



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, September 18

Headlines:

- **Anti-government Protests Begin as Rosh Hashanah Ends**
- **Record Number of Jews Visit Temple Mount on Rosh Hashana**
- **Israel Slams UNESCO Over a World Heritage Declaration**
- **Settler Stabs Palestinian in Hebron with IDF Soldiers Present**
- **Hamas Issues Threat to Israel: 'We Will Return to the Intifada'**
- **Israel Temporarily Shuttles Gaza Pedestrian Crossing**
- **Saudi Arabia Put Normalization Talks with Israel on Hold**
- **US Welcomes Saudi's Invitation to Yemen's Houthis for Talks**

Commentary:

- **Israel Hayom: "Saudi Normalization Prospects Hinge a Range of Factors – And Trump"**
 - By Ariel Kahana
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Downgraded"**
 - By Nahum Barnea

S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace
1725 I St NW Suite 300, Washington, DC 20006
The Hon. Robert Wexler, President

News Excerpts

September 18, 2023

I24 News

Anti-government Protests Begin as Rosh Hashanah Ends

Thousands of Israelis rallied nationwide against the government's judicial overhaul, in a [37th week](#) of protests that included a demonstration at the airport as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu departed for the United States. Protesters gathered at Ben Gurion Airport, where Netanyahu will be departing for the US for a week-long visit that will include a series of meetings with world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly, among them a much-anticipated sit-down with US President Joe Biden. Protesters have vowed to follow Netanyahu on his trip abroad, and are expected to hound him during his scheduled meetings in San Francisco and later in [New York](#). [Read More "Rallies Held Nationwide as Netanyahu Heads to US; Protesters Await Him at Airport" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel National News

Record Number of Jews Visit Temple Mount

403 Jews went up to the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif for prayers on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, led by rabbis and yeshiva heads, including Rabbi Israel Ariel, Rabbi Chaim Ozer Chait, Rabbi Eliyahu Weber, and Rabbi Yehuda Glick. The Temple Mount was open to Jews this year only on the second day of Rosh Hashanah since the first day of the Jewish New Year fell on Shabbat, and the Temple Mount has been closed to Jews on Saturdays since the year 2000. The Temple Mount administration congratulated the police chiefs and thanked them for the significant effort to thwart terrorist attacks and to allow Jews to ascend the holy site without interruption. Thousands are expected to ascend the Temple Mount on the ten days of repentance, on the Eve of Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement], and on Yom Kippur itself. [Read More "Jordan Rails at 'Provocative' Jewish Visits to Temple Mount During Rosh Hashanah" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet New

Israel Slams UNESCO Over a World Heritage Declaration

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) announced that the site Tell es-Sultan located in Jericho will join the list of World Heritage Sites in Palestine. The decision was made through a vote held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where the UN organization clarified that near this site, there are Jewish and Christian heritage sites not previously listed, but they hold value in their preservation. Israel was represented by an official delegation, marking the first time it was granted entry into Saudi Arabia for such an event. This isn't the first instance where UNESCO has recognized a "Palestinian World Heritage Site"; in 2017, it designated Hebron's old city as such. The Israeli Foreign Ministry slammed the decision as yet another sign of the Palestinians' cynical use of the UNESCO organization and its politicization.

Settler Stabs Palestinian in Hebron with IDF Soldiers Present

A Palestinian youth was lightly wounded during an assault by Israeli settlers in the southern West Bank city of Hebron, according to Palestinian reports. The young man was reportedly stabbed by one of the settlers who attacked residents and threw stones at houses in the Tel Rumeida neighborhood of the city. The Israeli army said that in an attempt to disperse the parties, an officer fired a shot into the air and treated the wounded Palestinian at the scene. Last week, Israeli settlers attacked and injured a Palestinian and a left-wing activist in two separate incidents in the West Bank. The first assault occurred in the northern Jordan Valley when masked settlers approached and beat a Palestinian shepherd with a club, breaking his hand. The second incident took place in the South Hebron Hills near the settlement of Otniel, where settlers attacked left-wing activists while they were being detained by police. According to the activists, the settlers also hit the officer at the scene. Two settlers were arrested on suspicion of involvement in the second incident but were released after being questioned.

