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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 14, 2020

Times of Israel

US Assured UAE It Won't Back Annexation Before 2024

The Trump administration gave the UAE a commitment during normalization negotiations that Washington would not recognize Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank until 2024 at the earliest, sources with direct knowledge of the matter told The Times of Israel. According to three sources, Emirati officials, led by the UAE's Ambassador to the US Yousef Al Otaiba, focused on seeking assurances from the US, rather than Israel. A key priority for the UAE during the negotiations was receiving a commitment from the US that it withholds its support for annexation if Netanyahu once again began promising to immediately carry it out, the sources said. The Trump administration is hoping to use the final year of its hypothetical second term to "hold the Palestinians' feet to the fire," using the possibility of it otherwise backing annexation as a last piece of leverage to bring the PA to the table, another source said.

Jerusalem Post

PM Signs Deals with UAE & Bahrain, Lockdown Expected

Prime Minister Netanyahu [left](#) for Washington as Israel prepared to lock down to combat the spread of coronavirus. Netanyahu emphasized the historic nature of the trip, in which he is set to sign normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain, only four days after the latter announced official ties with Israel. The two countries' foreign ministers are expected to join him for the ceremony at the White House on Tuesday. The drafts of the agreements were not yet completed as of Sunday evening, and it remained unclear as to whether the document Israel and the UAE will sign will be called a peace treaty or simply normalization. Because there was less time to prepare, the Bahrain-Israel agreement will be more declarative and will not be as detailed as the one with the UAE. [Morocco](#) is expected to allow direct flights from Israel as the next step in President Trump's normalization efforts, Channel 12 reported. [See also "PM Announces 3-Week Lockdown, Warns It May Last Longer" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Ynet News

Bahrain Says Deal Helps Palestinians; PA Recalls Envoy

Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa stressed the importance of reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians. The PA however, took a different view of the announcement, issuing a statement slamming [the decision](#). It also said it has recalled its ambassador to Bahrain for consultations. The Hamas terror group, which has long been a rival to the Fatah movement, also expressed dissatisfaction with Bahrain's announcement. The Palestinians have seen a steady erosion in once-unified Arab support -- one of the few cards they still held as leverage against Israel -- since Trump began pursuing an unabashedly pro-Israel agenda. [See also "Bahrain Deal Spotlights Saudi's Stealth Normalization with Israel" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Reuters

Oman Welcomes Bahrain-Israel Normalization Decision

Oman welcomes Bahrain's decision to normalize relations with Israel and hopes it will contribute to Israeli-Palestinian peace, Oman state media said. "Oman hopes this new strategic path taken by some Arab countries will contribute to bringing about a peace based on an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and on establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as capital," the government statement said. Israel's intelligence minister said a few days after the UAE-Israel accord was announced on Aug. 13 that Oman could also formalize ties with Israel. In 2018, Netanyahu visited Oman and discussed peace initiatives in the Middle East with then-Omani leader Sultan Qaboos. **Oman** has maintained its neutrality. It has kept friendly relations with a range of regional actors, including arch-foes the US and Iran. [See also "After Bahrain and UAE, Which Arab State Next for Israel Ties?" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

PLO, Hamas to Hold Rallies Decrying UAE, Bahrain Deal

Palestinian factions including Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction of the PLO and the Hamas announced a "day of popular rejection" to protest the signing of normalization deals between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. "We call on the vital forces, civil, public, student, and feminist institutions along the width and breadth of our beloved Arab homeland. Will not the Arab flag of pride and the Palestinian flag be raised in condemnation and rejection to this shameful agreement on this black day?" the joint Palestinian leadership said in a statement. It will be the first attempted popular action undertaken since a highly publicized meeting of Palestinian faction leaders of September 3, including both PA President Abbas and Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh. That meeting concluded with the creation of a committee to release recommendations for joint Palestinian political action. The meeting was received with skepticism by many Palestinians, who have seen many reconciliations attempts between their divided leadership come and go without success. [See also "Jordan Says the Necessary Steps to Achieve a Fair Peace Should Come from Israel" \(Reuters\)](#)

Al-Monitor

Home Demolitions in West Bank Spiked During Pandemic

The number of Palestinian homes demolished by Israel in the West Bank has increased in recent months and further exposed displaced residents to the coronavirus, the UN said. From March to August, 389 Palestinian-owned structures were razed. In just the month of August, 205 people lost their homes, the highest displacement figure since January 2017. The UN and human rights organizations say the policy amounts to collective punishment. According to the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs **OCHA**, building permits are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain from Israel, describing the processing as "restrictive and discriminatory." The Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories (COGAT), Israel's military-run body handling civilian matters in the territories, told AFP it had an "obligation to maintain order." [See also "Israel Rejects Over 98% of Palestinian Building Permit Requests in West Bank's Area C" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

