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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 10, 2020

Jerusalem Post

PMO Presents Plan to Reduce Violence in Arab Sector

Prime Minister Netanyahu attended a special hearing by the Committee on Eradicating Crime in Arab Society, at which a plan for tackling the challenge was unveiled. However, several Arab MKs said the long-anticipated plan falls short of real change. The proposed five-year plan, which would run from 2021 to 2025. It centers on four key elements that are meant to fight serious crime, increase enforcement and improve economic activities in the Arab sector. This includes building more police stations, recruiting more Arab police officers, using technological means to find and track criminals and implementing new legal measures to strengthen enforcement against weapons offenses. It would also involve stepping up collaboration between police and the local authorities. [See also "Israeli-Arab Lawmaker Cooperates with Netanyahu's Likud" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Ynet News

Knesset Committee Debates Weapons Sale to UAE

The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee met to discuss the sale of 50 F-35 jets and other advanced weapons systems by the US to the UAE. The meeting revolved around the question of Netanyahu's knowledge of and tacit agreement to the sale and ended without resolution. Committee chairman Zvi Hauzer said the matter calls for more deliberations. Opposition lawmaker [Nitzan Horowitz](#) said that Netanyahu was aware of the US's intent to complete the sale as part of the peace deal and had lied to the Israeli public and the defense establishment. The State Department sent Congress an informal notification of plans to sell defense equipment, including precision-guided munitions, non-precision bombs and missiles to the UAE. The informal notification about the ordnance came just after the Trump administration informed Congress it planned to sell sophisticated armed aerial drones to the UAE.

Jerusalem Post

Katz Vows to Deduct PA Tax Funds Over Terrorists' Salaries

Israel will once again freeze part of the funds it transfers to the Palestinian Authority due to the PA's continued policy of paying monthly stipends to terrorists and their families, Finance Minister Israel Katz said. Katz's statement is a reversal of former decision in May to give the Palestinians an \$228m [loan](#) that effectively returned all the tax and tariff funds Israel deducted since the Knesset passed the Pay for Slay Law in 2018. That law requires the gov't to deduct the funds the PA pays terrorists and their families each month from their taxes and tariffs. The Defense Ministry must present a report on the PA's terrorist salaries each year. The PA in May decided to stop accepting money collected by Israel in anticipation of Israel applying sovereignty to parts of the West Bank. As such, the deductions are not currently relevant, but there have been reports in recent weeks that they plan to take the funds again.

Reuters

UNRWA Appeals for Money to Pay Salaries

UNRWA said it needs \$70m by the end of the month to pay 28,000 staff in full for November and December. It also issued an emergency call for donations to avoid the suspension of essential services. The agency was badly hit by President Trump's decision to cut all funding to UNRWA, which amounted to more than \$300m a year. The US was by far the biggest donor to UNRWA, which provides education, health and relief services to around 5.7m registered refugees. But there have also been cuts from other donors, including in the Gulf, where some states recently signed U.S.-brokered normalization deals with Israel. President-elect Joe Biden is expected to resume funding to UNRWA, at least partially. But that is likely to take months, say UNRWA officials, too late to meet the hole in the agency's \$1.4b annual budget, including emergency programs for Gaza, Syria and COVID. [See also " Hamas Officials Warn That Gaza Could Return to Lockdown as Cases Rise Sharply" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Saeb Erekat, Veteran Palestinian Negotiator, Dies of COVID

Veteran Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat died aged 65 after developing complications from coronavirus. Erekat was in critical condition on a ventilator at Hadassah University Hospital at Ein Kerem since being admitted to the Israeli hospital mid-October. The hospital said last month that the treatment for Erekat was a "huge challenge" due to his lung transplant in 2017, saying he also had a "weakened immune system and bacterial infection" as well as suffering from coronavirus. His Fatah party announced his death in a statement. A relative and a Palestinian official confirmed he passed away, speaking on condition of anonymity out of privacy concerns. The American-educated Erekat was involved in nearly every round of peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians going back to the landmark Madrid conference in 1991. [See also "Israel, World Reacts to Death of Palestinian Leader Saeb Erekat" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Arab Officials to Press Biden to Maintain Sanctions on Iran

Saudi Senior officials in Saudi Arabia went so far as to call Biden "a pro-Iranian president" who they say will adopt a "conciliatory policy toward Iran that will put the region at risk." Riyadh confirmed that US Special Representative for Iran [Elliot Abrams](#) was set to arrive in the kingdom as a part of a short trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia aimed at discussing the Iranian threat with senior officials in both countries. A senior Saudi official emphasized that no agreement to normalize ties between the two sides was currently in the works, the official did say that, Biden's entry into the White House would not negatively impact the kingdom's desire to maintain relations with Jerusalem. Instead, according to the official, a Biden administration would serve to bolster the alliance currently being forged between Israel and the moderate Arab states. A senior official in Abu Dhabi admitted there was "serious concern that the cabinet of Biden's advisors will be composed of former President Obama, and the Biden administration would remove sanctions on Iran." Officials in Egypt and Bahrain also expressed their disappointment at Biden's victory.