Hamas Issues Threat to Israel: 'We Will Return to the Intifada'

Saleh al-Aroui, Deputy Head of Hamas' political bureau, met in Beirut with a delegation from the leadership of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - led by its Deputy Secretary-General, Jamil Mazhar. The two called on Hamas and the Popular Front to escalate their opposition against Israel. The two factions also called on the Palestinian Authority leadership to "return to the intifada in order to achieve national unity and the settlement of the Palestinian home on national and democratic bases." Last month, Aroui threatened regional warfare against Israel, to which Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Hamas and Iran would pay "full price" for their terrorist attacks against Israel. [Read More "Fatah Gives Deadline for Handover of General's Killers Amid Fragile Truce in Lebanon Refugee Camp" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Israel Temporarily Shuttters Gaza Pedestrian Crossing

Israel announced the temporary closure of its sole pedestrian crossing with the Gaza Strip, in response to [renewed rioting](#) by Palestinians on the border. According to the military's liaison to the Palestinians, the Erez Crossing would not reopen for Palestinian workers today after it had been shuttered since Friday due to the Rosh Hashanah holiday. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), said in a statement that it was announcing "the postponement of the opening of the Erez Crossing for the entry of Gazan laborers into Israel for an additional 24 hours." COGAT said the decision was made following an assessment of the situation by security officials and instructions by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi. Exceptions are made for humanitarian and other outstanding cases but they require COGAT's approval. [Dig Deeper "Palestinians Left Without Aid as Hamas, Qatar Squabble Over Delays" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Saudi Arabia Put Normalization Talks with Israel on Hold

Saudi Arabia reportedly told American mediators it wished to suspend the normalization talks with Israel in view of what Riyadh officials described as the intractability of the Israeli government on certain key issues, notably the Palestinian conflict. The unconfirmed report appeared in the Saudi-owned Elaph newspaper, citing unnamed senior Israeli officials as confirming having received such a message from Washington. The report cited as an obstacle the rhetoric of two hard-right ministers in the government led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir. Their intransigence on the Palestinian issue precluded any serious progress in the normalization talks, unnamed Saudi officials were quoted as saying. It is understood US officials have viewed the possibility of a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia as plausible, particularly in light of similar agreements brokered during the previous administration under then-President Donald Trump. The previous accords facilitated diplomatic relations between Israel and several nations, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia, which contains two of Islam's holiest sites, does not recognize Israel and did not join the 2020 US-brokered Abraham Accords. [Dig Deeper "Israel Denies Report Saudis Suspending Normalization Talks Over Palestinian Issue" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

US Welcomes Saudi's Invitation to the Houthis for Talks

The US State Department welcomed Saudi Arabia's invitation to a Houthi-led delegation from Yemen for talks in Riyadh and described it as an "important step towards peace." Saudi Arabia invited Yemen's Houthi delegation to Riyadh to continue ceasefire talks. The kingdom wanted to resume its and Oman's efforts to "reach a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire in Yemen and a sustainable political solution acceptable to all Yemeni parties," Saudi Arabia's state news agency said. The peace initiatives have gained momentum since arch-rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to re-establish ties in a deal brokered by China. A permanent ceasefire in Yemen would mark a milestone in stabilizing the Middle East. "This important step towards peace expands on a series of engagements between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis," the US State Department said. "The talks in Riyadh follow a visit by senior US officials to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE last week to consult with our regional partners and the Yemeni parties about a viable path toward peace." The trip marked the first official visit by Houthi officials to the kingdom since the war broke out in Yemen in 2014 after the Iran-aligned group ousted a Saudi-backed government in Sanaa. The group has been fighting against a Saudi-led military alliance in a conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands and left 80% of Yemen's population dependent on humanitarian aid.