US, Iran to Face off at UN's Top Court Over Sanctions

The US and Iran are set to face off at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), also known as the World Court, over the US pullout from the 2015 nuclear deal. At the head of the matter are the sanctions that the US reimposed on Tehran after withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018; Iran argues the move came as a violation of the 1955 "Treaty of Amity" between the two countries. In response, the US formally ended the 1955 treaty, signed long before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which saw ties between the two countries deteriorate from friendship to hostility. The coming weeks will see the two countries clash over whether the court, which was established in the wake of World War II to resolve disputes between UN members, has jurisdiction in the matter after Tehran turned to it in 2018. In October of that year, the ICJ ruled that some of the sanctions breached the accord and ordered restrictions on humanitarian goods eased as it works its way through the case. The US, which has accused Iran of using the ICJ for "propaganda" purposes, will address the court on Monday; Tehran will hold the floor Wednesday. [See also "Iran Said Plotting to Assassinate Us Envoy to South Africa to Avenge Soleimani" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

Turkey: U.S. Needs to Return to Neutral Stance on Cyprus

Turkey said that the US needed to return to a neutral stance on Cyprus, after Washington and Nicosia signed a memorandum of understanding to create a training center. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said earlier this month that the US would lift a 33-year arms embargo on Cyprus and deepen its security cooperation with Nicosia. During a visit to Cyprus, Pompeo said on Saturday that Washington remained "deeply concerned" about Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean, where it is at a standoff with Greece and Cyprus over maritime areas thought to be rich in natural gas. "The memorandum of understanding will not serve peace and stability in the eastern Mediterranean and will damage the solution of the Cyprus problem," Turkey's Foreign Ministry said. It added that the recent steps by the US increased the tensions in the eastern Mediterranean. "We invite the U.S. to return to the neutrality policy it traditionally follows on the island of Cyprus and to contribute to the efforts aimed at the solution of the Cyprus issue," the ministry said.

The Domino Effect

By Shimrit Meir

- **The announcement about the impending agreement felt like a rerun of the agreement with the Emirates: Trump was nominated for another Nobel Peace Prize—which he has little chance of receiving—Gaza automatically set fire pictures of Bahrain King Hamad Ibn Isa al-Khalifah, while reactions in Israel divided as usual between the Bibi-ists who cheered inordinately and the sourpusses who noted that Bahrain—yes, yes, Bahrain too—is not a liberal democracy and that the Sunni majority there rules the Shiite majority in a manner that is not very nice. But there are, nonetheless, a few things that make the Israeli-Bahraini agreement interesting in its own right. First, the very fact that it happened shows that the pilot plan has been a success: the normalization festival between Israel and the Emirates was met with relative equanimity in the Arab world, and the Palestinians were unable to ruin the party and to enlist support against it either in the Arab League or on the Arab street.**
- **The Saudis, on whom the minority Sunni regime in Bahrain relies and to a degree also takes orders from, monitored events closely and decided that a green light could be given to another peace agreement. Second, the Palestinians are coming to grips with the fact that this was not a one-time event but, rather, is a wave, which they are calling “a second Nakba.” The leaders of the Arab states, and even worse, what is known as “the Arab street,” have turned their backs on them. The hard truth for the Palestinians is that even if many Arabs would be happy were Palestine to be freed, its leaders haven’t been forced to pay a particularly steep price by preferring Israel over the Palestinians. This is a political and diplomatic failure, but most importantly—it is a huge failure in the battle over the Arab mindset. It takes real talent to take an issue that enjoys an almost total consensus—such as Palestine, Jerusalem, el-Aqsa—and to wear it down to the point of it being just another issue in contention, just one of many.**
- **Incidentally, the most infuriating thing for the Palestinians is Kushner’s insistence on including a section in the agreements that enables Muslim worshippers from the Emirates and from Bahrain to worship at el-Aqsa Mosque. Under the guise of ensuring freedom of religion to Muslims, this is implicit recognition of Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem and of its control over the holy sites to Islam. Where will they go from here? In contrast to the cynical Israelis, there are some officials in the White House who still hope that even if Abu Mazen doesn’t, the leader who succeeds him will come to terms with the fact that they are going to have to show flexibility and change direction. But in reality, it appears that the Palestinians’ recalculation of course is not steering them in the direction of negotiations, but in the opposite direction. People like Nabil Shaath have even begun to speak out loud about the possibility of a new Intifada that is coordinated with Hamas.**
- **If the Palestinians have despaired, then the Iranians are feeling besieged since, in contrast to the focus on economic ties and trade in the agreement with the Emirates, the focus of the new agreement with Bahrain will be on military and intelligence cooperation**

versus neighboring Iran. The Revolutionary Guard has threatened to respond to the Israeli-Bahraini “stupidity.” The Iranians can annoy the Bahrainis in many ways, including by agitating the Shiite population, some of whom are under their influence, but it seems that there is always some price to pay for peace.