Jordanians Vote in Polls That Show Limits of Democracy

Jordanians began voting in elections set to keep parliament in the hands of tribal and pro-government deputies under a system that under-represents the cities where the Islamist and liberal opposition do best. Across the country, banners of around 1,700 candidates fluttered from signposts appealing to 4.64m eligible voters on mostly tribal and family loyalty. The elections coincide with public discontent as Jordan grapples with its worst economic crisis in many years, with unemployment and poverty aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Politicians appealed to Jordanians to turn out and vote amid widespread apathy and calls for a boycott of what many see as an almost toothless tribal-dominated assembly packed with pro-government loyalists and powerless to make change. Jordan faces the challenge of forging ahead with IMF-guided structural reforms to help recover from the pandemic's impact on its aid-dependent economy. The Muslim Brotherhood, the country's main opposition group, say they are participating in the polls even though the electoral law keeps them marginalized to avoid being in the political wilderness and ensure vocal opposition to the pro-Western government.

Armenia, Azerbaijan Agree to Russian-Backed Ceasefire

Armenia and [Azerbaijan](#) signed a Russian-backed ceasefire [agreement](#), ending weeks of fighting in the autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh region. The announcement sparked outrage in Armenia, with a protest gathering outside of gov't buildings in Yerevan. Furious rioters broke in, smashed windows and ransacked offices. Protesters also took over the parliament building and called for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's resignation. The ceasefire declaration comes after a series of victories for Azerbaijan, including a takeover of Shusha, the second-largest city in the ethnic-Armenian bastion. Hours before the announcement, Azerbaijan admitted to downing a Russian Mi-24 helicopter flying over Armenia. Azerbaijan apologized for the incident and offered to pay compensation, blaming the shooting of the helicopter on the "tense situation in the region and increased combat readiness" of its troops. Russia, which has a pact with Armenia, will send 1,960 peacekeepers with 90 armored vehicles to secure a corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia as part of the agreement. President Putin said the two sides would hold to the areas they currently control, stressing that it was "a total ceasefire." [See also "Israel-Azerbaijan Relations Likely to Improve Following Abraham Accords" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Hamas Is Morning Trump's Defeat, Abbas Is Celebrating and the Saudis Are Sulking

By Muhammad Shehada

- Since Joe Biden was declared president-elect Saturday, Ramallah's elite have been jubilant. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and the Palestinian Authority he heads, relish the hope that the dark storm unleashed by outgoing President Trump's "peace team" may finally fade away. But Abbas doesn't operate in a vacuum. Hamas is mourning Biden's victory, the UAE are smirking and the Saudis are sulking. For the last four years, it's been the administration's trademark to humiliate, isolate and bash the Palestinian leadership, sometimes hand-in-hand with fellow Arabs. Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner has made it his sacred goal not just to force Arab regimes to prematurely normalize relations with Israel and abandon the Palestinian cause, but to force a stampede on the Palestinians.
- Now, with Biden's win, what was once the Trump administration's closest Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia, has a problem. The man Kushner helped "put on top" of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, has excelled at making his WhatsApp mate proud. Indeed, it has not always been clear who owes and owns whom the most: MBS famously bragged that he had Kushner "in his pocket." The UAE were first to abandon Trump's sinking ship and officially praise Biden, even though they engaged in high visibility cheering for Trump during the campaign and vote count. They've got what they wanted – advanced weaponry, normalization with no consequences, and don't stand to lose much under Biden. That doesn't apply to MBS. Even UAE ruler Mohammed Bin Zayed's close subcontractor, and former Fatah strongman Mohammed Dahlan, was quick to call Biden's win a "positive development that limits the extreme risks of the Trump/Netanyahu alliance." This comes after Dahlan's supportive silence on the normalization frenzy; Trump's ambassador to Israel let slip that Dahlan is their favorite substitute candidate to lead the Palestinians, before withdrawing the remark.
- While much of the Arab World congratulated Biden officially and promptly, Saudi Arabia was the exception. It took Riyadh more than 24 hours to come out with a short congratulatory message for Biden and Kamala Harris. The Saudis seem to believe that Biden's presidency, with a potentially troublesome interest in human rights and Mideast stability, is a direct threat to MBS's survival in power, his war in Yemen, and his blockade on Qatar. But they clearly can't burn their bridges with the news administration.
- So, they're nurturing their online pro-Israel trolls, performatively offering evidence of civil norms and freedoms, while sending warm signals to Israel's government, perhaps hoping Netanyahu would again intercede with the White House (as he did after the Khashoggi murder) to rescue MBS. And the Saudi government abruptly enacted nominal socio-economic reforms towards migrant workers to showcase openness toward moderation. Indeed, the Gulf's troll ecosystem offers a concise snapshot of the region's changing winds in the wake of the US elections – and its relations with the Palestinians.