Saudi Normalization Prospects Hinge a Range of Factors – And Trump

By Ariel Kahana

- **The prospect of peace with Saudi Arabia is the new fad, the ultimate prize that will come to fruition in the coming Jewish year. Something that one can imagine with starry eyes; we are willing to pay anything to get it done. This is, at least, the sentiment among media pundits, the newspaper editors, and the prime minister's orbit. But the fact of the matter is that in this reality, reconciliation between Israel and the biggest and most ancient Arab kingdom is almost as complex as resolving the judicial reform crisis. The more this matter is talked about and chewed upon, the harder it is to accomplish. The difficulties, which will be explained below, have not prevented the leaders from selling this to everyone, since marketing mirages are after all the bread and butter of being a politician, and Netanyahu in particular.**
- **So perhaps we cannot outright deny the possibility that the unexpected will happen, but it would be advisable to lower expectations. Many people have been laboring behind the scenes to seal a peace deal, a senior Israeli official says. The official noted that their hard work includes many trans-Atlantic flights. There is no doubt that if peace erupts, it will change the face of history and will once and for all cement Israel's existence in the region. The problem is that the longer this continues, the expectations grow, more players get involved and the price for a deal only goes up; That is why the difficulties keep mounting.**
- **At first, there was talk about small-scale normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Then it was expanded to include "the end of the Israeli-Arab conflict." Now it has already morphed into a vision of "reconciliation between Israel and the Sunni world," namely, from Morocco to Indonesia. For all this to get done, there has to be an economic-defense-diplomatic alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia, with normalization being one of its byproducts.**
- **However, deals between the US and Saudi Arabia pose a major challenge because they would involve a US pledge to defend Saudi Arabia against external attacks. In addition, the Saudis have made demands that could be problematic for Israel, chiefly among them the request to have nuclear enrichment for "civilian purposes." They have also been coveting sophisticated weapon systems such as the F-35 fighter jet. But there is more. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his people also want a boost in trade relations between the countries, ending the criticism over the Khashoggi murder. The US cannot fulfill a lot of what the Saudis want. For starters, President Joe Biden can't censor the media. Second, it will be almost impossible to get a two-thirds majority in the Senate for a treaty that would have the US commit to defend Saudi Arabia from Iran, as Riyadh wants. Under the US Constitution, the Senate has to approve a treaty by a two-thirds majority, meaning at least 67 senators. But in the current political climate, there is no enthusiasm for Middle East wars on both sides of the aisle.**

- The rising political star in the GOP Vivek Ramaswamy reflects a consensus in the US. When asked about attacking Iran, he simply said that he would not send US troops to a war "we don't belong in." Even the hawk Ron DeSantis, in an interview I conducted several months ago, refused to commit to using force against Iran. If that is how those two have acted, just imagine what more dovish candidates espouse. Moreover, peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia would be a great political feat for Biden. Despite their love of Israel, it's hard to see how the Republicans help lift him from rock-bottom polls on the eve of an election. Donald Trump has been on the rise and he has been running neck and neck with the incumbent. Why should he give him a gift? Moreover, as has been reported in this paper, Trump has a score to settle with Netanyahu.
- So long as Netanyahu doesn't find a way to put the bygones behind them, the former president will have all the reasons to say that "the deal Biden has reached with Saudi Arabia is terrible and I will bring a better deal." This will have the effect of creating momentum against the deal in the GOP. This is not just my assessment; this is what senior Israeli officials believe. Netanyahu may claim that he will get 15 Republican senators to support the deal, but Trump has yet to speak on the matter. If that happens, it's hard to see how the deal gets passed.
- The US angle is only one of a few that are at play. Bin Salman also wants to secure support for the deal among his regional neighbors. That is why he has met with the Egyptian president, the Jordanian king, and the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. That is also why a Palestinian delegation traveled to Riyadh just recently, and why Secretary of State Antony Blinken called Ramallah to speak with Abbas. But when Abbas picked up the phone, he provided Blinken with a laundry list of demands. They include a demand to reopen the US consulate in Jerusalem for the Palestinians, which has been a red line for previous governments in Israel because this would essentially mean a de facto division of the capital.
- The Palestinians are certain to demand more territory in Judea and Samaria (West Bank) and to see a halt to IDF operations in Palestinian cities and a settlement moratorium. Because, after all, wouldn't it be just easy peasy to solve the Palestinian conflict as an afterthought of a normalization deal with Saudi Arabia that is a byproduct of a US-Saudi pact? It might sound like a joke, but if Abbas rejects, then Jordan's weak king – who is wary of the Palestinian and Muslim Brotherhood-majority population, would also be affected. And if those two are against the deal, then bin Salman will have a very hard time finalizing it.
- But that is not where the obstacles end. Just recently, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant decided to get involved in this matter. He went on an unusual visit to New York to brief the UN secretary general on Hezbollah's threats, although the real crux of the visit was meetings with two senior Biden administration officials who deal with the Saudi portfolio. Gallant, Brett McGurk, the US special envoy for the region, and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf agreed to create a trilateral dialogue between the two nations to discuss the various issues about a deal with Saudi Arabia: A Mossad-CIA axis as well as an axis connecting the US military and the IDF.

