

Middle East Notes
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
March 19, 2015



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This issue of Middle East Notes (MEN) highlights Hamas' interest in a long term ceasefire with Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu's constant focus on Iran with little mention of the occupation, President Obama's possible more aggressive attitude on resolution of the Palestinian issue, documents clarifying that Israel knew that Egypt, Syria and Jordan were not planning to attack when beginning the Seven Day war, the impossibility of Israel being both democratic and the nation state of the Jewish people while denying the Palestinians their right to self-determination, settler violence against the Palestinians, and other issues.

Commentary: Reactions to the March 17 elections in Israel will be included in the next MEN. The challenges to reelected Prime Minister Netanyahu remain the same: fear of Iran, Israel's relationship with the U.S., the occupation of the West Bank and continuing oppression of Palestinians, Israeli expansion in East Jerusalem, crushing confinement of the Gaza population, settler violence, poverty and social unrest in Israel, to name a few.

- Avi Issacharoff writes that recently released documents show that Hamas has sent messages to Israel via Western diplomats indicating interest in a long-term ceasefire lasting for several years, in exchange for an end to the Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip.
- Allison Deger comments in Mondoweiss that when Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke to Congress in hopes of blocking a possible nuclear deal with Iran he did not mention the Palestinians once. To officials in the West Bank, this omission showed Netanyahu would rather the occupation stay invisible.
- Alex Fishman reports in Ynetnews that, now that he is free of electoral pressures and has been challenged by Netanyahu, Obama is making it clear to Israel and its supporters that the presidential treatment of the Palestinian issue is about to take on a much more aggressive attitude.
- Marjorie Cohn in Counterpunch writes that when Netanyahu spoke to Congress and AIPAC, he reiterated the claim that Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in self-defense during the Seven Day War. However declassified high-level documents from Britain, France, Russia and the United States reveal that Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were not going to attack Israel and Israel knew it.
- Gershon Baskin states in the Jerusalem Post that there is simply no way Israel can be both democratic and the nation state of the Jewish people if Israel continues to deny the Palestinians their right to self-determination.
- Akiva Eldar in Al-Monitor asks why is Israel still blind to settler violence against Palestinians. Despite resolutions by Israeli administrations to adopt the 2003 road map for peace and the Sason report on illegal West Bank outposts, settler violence against Palestinians continues unabated.
- Other articles of interest

1) Hamas offers long-term calm in exchange for end of blockade

Avi Issacharoff, The Times of Israel, March 9, 2015

Hamas recently sent a series of messages to Israel indicating interest in a long-term ceasefire lasting for several years, in exchange for an end to the Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip, sources told The Times of Israel.

Senior Hamas officials met with Western diplomats about the ceasefire, and also reached a number of understandings about the character of the ceasefire, also known as a *tahdiyya*. During the talks, Hamas officials emphasized that they were willing to agree on a ceasefire of at least five years (though some sources said the offer was for 15 years), during which time all military activities “above and below ground” from both parties would end. At the same time, the blockade on Gaza would be removed, including restrictions on exports, and Israel would allow the construction of a seaport and an airport.

The Western diplomats included Swiss Consul Paul Garnier, who has become the key figure in maintaining contacts with Hamas. Garnier visited Gaza a month ago, and met with several Hamas leaders, including Moussa Abu Marzouk, Bassem Naim, Ghazi Hamid, and others. Garnier presented these conditions to senior EU officials who are in touch with Israeli leaders.

Hamas discussed separately with outgoing United Nations peace process representative Robert Serry a possible ceasefire under the auspices of a Palestinian unity government. He said he hadn’t heard back from either Hamas or Israel, which he had also approached with his proposal.

In conversations with other diplomats, Hamas presented different terms for a ceasefire with Israel. One of the draft agreements reached The Times of Israel, with the following clauses:

- 1) All forms of military conflict between Israel and the Palestinians will cease.
- 2) Israel will commit to removing the blockade on Gaza, including: opening all crossings around Gaza; permitting unfettered import and export from Gaza; allowing the construction of a sea and air port.
- 3) The *tahdiyya* will last between three and five years starting from the moment the agreement is signed, but the two sides will finalize the exact length of the ceasefire.

A senior Hamas official confirmed ... that a number of meetings have been held between the organization’s leaders and a number of figures, including businessmen and diplomats.

