Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, December 24

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**Thousands March in Memorial of Slain Settler on West Bank**

Thousands of West Bank settlers attended the memorial service of yeshiva student Yehuda Dimantman who was killed in an alleged terror attack last week where two others were wounded. Some 15,000 arrived by buses to northern West Bank for the memorial service at the sight of the shooting, which was held under heavy rain. Dimantman’s family demanded that the government not take any steps to evacuate the yeshiva in Homesh and would in fact legalize it. IDF troops were on hand to secure the march and the entrances to the Palestinian villages were blocked. Settlers said they would leave a small presence at the Yeshiva to stop any attempt by the IDF to remove structures from the outpost. Dig Deeper “Thousands Rally Against Razing of Illegal Outpost Where Terror Victim Studied” (Times of Israel)

Times of Israel

**2 Terrorists Who Killed Israeli in 2019 Sentenced to Life**

Two terrorists who killed an Israeli teenager in 2019 were sentenced to life imprisonment. Qassem Asafra was handed an additional 40-year sentence, and Nasir Asafra an additional 20 years. Dvir Sorek, 18, was stabbed to death near the West Bank settlement of Migdal Oz in August 2019. He was a yeshiva student enrolled in a program known as hesder that combines Torah study with military service. He was off-duty at the time of his killing. Qassem Asafra was also convicted of an attempt to kill two Israelis in a 2011 terror attack in Beersheba, which he had not been caught for at the time. The military has said that Nasir Asafra was a member of the Hamas terror group. The two convicts are cousins. The attackers told investigators they killed Sorek due to “the suffering of the Palestinian people”, according to transcripts of their interrogation obtained by the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper. Dig Deeper “14-Year-Old Palestinian Arrested with Large Knife in Tel Aviv Bus Station” (Times of Israel)

Ynet News

**Israel: Christian Community Growing Despite Claims**

Israel has said its Christian population is growing, days after the most senior cleric in the Church of England backed accusations of a "concerted attempt" to drive the community away. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics said that there were 182,000 Christians in the country, an increase of 1.4 percent on last year. Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby raised hackles in Israel by decrying, alongside Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem Hosam Naoum, a "steady decline" among Christians in east Jerusalem. The Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, said the accusations were "baseless, and distort the reality of the Christian community in Israel." East Jerusalem includes the Old City, as well as a verity of Christian holy sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where the faithful believe Jesus was crucified and buried. Dig Deeper “Gaza at Christmas: A Bleak Outlook” (Al-Monitor)
Jerusalem Post

Gazans Hold PA, Hamas Responsible for Crises, Poll Finds

Most Palestinians in the Gaza Strip hold the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas responsible for the continued crises in the Hamas-ruled coastal enclave, according to a public opinion poll published on by the Palestinian Atlas Center for Studies and Research. The results showed that 45% of respondents believe that the PA is responsible for the various crises in the Gaza Strip, with 25% saying they hold Hamas responsible, and only 15% blaming Israel. Additionally, only 7% of respondents blamed Egypt for the crises in the Gaza Strip, home to approximately two million Palestinians. The PA, Hamas and many international parties often hold Israel solely responsible for the “economic and humanitarian crisis” in the Gaza Strip because of the blockade imposed there. The poll showed that a majority of Palestinians in Gaza believe that their living conditions will remain unchanged or will deteriorate. Dig Deeper “Violence in West Bank May Lead to New Confrontation with Gaza” (Al-Monitor)