A Leap into the Abyss

By Ben Caspit

- **Binyamin Netanyahu has been in this situation once before, in which he had to make a tough decision regarding a major threat and had to choose between two dangerous options. The last time was between the years 2009 and 2013, when Netanyahu deliberated, along with the group of ministers close to him, whether to attack the Iranian nuclear infrastructure. The security establishment's position, in all of its branches, was uniform. It was well phrased by the Mossad director at the time, the late Meir Dagan: "Iran should be attacked in order to prevent it from attaining nuclear capability, but this decision must only be made at the last minute, when the sword is placed against our neck. We are far from that point." Netanyahu thought otherwise, but he was in a minority. He could have enlisted a majority in the security cabinet and given the order. It would have been carried out. But that wasn't the decision he made. I believe that with hindsight, he is very pleased today with his decision. The majority of the experts believe that if Israel had attacked Iran during those years, Iran would be a nuclear power today. Netanyahu realized that things hadn't yet reached the last minute. He knew that the sword was not placed against our neck and that there was a lot that could be done before taking a huge gamble that could precipitate a major catastrophe.**
- **Coping with the coronavirus today very much resembles those years. Israel is about to be the only Western country to impose a second lockdown. Why? Nobody can provide a convincing explanation. The country that had the longest and most draconian lockdown is Peru, and the mortality numbers there are sky high. You don't have to be an epidemiologist to realize that a lockdown does not solve the coronavirus problem, but only creates a temporary lull. It does not sever the chain of infection, it does not close circles, it does not isolate the coronavirus hotspots and it is a kind of sledgehammer being used on butter that is melting in the sun. Its effect fades a short time afterwards and the situation reverts to its former state.**
- **We learned on Friday that the healthcare system had "raised a red flag." They had reached their red line. The sword was placed against the neck. On Sunday—i.e. yesterday—we learned that this was not in fact the case. Aside from the director of Rambam Hospital in Haifa, all the other directors believe that the system is not collapsing. It is worn thin, but it is alive and well, treating and caring. The national occupancy rate in the coronavirus wards is 67%. They too are not collapsing. Following is a selection of quotes that I recorded yesterday from the mouths of experts: Dr. Mickey Dudkevich, the director of Hillel Yaffe Hospital in Hadera: "We are not at the stage of collapse, all the hospitals are overburdened, but are not collapsing." Prof. Yehuda Adler, the dean of the Faculty of Health Science at the Ramat Gan Academic College, told me harsher things on Radio 103 FM. He said that a lockdown is a disaster that will cause more damage than benefit. "The system is not collapsing, there is a lot of maneuvering room, anyone who decides on a lockdown now is making a disastrous mistake."**

- **The most vehement comments were provided by Prof. Hagai Levine, who is both an epidemiologist and a member of the cabinet of coronavirus experts. “We are being sold the lie as if there is no choice,” Prof. Levine said on Hahadashot. “There are a lot of alternatives to a general lockdown.” When asked whether this was a step of despair, he replied: “This isn’t a step of despair, this is a step of suicide, or actually, a step of execution.” Levine further said: “They are scared to make a political decision, they are scared of pressure groups, they are scared to do the right thing. This is utter irresponsibility. The risk has to be managed intelligently, if we are on the brink of an abyss, then a lockdown will push us into it.”**
- **I have no idea who is right. What is certain is that the decision-making process is more suited to an eastern European shtetel in the 19th century and not to a high-tech nation that launches satellites into space and intercepts rockets in mid-flight. The fact that in the last seven months nobody strengthened the hospitals in any meaningful way, such as by adding new wards, new beds and new staff, is a fiasco on an historic scale. The lockdown is meant to ease the pressure on the healthcare system, but nobody knows how to measure or how to draw a comparison between the damages of the lockdown and the damages of the pandemic. Will the continued collapse of the economy, will hundreds of thousands of new unemployed people, will depression, will elderly who are cut off from their families, will side effects, morbidity and other innumerable damages and disasters be worse than the pandemic itself or less bad? We will learn the answer on our own flesh in the near future. For now, we deserve a pat on the back: Israel is about to set a new world record and to be the first serious country to go into lockdown for the second time. This is on the assumption that Israel truly is a serious country.**