He said Hamas would “not oppose” a long-term ceasefire if the blockade were lifted, and that the organization knows no agreement would happen before the elections on March 17.

In addition, days after Garnier’s last visit to Gaza on February 15, Hamas passed to the Quartet Middle East representative, Tony Blair, an English-language document which paints an ostensibly moderate picture. During the visit, Blair met with Gazan businessmen who gave him the document in Hamas’s name.

The document, presented here for the first time, includes extremely moderate positions for Hamas:

- 1) Hamas will not oppose the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines with Jerusalem as its capital, while not giving up the right of return of Palestinian refugees. (This language does not include an end to the conflict or claims against Israel, but does not demand a return either.)
- 2) Hamas is interested in maintaining the quiet, and wants to see the seaport and airport issue solved by indirect talks.
- 3) Hamas is bound by the Palestinian reconciliation agreement and other reconciliation agreements.
- 4) Hamas is interested in improved relations with the international community, and would like to discuss with it all issues related to stability and international peace.
- 5) Hamas demands the blockage be lifted.
- 6) Hamas demands that border crossings be opened and the rehabilitation of the Strip be sped up. ...

2) Palestinian leaders respond to Netanyahu's Congress speech

Allison Deger, Mondoweiss, March 9, 2015

... [W]hen Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to Congress in hopes of blocking a possible nuclear deal with Iran he did not mention the Palestinians once. To officials in the West Bank, this omission showed Netanyahu would rather the occupation stay invisible.

As Netanyahu addressed Congress, high-ranking Palestinian officials were busy trying to gain momentum from the international community on a series of on-going initiatives. The Palestinian Liberation Organization's Central Committee, Executive Committee and Fatah Council all held day long meetings in Ramallah and the agenda was full: they discussed plans to file a war crimes case against Israel over settlements and the summer war in Gaza, launch a boycott campaign against Israeli consumer goods from shops in the West Bank, seek another resolution at the Security Council and more daringly, announced the end to security coordination with the Israeli military. Between the discussions, some senior officials made statements about Netanyahu's speech. They were miffed that he did not talk about them and many also decried what they viewed as a call for war on Iran. In their view Iran was a distraction to the issue at hand, the occupation that they live under.

Chief Palestinian Negotiator Saeb Erekat said, "In his speech, Mr. Netanyahu wanted to shift the attention from the core of the conflict by not mentioning Palestine. It seems that the impunity granted to Israel by the U.S. Congress allows him to continue violating Palestinian rights without fearing any response. We also declare that Palestine supports a Middle East free of nuclear weapons, and in order to achieve that goal, Israel must allow the presence of international teams to check on Israel's nuclear facilities."

Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, the head of the Palestine National Initiative, said Netanyahu was "selling an old product that no one is buying, he is selling fear." Dr. Barghouti and his party represent Palestinians immersed in the non-violent struggle, weekly protests against Israel's separation wall. His group has tried to diversify the Palestinian struggle, where the grassroots can participate when collapsed negotiations yield little hope.

"It is really amazing how such a man has the guts to stand in front of congress in and the entire world without mentioning the Palestinian issue, the most important issue for Israelis," he said.

Spokesperson for the PLO Ashraf Khatib added, "It will be a mistake to give it [the speech] much importance. Netanyahu went to Washington because he has started an election campaign and he wants to inflate the region with more tension, and his agenda is an agenda of war."

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas addressed the speech indirectly. Netanyahu's Iran talk was regarded as campaign plug, although Israeli polls showed he made little gains from the internationally televised event. Abbas took a lighter tone than other Palestinian officials. "At this time Israel wants to put everything in hold because of the elections. It is unfortunate that Israel is doing this. But I say clearly and plainly that we have no business with the Israeli elections and we do not wish to express own view on whom we wish to be the next Prime Minister of Israel. Whomever the Israeli people will elect we will consider a peace partner and negotiate with," he said on Thursday.

Yet future negotiations seem unlikely. On Sunday Netanyahu's Likud party published a pamphlet relaying that the prime minister is done with supporting any sort of Palestinian statehood. The reason, like Netanyahu's Congress speech, was Iran.

"[T]he situation that has arisen in the Middle East, any evacuated territory would fall into the hands of Islamic extremism and terror organizations supported by Iran. Therefore, there will be no concessions or withdrawals, they are simply irrelevant," the pamphlet said.