- Israeli security officials are convinced that if Saudi Arabia enriches uranium, Egypt and Turkey – if not additional countries – will soon follow suit. Thus, rather than having the deal usher in a new Middle East, we will get a nuclear arms race in the region. That is not a thrilling prospect and there are already voices inside the security establishment against the deal. Not everyone is going to embrace a deal automatically, and this was evident when Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman Yuli Edelstein said in a recent conference that "there are provisions that are much more sensitive [in the emerging agreement] from what has been told in the foreign media. Such a deal would have great importance, but there is great importance to cost and benefit, along with the need to preserve the current strategic situation in the Middle East...I don't think the provisions that deal with Judea and Samaria are those that worry me the most."
- Edelstein has already shown over the past 12 months that he is no one's puppet, and there is also the hawkish stance he and many of his fellow Likud faction members hold on Judea and Samaria (West Bank). And finally, there is Opposition Leader Yair Lapid, who has recently told Biden's people in Washington that "he would find it hard to support a deal that includes uranium enrichment on Saudi soil. Can there be a scenario in which Biden helps Netanyahu despite Lapid being against such a move? This is a rhetorical question. The bottom line is that a deal has a lot of obstacles within the US. The Palestinian linkage and the Saudi crown prince's decision to let his Arab brethren have their input pose a heavy burden.
- The Israeli security establishment, which has already proved its strength when it wholeheartedly leaned in to have the Israel-Lebanon maritime border deal finalized and helped torpedo the Trump peace plan, has yet to make its voice heard on the Saudi issue. Thus, the deal faces many challenges at home as well. In the wake of the voices expressing concern, Netanyahu has told reporters, "I will never put Israel's security in jeopardy." In private conversations, he has been explaining that any deal would have provisions to ensure the US monitors the Saudi nuclear program. But not everyone thinks these answers fully address the worries.
- With all that in mind, one has to also look at the situation inside Washington. Or perhaps that should be the first thing we should look at. It is no coincidence that National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who is Biden's point man on the Saudi normalization issue, said in recent days that no breakthrough was expected in the near term. The reason is that Biden, despite sending his people to the region to speak with players and to examine their requests, and iron out various disagreements, has yet to decide to go all in for normalization. In his three years as president so far, unlike Trump, he has not shown many daring moves. As a very seasoned politician, he has been subscribing to only measured steps. He has been maneuvering between various pressure points in search of compromise. It's hard to see how he makes a dramatic and bold break toward some big move. Historical shifts – especially in this region – don't happen under the limelight, if the past is prologue; they happen behind closed doors. This includes the peace treaty with Egypt, the Oslo peace process, and the Abraham Accords. In all three instances, secret backchannel communications preceded the public declarations. In the current situation, there is a lot of talk but very little results to show for.

- **So of course, despite all the challenges, and in the face of all the obstacles, we could eventually wake up some two or three weeks from today to find out that a dramatic breakthrough had been announced. I wish. The only problem is that by the time it arrives, if it arrives, Israel will have already paid dearly so that it would avoid friction with the US. The scope of terrorism speaks for itself. In Jenin, terrorist hotbeds are getting bigger and look a lot like what we saw during the early 2000s. The decision not to go all out against them but rather to tread lightly has backfired big time.**
- **The administrative detentions used against right-wing activists are a result of pressure from Washington, as a means of showing Biden that Israel was "cracking down on Jewish terrorism." New construction permits for settlement communities will not be issued through 2023. What's worse is that despite there being a de facto deal between Iran and the US, which allows Tehran to enrich uranium to 60% purity, Netanyahu has been practically silent on the issue – and this is the same person who locked horns with Barack Obama over the 2015 deal. Or as the previous Opposition Leader Benjamin Netanyahu said, " The silence on the part of the prime minister in the face of the existential threat from a nuclear Iran is nothing short of mind-boggling."**