- **MBS's online troll project, which includes prominent Saudi royals, have relentlessly branded Palestinians as the Arab world's number one enemy, a narrative that has fitted perfectly with the Trump administration's aggressive pro-normalization policies. The UAE soon emulated this troll apparatus, even asking citizens to use a smartphone app to snitch on critics of Israel. With Trump ousted, the Kushner-sanctioned wave of Arab hostility towards the Palestinians seems to have subsided, although the state apparatuses in "normalized" Gulf states still maintain a heavy hand on domestic criticism of the Abraham Accords process. Remarkably, last Thursday, to the dismay of Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan voted for pro-Palestinian resolutions at the UN: they may have reached the limits of their reflexive anti-Palestinian stance.**
- **Though some prominent UAE trolls still offer Israel adulation, their attention is now far more concentrated on Turkey than the Palestinians. The pro-normalization Gulf states are engaged in an informal economic war with Ankara, including a consumer boycott of Turkish products. That dovetails nicely with Gulf assessments that Biden will continue, as he did in the campaign, to voice critical views on Erdogan. Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority leaders are reveling in the moment of respite provided by Biden's win. PA leaders are hopeful – almost excessively – that Biden will reverse Trump's catastrophic imprint on their rights. They hope the Biden White House will take annexation completely off the table, restore funding to the PA and UNRWA, and reestablish diplomatic relations.**
- **Though insufficient, these steps would surely make a difference to millions of increasingly despairing Palestinians, especially low-income civil servants whom Abbas hasn't paid in full for six months, ever since he cut relations with Israel. But for Hamas, rulers of Gaza, relief that Trump's era was ending is clouded by disappointment. All of Abbas' promises over the last few months – to reconcile with Hamas, to push to lift sanctions on Gaza, to renounce Oslo, to halt security coordination with Israel and to hold national elections – are now mere dust in the wind. Despite its barefaced hostility, Hamas saw Trump's administration as a catalyst to increasing the relevance of its platform and advocacy.**
- **They saw an opportunity in Abbas being isolated but holding on: Hamas feared that the US-Israel-Saudi-UAE axis would try to replace him with a Deal of the Century yes-man. Abbas' weakness, and his need to withstand US pressure, meant he needed Palestinian backing from all factions, including Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. That trigger for renewed efforts at intra-Palestinian reconciliation could have given Hamas a chance to join the PLO and influence its direction, and to push hard for unified Palestinian elections, which could have given it a significant, officially sanctioned presence in the West Bank. And a Trump reelection would have fueled the extreme rage and despair that Hamas could have exploited to ignite a third intifada in the West Bank, a possibility broached recently by Saleh Arouri, Hamas' deputy leader. Abbas felt compelled in recent months to put on a warmer face towards cooperation with Hamas, and not because he suddenly decided to adopt Hamas positions - that settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through negotiations with Netanyahu was an impossibility. It was because Abbas felt increasingly cornered, irrelevant, dejected, and enraged by Trump's obscene policies, and the betrayal of his fellow Arab leaders.**