3) For Obama and Israel, the party is over

Alex Fishman, Ynetnews, March 11, 2015

When ... Obama appointed Dr. Robert Malley as the person in charge of the Middle East at the White House, he gave the finger not only to ... Netanyahu, but also to the Jewish establishment in the U.S.

Dr. Malley is the complete opposite of Dennis Ross when it comes to the peace process. He gave Israel a hard time over its part in the failure of the talks in the Bill Clinton era, and he believes that a dialogue with Hamas is crucial in order to reach a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians. ... Although Obama wanted him in the White House, he was forced to take into account the campaign waged by the Jewish community leaders against his appointment.

But now that he is free of electoral pressures and has been challenged by Netanyahu, Obama is making it clear to Israel and to its supporters that the party is over. The presidential treatment of the Palestinian issue in the next two years is about to take on a much more aggressive attitude.

Israel, on the other hand, is for some reason developing a world view which maintains that the president is quickly approaching the status of a "lame duck." There are those who claim that he is already being discounted in Washington. And anyway, in three months' time, the Democratic Party will begin the primary election process to elect its next presidential candidate – and from that moment on, Obama is history. All eyes will be turned towards Hillary Clinton's election headquarters.

So we shouldn't get excited, people here are saying. We should try to get through the next three months quietly, establish a government, and then we will anyway be able to torpedo anything he decides on.

When it comes to domestic issues, with the current Congress, it's true that Obama will be unable to pass any legislation. But in terms of foreign policy, Obama has decided to invest the little political credit he has left in "bringing world peace" and leaving a mark on the pages of history. One of his main efforts is where everyone else has failed: The Middle East, and mainly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There are now two channels of action on the desk of the White House's Middle East department. The first is the "European initiative," which is working on a proposal to the United Nations Security Council for a permanent solution in the Middle East. The Europeans are currently devising two working papers. One talks about a "lean decision," which sets a timetable for the end of the occupation.

The second formula, the "fatter" one, is much more detailed and sets the parameters for an agreement. This formula meets most of the Palestinians' territorial and political demands, gives them an independent state within the 1967 borders with a capital in Jerusalem. On the other hand, it takes Israel's security considerations into account – including the demand that the Palestinians won't flood Israel with refugees – and demands that the Palestinians will recognize the Jewish state. The Palestinians had demanded from the Americans a permanent agreement which would be implemented within two years, while the European formula talks about three years of negotiations before the implementation.

The Americans have no intention of addressing the documents taking shape in Europe until after the elections in Israel. Only when the identity of government of the new Israeli government becomes clear, the Americans will delve deep into the documents so that they won't have to – when the time comes – veto the European proposal, even if they don't vote for it.

The second channel lying on the table is also waiting for the Israeli election results. It is a renewal of the American peace initiative, which will have behind it a very skilled, determined person, who isn't very fond of the current government: The president's new man in the Middle East. ...

Read the entire piece using the link in the headline above.

4) [The big lie of the Six-Day War](#)

Marjorie Cohn, Counterpunch, March 4, 2015

On March 3, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued an impassioned plea to Congress to protect Israel by opposing diplomacy with Iran. Referring to “the remarkable alliance between Israel and the United States” which includes “generous military assistance and missile defense,” Netanyahu failed to mention that Israel has an arsenal of 100 or 200 nuclear weapons.

The Six-Day War – The day before he delivered that controversial address, Netanyahu expressed similar sentiments to AIPAC, Israel’s powerful U.S. lobby. He reiterated the claim that Israel acted in the 1967 Six-Day War “to defend itself.” The narrative that Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in self-defense, seizing the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, has remained largely unquestioned in the public discourse. Israel relies on that narrative to continue occupying those Palestinian lands. And the powerful film “Censored Voices,” which premiered at Sundance in February, does not challenge that narrative.

But declassified high-level documents from Britain, France, Russia and the United States reveal that Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were not going to attack Israel and Israel knew it. In fact, they did not attack Israel. Instead, Israel mounted the first attack in order to decimate the Egyptian army and take the West Bank.

Censored voices uncensored – For two weeks following the Six Day War, Amos Oz and Avraham Shapira visited Israeli kibbutzim and recorded interviews with several Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers who had just returned from that war. Largely censored by the Israeli government for many years, those reels have finally been made public. “Censored Voices” features the taped voices of young IDF soldiers, as the aging, former soldiers sit silently beside the tape recorder, listening to their own voices.