Downgraded

By Nahum Barnea

- In 1976 the United States celebrated its 200th anniversary. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was the first foreign leader who was chosen to begin the celebrations. He began his visit in Philadelphia, the cradle of American independence. A large military plane was placed at his disposal. His next stop was the White House, where he was received with pomp and fanfare by President Ford and the leaders of the two parties. His third stop was Los Angeles. Hollywood stars, Jews and non-Jews, held a sumptuous dinner in his honor. The second guest of honor was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The singer Diana Ross hovered over the two men, a microphone in hand, and forced them to sing.
- Kissinger sang; Rabin blushed. Not a single one of those honoraria will be waiting for Netanyahu during his current trip to America. We've been downgraded. We've been relegated. Leaders of third- and fourth-tier countries use the opportunity of the annual UN General Assembly to visit America. The invitation is issued by the UN. Everyone who is a member of the organization is invited to come, to deliver a speech with the green-tiled wall of the auditorium in the backdrop, and to stand in a long line for a quick meeting, mainly a photo-op, with the president of the United States. Even leaders who are boycotted by America, as was the case in the past with Ahmadinejad and Arafat, are invited and come. Those who aren't boycotted find a way to extend their visit to include another city or two. That is a consolation prize for people who envisioned Washington in their mind's eye but couldn't go. Netanyahu is kicking off his visit in San Francisco.
- Netanyahu has known better days in America, much better days. In a certain sense, he's to be admired. Instead of wallowing in his sense of insult, he is trying to make the most of what's available. Just like Shimon Peres, who always believed that he could turn lemons into lemonade. But the current visit poses a challenge for Netanyahu in another sense as well. Demonstrators will be waiting for him everywhere he goes, supporters of the protest movement. Demonstrations against Israeli premiers have been held in America before. Demonstrations were held by students in support of Palestine and demonstrations were held by anti-Zionist Satmar Hasids, mainly girls who attend seminaries.
- This time the Israeli prime minister will be facing hundreds and possibly thousands of Israelis, the flesh of the country's flesh, who are determined, vocal and decidedly impolite. Nothing of the kind has ever happened in America before. The significance of the demonstrations will be far broader than what the video footage documenting them will reflect. An American friend who has been involved in relations between the two countries for years said to me, "For 75 years the Americans viewed Israel as a country that was facing threats from without. America needed to help it. The demonstrations against Netanyahu will make them realize that Israel is now facing a threat from within. They are going to ask themselves what they need to do, if anything at all, whom to believe—Bibi, Sara or the Israelis with posters in the streets." That applies first and foremost to the Jewish community.

- Its lobbyists, members of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, AIPAC and other organizations, have always deferred to the authority of all Israeli governments. When other organizations spoke out differently—J Street, for instance—they tried to silence them. But it is harder to automatically support a government that has humiliated the majority component of the Jewish community, has rebelled against the White House, has polarized Israeli society and is hated by hundreds of thousands of Israeli protesters. That also applies to the Democratic Party, which most American Jews vote for, and it also applies—albeit for other reasons—to Trump and the Republican Party.
- Questions that were shunted aside in the past have now surfaced. Netanyahu’s visit, the demonstrations and the media’s mounting interest in them have put them all on the agenda. But the people who projected onto the wall of the UN building a text that reads: “Don’t Believe Crime Minister Netanyahu” need to take into account the discomfort that a lot of Israelis feel, including those who support the protests with all their hearts. Turning Netanyahu into a victim isn’t a particularly smart thing to do. In San Francisco, Netanyahu will meet with the multi-billionaire Elon Musk. According to reports, that is the purpose of his visit to the city. The 52-year-old Musk is a fascinating figure. An incredible entrepreneur on the one hand, and an odd and insufferable man on the other. He smells of success, and from Netanyahu’s perspective success and money purify everything. He ought to worry us because of X (formerly known as Twitter), the social network he bought. Under his leadership that network has allegedly fostered racist, anti-Semitic, anti-democratic and anti-social discourse.
- The Anti-Defamation League, one of the most important Jewish organizations in America, condemned his social network and, in response, Musk has threatened it with a lawsuit. I find it hard to understand why my prime minister needs to fly to the western edge of America to meet with a dubious billionaire. It would have been far more dignified had Musk met with Netanyahu in New York or Jerusalem. But the pictures snapped at the meetings will be beautiful and the compliments will be warm and in excellent English, which will please the government’s supporters. That’s all that’s left.