Ha’aretz

Sheik Jarrah Family’s Evacuation Delayed

A court halted the evacuation of a Palestinian family from their home in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, after police asked the court registrar to postpone the eviction, citing a security risk. The head of the European Union’s mission to the West Bank and Gaza Strip visited the Salem family, who have been living in their home in Sheikh Jarrah for the past 70 years. He blasted the eviction, calling it “inhuman and unfair.” The authorities, equipped with a writ of execution, were scheduled to evict the Salems next week so that Jews could move into the house. Before 1948 the house had belonged to a Jewish family, and the Salem family leased the house from the Jordanian custodian of enemy property from 1951. After the Six Day War the house passed to the Israeli Custodian General, who returned it to its Jewish heirs. The authorities, equipped with a writ of execution, were scheduled to evict the Salems next week so that Jews could move into the house. Before 1948 the house had belonged to a Jewish family, and the Salem family leased the house from the Jordanian custodian of enemy property from 1951. After the Six Day War the house passed to the Israeli Custodian General, who returned it to its Jewish heirs. The authorities, equipped with a writ of execution, were scheduled to evict the Salems next week so that Jews could move into the house. Before 1948 the house had belonged to a Jewish family, and the Salem family leased the house from the Jordanian custodian of enemy property from 1951. After the Six Day War the house passed to the Israeli Custodian General, who returned it to its Jewish heirs. The lawyers acting for the Jewish heirs were financed by a right-wing NGO working to evict Palestinians and populate the neighborhood with Jews. Dig Deeper “So You Don’t Like the Two-State Solution? Meet the One-State Model” (Ha’aretz)

Reuters

Lebanon: Christian Party Signals End of Hezbollah Alliance

Lebanon’s top Christian party has indicated it is considering ending a political alliance with Iran-backed Hezbollah, threatening a fragile union that has shaped Lebanese politics for nearly 16 years. Gebran Bassil, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) party said there would be "political consequences" for action taken against his party by Lebanon's two main Shiite parties Hezbollah and Amal. Prominent figures close to the party have said the 2006 Mar Mikhael Agreement between FPM and Hezbollah is at an end. The party's support was critical in bringing President Michel Aoun, the FPM's founder, to power in 2016, and the FPM has provided critical Christian political cover for Hezbollah's armed presence under Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. Bassil's party has faced growing political pressure to distance itself from Hezbollah since the country's 2019 financial meltdown. Dig Deeper “Lebanon ‘Regrets’ Attack on UN Peacekeeper Forces” (I24 News)
Iran Nuclear Talks to Resume on Monday, Says EU Diplomat

Talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal will resume next Monday, the EU diplomat chairing the negotiations said, urging a “picking up of the pace.” Officials have said the deal would become obsolete within weeks if Iran continued to step up its nuclear activities as it has been doing since 2019, a year after the United States left the landmark agreement and reimposed sanctions. Negotiations restarted in November after a five-month hiatus to try to restore the deal, which offered Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. Diplomats from parties to the deal — China, Britain, France, Germany and Russia — are in talks in Vienna with Iran and the US, with the two sides refusing direct contact. Iran claims it only wants to develop a civilian nuclear capability, but Western powers say its stockpile of enriched uranium goes well beyond that and could be used to develop a nuclear weapon. Israel is not a party to the talks but has threatened force if diplomacy fails, and the US has also said it is preparing “alternatives.” Dig Deeper “Iran Admits to Increasingly Relying on Kamikaze Drones” (Jerusalem Post)

Saudi Arabia Building Missiles, with Help From China

Saudi Arabia is allegedly engaged in domestic production of its own ballistic missiles with assistance from China, a report explained. Sources familiar with the matter disclosed to CNN that US intelligence departments assessed Saudi Arabia is manufacturing missiles in at least one site. Additionally, two unnamed sources said a number of classified US intelligence briefings revealed that China and Saudi Arabia traded sensitive ballistic missile technology. A representative from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when asked for a statement on the matter said the two countries "have maintained friendly cooperation in all fields, including in the field of military trade.” “Such cooperation does not violate any international law and does not involve the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,” the official added. Satellite images taken of a suspected missile production site near Dawadmi, Saudi Arabia revealed the presence of a burn pit. The pit is believed to be used in disposal of the solid-propellant left over from missile production. Dig Deeper “US Navy Says It Seizes Arms From Iran Likely Bound for Yemen” (Associated Press)
Plans for the Golan

By Ariel Kahana

- The cabinet will convene on Sunday for a special meeting at Kibbutz Mevo Hama, where it will approve a government plan to double the population on the Golan Heights and in Katzrin. In addition to upgrading infrastructure, building new communities and new neighborhoods, and developing 2,000 places of employment, the government intends to make the Golan Israel's capital for renewable energies. The overall investment is a billion shekels, and many of the ministries will have a role. The decision is being spearheaded by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Gideon Saar, and will include the Construction and Housing, Interior, Transport, Tourism, Economics, Agriculture, Education and Environmental Protection Ministries, as well as the Israel Land Authority. In the last few months, an inter-ministerial team headed by Prime Minister’s Office Director General Yair Pines drew up the details of the plan.