The testimonies documented in the tapes reveal evidence of targeting civilians and summarily executing prisoners, which constitute war crimes. A soldier asks himself, “They’re civilians – should I kill them or not?” He replies, “I didn’t even think about it. Just kill! Kill everyone you see.” Likewise, one voice notes, “Several times we captured guys, positioned them and just killed them.” Another reveals, “In the war, we all became murderers.” Still another says, “Not only did this war not solve the state’s problems, but it complicated them in a way that’ll be very hard to solve.” One soldier likens evacuating Arab villages to what the Nazis did to Jews in Europe. As a soldier watched an Arab man being taken from his home, the soldier states, “I had an abysmal feeling that I was evil.”

In what proved to be a prescient question, one soldier asks, “Are we doomed to bomb villages every decade for defensive purposes?” Indeed, Israel justifies all of its assaults on Gaza as self-defense, even though Israel invariably attacks first, and kills overwhelming numbers of Palestinians – mostly civilians. Each time, many fewer Israelis are killed by Palestinian rockets.

Israel’s false self-defense claim – The film begins by showing a map of Israel surrounded by Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, with arrows from each country aimed at Israel. The IDF soldiers felt those Arab countries posed an existential threat to Israel. “There was a feeling it would be a Holocaust,” one soldier observed. The Israeli media claimed at the time that Egypt had attacked Israel by land and by air on June 5, 1967. According to British journalist Patrick Seale, “Israel’s preparation of opinion” was “brilliantly managed,” a “remarkable exercise in psychological warfare.” ...

Read the entire article using the link in the headline above.

5) [Encountering peace: A cautious peace, but peace nevertheless](#)

Gershon Baskin, Jerusalem Post, March 11, 2015

Israel is my home. There is no other place in the world that I call home or in which I want to live.

Israel is an amazing country and we have a lot to be proud of. Amazing achievements have been made against great odds and in a relatively short period of time. One of the amazing things about Israel is how passionate so many people are about it. It is almost impossible to be passive or apathetic about what is happening in the country or what the country is doing. This place is always buzzing with energy, invention and creativity. Nonetheless, I am deeply worried about our future.

More than any other time since I have been living here – 37 years – I am worried about the decisions Israel will make faced the events around the region and within the country. Israel is facing many new realities and challenges with regard to which decisions must be made – and rather quickly. These are life-and-death decisions that cannot be escaped; not deciding is also a decision.

The decisions Israel makes in the coming months regarding the future of our relationship with the Palestinian people will determine the country's future for years to come. Will those decisions prevent the next war, the next round of violence, or will they cause it? There is no status quo – change is happening all the time. The decision to keep the territories conquered in 1967 under permanent Israeli rule and to continue to build more settlements on them, sending more Israeli citizens to those areas, will mean the end of Israel as the democratic nation state of the Jewish people.

There is simply no way Israel can be both democratic and the nation state of the Jewish people if Israel continues to deny the Palestinians their right to self-determination. It is so black and white that it amazes me how many people are blind to this reality.

Let's be clear: the decision to negotiate a fair deal with the Palestinians is in no way risk-free. But the risks to the State of Israel if it does not do that are far higher. When I talk about negotiating peace with the Palestinians, it is certainly not some naïve, Pollyannaish fantasy. There are few people in this country with more experience in negotiating and talking with the Palestinians than me. The failures of more than 22 years of attempts to make peace should teach us many lessons, but one of those lessons is not to give up hope and stop trying. What we should learn is how to do it better.

First of all, the negotiations and any real peace process must be based on the principle that there is no trust between the parties – and there is no logical reason why there should be. After signing six agreements and breaching all of them (both sides!) there is no reason why anyone should even be talking about trust. The lack of trust must be the basis for negotiating a new agreement. That means that any future agreement must have built-in “failsafe” mechanisms to ensure maximum implementation of treaty obligations by both sides. That will require what I call an “implementation assistance mechanism” led by trusted third parties – most likely the United States.

This mechanism will include a monitoring and verification team that will be on the ground and ensure that the parties are doing what they promised to do. It will also include a real-time dispute resolution mechanism to deal with conflicts as they arise – which they will.

