HaYehudi's Bezael Smotrich and Yisrael Beiteinu's Avigdor Liberman. Any move on his part signaling hesitancy or moderation could harm his prospects for victory.
- In recent weeks, Bennett, Liberman, Smotrich and Netanyahu have been going at each other with combative declarations, vehemently right-wing positions and blatant contempt for the Palestinians even as tensions with the Palestinians increase. All that remains is to pray that the explosion can somehow be staved off until April 10 and hope that after election day someone somewhere will come to his or her senses and try to restore calm. For now, only the Egyptians are attempting to do so. The storm clouds are gathering. In recent days, Palestinians in Gaza have been launching explosives-bearing balloons toward Israeli border communities. These are different from the “incendiary” balloons and kites set on fire that caused numerous wildfires for almost a year but did not result in casualties. At the same time, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have intensified their retaliation, with tanks shelling Hamas positions every time a balloon explodes in Israeli territory.
- Violent protests and nightly clashes between Palestinians and Israeli troops along the Gaza border fence are escalating. A delegation of Egyptian intelligence officials visited Israel and Gaza March 5 in an attempt to mediate, but without apparent success. Financial pressure on Gaza is also increasing, mostly at the instigation of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is also under financial pressure and is repeatedly slashing Palestinian Authority (PA) funding to officials in Gaza. This month, the PA refused to accept the tax revenues that Israel collects on its behalf to protest Israel's decision to deduct an amount equivalent to what the Palestinians pay the families of inmates in Israeli jails, including those convicted of terrorism. The productive cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security agencies is also at risk. Two other events also threaten the relative stability in the West Bank. One is the decision by Israeli prison authorities, under the direction of Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, to install jamming equipment in security prisons to prevent Palestinian inmates from using cell phones smuggled in to them. The move has set off widespread unrest among prisoners and is spreading beyond the prison walls to the West Bank.

- f even more potential to cause volatility is the decision by the Islamic Waqf to reopen the Bab al-Rahma building, which Israel shut down in 2003. An improvised mosque has been set up on the site, next to the Gate of Mercy in Jerusalem's Old City. On March 4, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ordered the site cleared within a week. The Netanyahu government cannot afford to back down. In ordinary times, Netanyahu would have rolled up his sleeves, called Jordan's King Abdullah and other influential Muslims and ordered Israeli security forces to do their best to ease tensions. This being an election season, however, the two sides keep thumbing their noses at each other. The Temple Mount and Jerusalem are at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and are two of its most cogent symbols. The Israeli political right, like the Palestinians, will not consider any concessions on this issue. With Netanyahu fighting for every vote on the right to avoid losing to the rival Blue and White alliance, caution is not an option. Faced with the prospect of a defeat at the ballot box that could hasten his indictment on corruption charges and send him to jail, Netanyahu appears to be losing control. It is unclear whether he will step on the brakes before it's too late.
- The IDF's latest annual threat assessment, issued at the beginning of 2019, warns of the increased prospect of Palestinian violence. Nonetheless, steps have not been taken to prevent such an outcome. Lt. Gen. (res.) Gadi Eizenkot, former IDF chief of staff, warned last September that a conflagration in the Palestinian arena was a far greater risk for Israel than any other threat. The way he saw it, a bloody conflict with the Palestinians could last for years — like the first (1997-2003) and second (2000-2005) intifadas — and be far harder to end than short-lived wars on other fronts — for instance the 34-day Second Lebanon War (2006). Eizenkot had been successful during his 2015-19 term in containing an outbreak of knife attacks against Israelis. He prevented its escalation into widespread violence, at a relatively low cost, thanks to a policy of containment and restraint and differentiating between the assailants and the broader Palestinian society. There is no certainty that Israel would today be able to contain a similar outbreak to the same extent. On March 4, three Palestinians on the West Bank threw firebombs at an IDF post and then drove their car into a group of Israeli soldiers. Experts have described the car-ramming as “unusual” in the perpetrators first hurling the firebombs at targets.
- Another key question is how long Abbas will continue to restrain Palestinian security forces and direct them to prevent clashes with Israelis. The recent loss of US financial support for the security forces, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars a year, has created an unprecedented economic crisis for the PA, and that does not bode well. At 83, Abbas is a sick man facing the toughest decision of his life: What legacy does he want to leave? Will he decide, in the twilight of his tenure, to make a U-turn and let his people launch another confrontation with Israel or will he stick to his long-standing stance against terror and his conviction that it harms the Palestinian cause? Either way, with or without Abbas, Israel and the Palestinians are careening toward a point of no return at which a clash appears to be inevitable.