- The main points of the plan: the allocation of $128 million for planning and housing, and an addition of about 3,300 housing units for the capital of the Golan, Katzrin, in five years. The communities of the Golan Regional Council will get another 4,000 homes, and there is a plan to grant an economic incentive to communities that expand. All in all, an influx of 23,000 people is anticipated. The government also plans to build two new communities on the Golan Heights, Assif and Matar, each of which will have roughly 2,000 housing units. The government will allocate $50 million to improving the quality of life on the Golan. This money will go to investment in transport infrastructure linking the Golan to central Israel and to developing transport infrastructure between the communities and Katzrin. The condition of the roads on the Golan today is quite poor. The government will also approve upgrading the medical services.

- It will develop tourism infrastructure and build bike paths. The plan is to turn the Golan into Israel's capital of climate and renewable energy technologies. To that end, impact investments will be promoted and the food-tech compound in Kiryat Shmona will be linked to the Golan Heights. The government will also approve an unprecedented investment in a program to develop employment and create 2,000 jobs in the fields of agricultural technology, hotels, agriculture, commercial areas and more. The government intends to enlist the private sector to invest millions of shekels in solar energy projects. The plan is unprecedented in scope. Because it is not controversial, like Judea and Samaria (West Bank), all of the parties agreed to it. It is nevertheless likely to encounter some opposition from the Golan residents, some of whom don't want to expand their communities. Environmental organizations may also mount obstacles to ventures that will affect the landscape, such as placing many wind turbines.
The future Before Us
By Jacky Hugi

- Few Palestinians paid attention to the remarks by Mohammed Dahlan, the exiled Fatah figure, regarding the future of the relationship with Israel. Dahlan declared that the dream of two separate states, one Palestinian with East Jerusalem as its capital, and the other being Israel, is in its death throes. “The occupation destroyed all the foundations for the two-state solution,” said Dahlan, and therefore, “I personally, and in view of the ruins of the two-state solution, am willing to entertain the one-state [solution] as a challenging option.” The Palestinian oppositionist made his remarks in an address to his supporters in the Gaza Strip. That day, last Wednesday, a primary was held in Gaza for the party that he established, the Democratic Reform Stream, or as it is more commonly referred to, Fatah-Dahlan. Elections are not on the horizon, but for Dahlan, at least in Gaza, the democratic game goes on, be the circumstances what they may.

- The independence that he has shown has split Fatah further and torn off bits of its flesh, but that’s a topic for another article. “The one-state solution will be a natural alternative to the illusion of the two-state solution,” Dahlan said at the same event. “We will let the future decide what the outcome of the conflict will be.” The exiled opposition figure knows that neither of the solutions will be in the offing any time soon, and that Israel, more than likely, will decide not to decide. But he cannot be left behind. Among the Palestinians, talk of the possibility of establishing an Arab-Jewish state from the river to the sea is picking up steam. Abu Mazen also warned Israel in a speech that he delivered in Ramallah on October 2 that its rejection of the two-state solution was compelling the Palestinians to consider alternatives. One of them, he said, is to go back to the UN Partition Plan of 1947, and another is “a single democratic state on the historic land of Palestine, with full political and civil rights for the Palestinians.”

- Until a few years ago, the one-state scenario was the province of fringe circles. A state with a single central government, with united Jerusalem as its capital, and Arab and Jewish citizens. You could hear praise for it from left-wingers who dream of Jewish-Arab partnership on the one hand, and on the other from the leaders and supporters of Hamas who pray for the day when the Zionists will be driven out. As the two-state solution recedes into the distance, this scenario is making its way to centerstage and gaining broad support among the Palestinians. Granted, Israel won’t give up and will want to keep them as second-class citizens under its rule. But none of them thinks that this vision will become reality tomorrow.