Any future agreement must be based on the principle of performance and not just timetables. The implementation of agreements must be benchmarked with clear, identifiable achievements that will be monitored and verified by the implementation assistance team. Successful performance will be required before Israel withdraws from additional territories and takes on additional risks. The management of risks must be correlated to the progress on the ground. ...

Read the entire article using the link in the headline above.

6) Why is Israel still blind to settler violence against Palestinians?

Akiva Eldar, Al-Monitor, March 11, 2015

When the prime minister of Israel announces that there will be “no withdrawals” and “no concessions,” and when the Likud announces that the 2009 speech in which Benjamin Netanyahu expressed support for the two-state solution is “no longer relevant,” they are discarding out of hand a clear decision by the Israeli government.

Despite resolutions by Israeli administrations to adopt the 2003 road map for peace and the Sason report on illegal West Bank outposts, settler violence against Palestinians continues unabated.

In May of 2003, the government of then-Likud Chairman Ariel Sharon (in which Netanyahu served as one of the top ministers) decided to adopt the so-called Road Map — a document issued by the office of U.S. President George W. Bush. The document, which Bush subsequently turned into a UN Security Council resolution, states emphatically, “A settlement, negotiated between the parties, will result in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbors.”

When Netanyahu and other Likud leaders pledge to expand construction in the settlements of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, they are in contempt of a Cabinet decision that adopted the principles of the 2005 “Unauthorized Outposts Report” commissioned by Sharon from the former senior state prosecutor, attorney Talya Sason.

The report states, “As approved by the government’s decision of May 2003, the first stage of the Road Map determines that Israel must dismantle the ‘unauthorized outposts’ erected since March 2001. The Israeli government will adhere to this commitment.” The outposts in question were less than two dozen settlements out of the more than 105 outposts dispersed throughout the occupied territories. Most of them were erected on private Palestinian lands. There was no mention of the fact that the decision to adopt the Road Map had also included a commitment to freeze construction in the settlements, with no reservations.

This week marks 10 years since this important decision. According to figures provided this week to Al-Monitor by Hagit Efran of Peace Now, aside from the Migron outpost, which was moved to an adjacent site, and several caravans, most of them uninhabited, all the other outposts are still in place. Several of them have since undergone a process of “whitewashing,” courtesy of successive defense ministers. In addition, the population of the outposts has grown by 9,000 new residents over the past decade — more than three times their number at the time the Sason report was published.

Even the committee headed by former Supreme Court Justice Edmond Levy that determined the settlement enterprise does not violate international law echoed the criticism about the planning and construction in the territories. The committee report, presented to Netanyahu in June 2012, quoted testimony by the Defense Ministry’s legal counsel, attorney Ahaz Ben-Ari, who said, “There are some ministers, who were [ideologically] close to the settlements, who did not follow the rules. Things were done without permission, and that places the government in an embarrassing situation.” He added, “This is a sore point and it indicates anarchy.”

The issue does not end with planning and construction laws. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) documented some 300 attacks by settlers against Palestinians or their property in 2014. Many, if not the majority, of the assailants live in unauthorized outposts. There were on average six attacks a week. ...

Read the entire article using the link in the headline above.

Other articles of interest:

[Former Mossad chief blasts government at Tel Aviv rally](#) –Itay Blumenthal, Ynetnews, March 8, 2015

[We're not stuck with Palestinians, we're stuck in our own fear](#) – Mairav Zonszein, +972, March 9, 2015

[American Jews are angry with Netanyahu](#) – Eric H. Yoffie, Ha'aretz, March 9, 2015

[U.S.: We expect next Israeli government to be committed to two-state solution](#) – Barak Ravid, Ha'aretz, March 9, 2015

[Report on Israeli human rights violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, February 26-March 4, 2015](#) – Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), March 10, 2015

[In the West Bank, the kids aren't all right](#) – Beth Maschinot, In These Times, February 26, 2015

[Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin, March 6, 2015](#)

[Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin, March 13, 2015](#)

[The State of Two States](#) – Israel Policy Forum, Week of March 8

[The battle to be Israel's conscience](#) – The Guardian, March 12, 2015

[Is the Oslo process really over?](#) – Daoud Kuttub, Al-Monitor, March 6, 2015

[86 Israeli attacks on Islamic and Christian holy sites in 2014](#) – News Network and Broadcasting Collective-International, January 3, 2015