## The Real Enemy

By Alex Fishman, Senior Columnist

- A delegation of Egyptian intelligence officers landed at Ben Gurion Airport on Tuesday morning, led by the director of the “Palestine desk,” General Omar Halfi. The group of Israeli officers who waited for them drove them directly to the Kirya in Tel Aviv for talks with the top security echelon to find a formula that could somewhat lower the ever-growing tension ahead of an explosion in the Gaza Strip. The Egyptians arrived with a list for Israeli commitments to improve the living conditions in Gaza: water, electricity, expanding the fishing zone, increasing the quantity of goods from Israel and more. The next day, the Egyptians left for Gaza with the Israeli answers, but then it turned out that Israel’s commitments were not enough. So on Wednesday the Qatari envoy to the region, Mohammed al-Emadi, was called in, because Hamas demanded that Qatar increase its monthly allowance from USD 15 million to USD 20 million. It also emerged that the work projects that the UN was supposed to arrange for the Gaza Strip had not yet begun.
- That’s how it happened that the Egyptians went yesterday to the Gaza Strip with a partial package. Last week they tried to do their part to dispel the tension by releasing Hamas prisoners, but contrary to expectations, Hamas did not leverage their release for mass celebrations that would highlight its leadership’s achievements. Hamas wants electricity and water—now. It is demanding that a new Israel Electric Corporation line, which was laid to provide electricity for Gaza, come online immediately. We will see the results of the latest round of Egyptian efforts on the border fence by the end of this week: if there is a big explosion, it will be a sign that the Israeli-Egyptian package was unacceptable to the Gazan side. If the flames stay at their current level, it will mean that there is still something to talk about. At the moment, both sides are one step away from the abyss. One small blow, and we will clash.
- Furthermore, this fragile situation is compounded by another major factor that is liable to turn the situation upside down. It turns out that Israel and Hamas have a common enemy: the Islamic Jihad organization. Israel, as it always has and for an unclear reason, does everything possible to strengthen Islamic Jihad against Hamas. This is despite the fact that Islamic Jihad is responsible for the majority of the rocket fire incidents, the anti-tank missile fire in the last few months and the sniper fire against Israel, and whose leaders—who are hiding among Hizbullah in the Dahiya Quarter in Beirut under the leadership of Ziad al-Nakhalah—made a decision to resume its military activity from the Gaza Strip. Its representatives in Gaza also stopped coordinating their military activity with Hamas in the joint “war room” of all the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip. Hamas therefore finds itself facing off against a rogue organization that acts contrary to its agenda. Islamic Jihad is careful to time its military provocations to when Hamas is holding some sort of dialogue with Israel or Egypt about a truce arrangement or relief measures—and when it attacks, Israel attacks Hamas installations in response. So we can assume that if there are any signs of understandings ahead of this weekend, Islamic Jihad will try to sabotage them. It will be enough for one sniper mercenary to

hit an Israeli for Gaza to burn. And when Israel does not address Islamic Jihad, it encourages further anarchy that will ultimately lead to a ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

- Hamas, for its part, is waging an ineffective battle against the rogue organization. For example, a few days ago, Hamas's internal security organization arrested Hashem Salam, an Islamic Jihad figure who converted from Sunni to Shiite Islam and formed a pro-Iranian organization of his own in the Gaza Strip. After all, that's how it starts: today it is a small, Iranian-bankrolled charity that supports widows and orphans, but if we don't pay attention, tomorrow it will be another Iranian military organization in Gaza. Hamas realizes very well the danger of pro-Iranian organizations, but Israel treats Islamic Jihad as a secondary enemy. Whereas Hamas is a political movement, Islamic Jihad is a military organization: it does not recognize the PLO as representing the Palestinian people and it views itself as a fighting elite with the goal of liberating Palestine. It has more rockets in the Gaza Strip today than Hamas. It is an immediate enemy, and it is the organization that will set the border on fire.