- A decade or two will pass; maybe three. Haste is from the devil, and this is a world of changes, after all. If regimes rise and fall, Israel's iron fist is likely to loosen as well. Thanks to demography or to the Jewish state growing weaker internally, the Palestinians hope that they will take power in the single state and bring an end to their era of deprivation. That is why many of them wanted Netanyahu to annex territory in the West Bank to the State of Israel. Annexation shortens their path to becoming citizens with equal rights in the future situation.
Left-wing circles have been warning for decades that a Palestinian state is Israel’s lifesaver as a country with a Jewish majority. Without the two-state solution, we are surely headed for a bi-national state. One of my undergraduate lecturers in Middle Eastern history at Tel Aviv University used to belittle the Palestinians. “What are they fighting for?” he wondered. They’re wasting their blood. He was and still is a left-winger, and he would say that time would do their work for them. Hamas was quick to embrace Dahlan’s proclamation. One state is their dream—under Arab rule, of course. “This is the best solution for us, if we manage to persuade our people and the international community to adopt it,” said Dr. Ahmad Yousef, one of Hamas’s ideologues. “The two-state solution is getting lost,” he said, “and Israel has left no opportunity to implement it.” Yousef, Abu Mazen, Dahlan and company were not speaking in a vacuum.

They simply listened to the people. Polls that were conducted in recent years have shown that the Palestinian population is increasingly abandoning Oslo’s vision of two separate states. For example, the latest survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research led by Khalil Shikaki this September found that only 36% were still faithful to the two-state solution, compared to 39% in a similar poll that it conducted only three months earlier. 62% of the polled said that they opposed this solution. 63% said it was impractical because of Israel’s conduct. Both sides are moving further apart from each other quickly: nearly 40% supported resuming the armed struggle as a means of obtaining an independent state. It’s no wonder then that their leaders are adopting similar positions. The top leadership of Hamas has meticulously maintained good ties with the outgoing pro-Fatah leader.

Their mutual loathing of the Palestinian Authority has sufficed to bring them closer to each other. Other than that, Dahlan, unlike Abu Mazen, is not someone to whom people turn their back. He enjoys an open channel to the Egyptian president’s bureau, and he is considered family in Abu Dhabi. At the start of his path as a young officer in Fatah, Dahlan acquired from the Russians knowledge about providing security details and conducting counter-assassinations. He developed and sold this knowhow to governments and rulers in the Balkans and Arab states. In the early aughts, when Mohammed bin Zayed launched an all-out war on the Muslim Brotherhood, which was threatening to take over the United Arab Emirates, it was Dahlan who stood by him and offered advice on how to carry it out.

The campaign was declared a success, and ever since then Dahlan has been the darling of the regime, a friend and advisor. Dahlan expanded his business into real estate and other investments, got even richer, and started openly speaking out against the Palestinian Authority. Ever since running afoul of Abu Mazen and his men, he has been building his power bases from afar with money. He has been investing millions of dollars into social initiatives in the Gaza Strip for years, like scholarships for students, funding for medical projects for public service, and giving charity to the population of the refugee camps. At the height of the Covid crisis he sponsored a handsome donation of medical equipment and test kits from the UAE to Gaza. Despite having been born and raised in Khan Yunis, his remarks did not make a particular stir among the residents of the Gaza Strip. They are preoccupied with their own war for survival.
His declarations did not make waves in the West Bank cities or in East Jerusalem either. The average Palestinian has had their fill with policy declarations that have led to nothing and is looking for tomorrow long before making time to think about the future. Like with the rest of the leaders of Fatah, Dahlan has rather limited support among the Palestinian population, and as many of them don’t get excited by every speech by Abu Mazen, they reacted to his pronouncement with indifference. Nevertheless, declarations like these were not meant to produce immediate gains. Dahlan spoke as a message to the leadership in Jerusalem, intending to start a public conversation in Israel about the price of renouncing the two-state solution. The Palestinian leadership is convinced that if it sprinkles this idea gradually, it will ultimately dominate the conversation. In the next stage, maybe a miracle will happen, and someone in Jerusalem will wake up and keep [the status quo] from snowballing at the last minute. Israel is not open to incisive debates about its political future, but the Palestinians have patience. One day, my undergraduate teacher said, they’ll all realize that they could have been spared these wars, and gone straight for a bi-national state.