- Now, poised to regain its relevance and good standing with the US – and subsequently with the Arab world – the PA sees no urgency to reconcile with a movement whose pro-resistance rhetoric will soon look irrelevant, if not embarrassing, when and if Biden revives the façade of the peace process. Why would Abbas now feel the need to fast-track Hamas undermining his Fatah party's rule in the West Bank? When I asked a moderate Hamas leader this weekend about the likelihood of Palestinians elections, he laughed, bitterly: "What elections? Does anyone in his right mind think that Abbas would go for elections now?"
- Sunday morning, Abbas issued a congratulatory statement on Biden's win, and expressed unconditional enthusiasm for working with the incoming administration. Tired and demotivated, Abbas is evidently willing to let bygones be bygones, even though Biden would keep the US embassy in Jerusalem, oppose the PA's bid to try Israel for alleged war crimes at the international criminal court, and would commend Israeli-Arab normalization.
- As for Hamas, its top leader, Ismael Haniyeh, made two separate remarks regarding the incoming Biden administration: both were uncompromising. One called on Biden to revoke the Trump Mideast deal and the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital; to end US pressure on Arab countries (i.e. Qatar) to normalize relations with Israel; and to respect Palestinian democratic choices (i.e. elections). In the other, during a speech at a virtual conference, Haniyeh warned Abbas that negotiations with Israel are both "useless" and a "trap," and that far more than the Palestinian cause needed soft power support from its allies, it needed support in the form of "money and weapons." But never mind Abbas or Hamas.
- When Biden tries to turn back time and restore relations with the Palestinians to the pre-Trump era, he should go the extra mile. Rather than resurrecting the exact same status quo ante, Biden should push for substantial change in the lives of Palestinians, particularly in the besieged, abandoned and increasingly unlivable Gaza Strip. He should also push for Palestinian elections, as a way for Palestinians to actually have say in their own future.
- Biden and his soon-to-be-appointed fleet of envoys content themselves with same old empty talk – rhetorical frowning on Israel's actions as "unhelpful to peace," lip service to the two-state solution – they would be assuring, at least in one way, that the incoming presidency is even worse for this part of the Middle East than Trump's. The Trump White House was at least blatant in its intentions: to squeeze the Palestinians until they gave up and begged for mercy. Biden has to make sure that pacifying Palestinians with aid and containing them through US-sponsored PA security forces isn't just the same strategy but dressed up in nicer clothes.

The Ungiving Tree

By Gilad Sharon

- Spending time with a herd of cows grazing in the pasture can teach a person a lot. There are all kinds of trees in the grazing pastures. There are large trees that provide good shade and under which fresh greens sprouts up that the cows enjoy; and there are other trees beneath which nothing grows. A real leader, a leader who possesses self-confidence, nurtures young leaders to succeed him when the time for that arrives. But the very opposite is currently happening in our party, the Likud. Netanyahu has crushed anyone who has shown any sort of potential. We have very talented young people in the Likud, but Netanyahu has politically destroyed anyone who has ever shown a smidgen of independence or talent.
- Why? Who knows what lurks in the hearts of men? Maybe it's a desire to rule forever, but that isn't the way things work in real life; everyone goes at one point or another, and it would be best to prepare for that in advance so as not to leave devastation in one's wake. The Likud's best interests oblige Netanyahu to nurture young leadership; his behavior is damaging to the Likud and may result in a fictitious party, such as Yamina, replacing us on the day after his departure. Simply because no young leaders were nurtured, and no young leaders remained—only scorched earth. The Likud's ministers and MKs know that perfectly well, but they are paralyzed with fear. They are afraid of airing even the faintest shadow of criticism. They have preferred to fawn and to grovel instead. But if we want the Likud to remain in power, it behooves us to speak the truth fearlessly.
- A lot can be learned about a leader by looking at the people whom he surrounds himself with. A strong and self-confident person surrounds himself with independent people, strong people who aren't afraid to speak their mind with him, even if their views contradict his own. That is the only way to learn from mistakes, to analyze processes and to improve. A weak person surrounds himself with puny yes-men, who tell him only what he wants to hear. When standing next to midgets, he appears to be a giant. A leader, from the moment he is elected to office, is no longer the leader of just one party or one camp; he is the leader of the country and of all its citizens. He needs to be a uniting figure, not a divisive one—and certainly not during a time of crisis. All of the “them or us” rhetoric needs to disappear. The leftists aren't our enemies. The Iranians, the terrorists and their supports, and the coronavirus—those are our enemies and it is they whom we need to fight. The leftists are our brothers. We have all suffered the economic damage as a result of the pandemic together; we all serve in the army together; and we all face a single shared fate together.
- Netanyahu has some very serious legal problems, but it isn't the entire right wing that is on trial, and neither is it the Likud. He alone is on trial. To paraphrase the famous quote from Louis XIV: The party isn't me. The Likud is a democratic and deeply rooted party that existed before Netanyahu and will continue to exist after him. I wish him to be cleared of any wrongdoing; another prime minister being sent to prison is the last thing that we need. He has much to his credit. Over the course of the years he has done a lot of

good things, and I want him to be treated with respect. But that doesn't mean saying amen to his every decision. It is important to air criticism when it exists, but to do so respectfully. And, with all due respect, it is untenable to subordinate an entire country or even an entire party, such as the Likud, to the personal problems of an individual person.