

Yemen Warring Parties Hold First Direct Meeting of Sweden Talks

RIMBO, Sweden (Dispatches)

Yemen's warring parties held the first direct talks in UN-led efforts in Sweden on Sunday to iron out a prisoner swap, one of several confidence-building measures intended to help launch a political process to end nearly four years of conflict.

Since talks began on Thursday, UN officials have been shuttling between delegations from the Houthi Ansarullah resistance group and the former government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi which is backed by a Saudi-led military coalition.

The first negotiations in over two years were convened amid pressure from Western nations, some of which supply arms and intelligence to Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition. The war in Yemen has killed tens of thousands of people and caused a major humanitarian disaster.

Mediator Martin Griffiths opened the new round due to last until Dec. 13 by announcing

a deal to release thousands of prisoners. The two sides met in a renovated castle outside Stockholm on Sunday to discuss implementation of the deal.

The team from Hadi's ex-government initially refused to enter the room, saying the Houthis needed to include more senior delegates, but the meeting went ahead, delegates said.

"We are very optimistic about having a breakthrough on the prisoners issue ... we have exchanged some lists in the past but each side needs to update them," said Askar Ahmed Zayl, a delegate from Hadi's ex-government.

The parties have yet to agree on trickier issues such as re-opening Sanaa airport and a truce in the port city of Hudaydah, both held by the Houthis, both further confidence-building measures that are the focus of the talks in addition to a framework for negotiations.

"We have three or four days. If we end up without any agreement



Swedish Foreign minister Margot Wallstrom (C-2L), UN special envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths (C-2R) and delegates from Yemeni warring sides attend the opening press conference of the Yemeni peace talks at Johannesburg castle in Rimbo, Sweden, on December 6, 2018.

then this round has failed," the Houthi's main negotiator Mohammed Abdusalam told reporters.

"But if we have a draft on some general framework, the reopening of Sanaa airport, the prisoners release, keeping the central bank neutral and a de-escalation in Hudaydah... then this will be a

good step to hold another round in one or two months."

Griffiths praised the parties' "positive spirit" in engaging constructively and urged for calm on the ground in Yemen, where sporadic battles have continued in the Red Sea port of Hudaydah, a lifeline for millions, and other parts of the country.

Palestinians Mark Intifada With Call for 'Armed Struggle'

WEST BANK (Dispatches) — Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has marked the 31st anniversary of the first Intifada with pledges to continue the "armed struggle" and rebuked Arab leaders for seeking to normalize ties with the Zionist regime.

"Armed struggle is a strategic option to safeguard the Palestinian cause and restore Palestinian national rights," Hamas said in a statement.

The first Intifada broke out in 1987 after four young Palestinians were killed by Zionist troops at a checkpoint in Gaza as well as the shooting death of a 17-year-old boy during an unarmed protest.

Intifada is an Arabic word that

literally translates to "shaking off." It has been used to refer to legitimate means of resistance against oppression across the Middle East for decades. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, it means a concerted Palestinian effort to shake off Israeli occupation and gain independence.

Hamas also said "resistance is a legitimate right guaranteed by international laws and conventions."

It said 31 years after the eruption of the uprising, which is also known as the stone Intifada, Palestinians are still in need of unity, partnership, and the reconstruction of their national project.

The second Intifada began in

2000 and was known as the al-Aqsa Intifada. It was sparked by former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque complex.

The anniversary comes amid worldwide outrage over the U.S. relocation of its embassy to al-Quds from Tel Aviv and the recognition of the city as the so-called capital of Israel.

The Zionist regime annexed East al-Quds in the 1967 Six Day war in a move never internationally recognized. The occupying regime claims the entire city as its capital. Palestinians also want it as the capital of their future state.

Control of the highly sensitive city remains one of the major

stumbling blocks in any Zionist-Palestinian deal.

On Saturday, Hamas seized the occasion to repeat its rejection of U.S. President Donald Trump's plan for "peace" in the Middle East, billed as the "deal of the century".

The plan, the movement said, is aimed at "liquidating the Palestinian cause and undermining the rights of the Palestinians."

Hamas also lashed out at Arab countries for their attempts to normalize relations with Israel, saying such efforts "are doomed to failure."

"Our people will stand against those who are promoting normalization regardless of the sacrifices," it said.

Report:

Zionist Regime Seeks to Formalize Diplomatic Ties With Saudi Arabia

RIYADH (Dispatches) — The Israeli TV station Hadashot has cited sources as saying that Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is interested in formalizing formal ties between the occupying regime and Saudi Arabia ahead of the November 2019 elections in the occupied territories.

The sources singled out unnamed U.S. officials and Yossi Cohen, chief of the Zionist regime's intelligence agency Mossad, who are allegedly dealing with the issue. Netanyahu has yet to

comment on the Hadashot report. Earlier, the Times of Israel reported that the regime is in talks with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to prompt them to establish formal diplomatic relations with the regime.

In late October, Israeli media quoted the United Arab Emirates news website Al-Khaleej as saying that Saudi Arabia and the regime had held covert meetings "in Washington and London" which resulted in the clinching of a deal worth an estimated \$250 million.

The agreement specifically stipulates the transfer of Israeli espionage technology to the kingdom. Neither side to the alleged deal has confirmed the information.

In September, Al-Khaleej reported that Saudi Arabia had allegedly purchased the regime's Iron Dome missile systems to fend off Yemen's Houthi Ansarullah missile attacks.

In March, Zionist Prime Minister Netanyahu confirmed that Saudi authorities had opened the

country's airspace for Air India planes that fly from Delhi to the occupied territories.

Earlier this year, he admitted to the regime "having contacts" with Saudi Arabia which "have been kept in general secret".

The same month, Zionist troops Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot revealed that his regime was ready to share intelligence with Riyadh in order to "face Iran", which is considered to be a threat by both the occupying regime and Saudi Arabia.

Jordan Warns of Drop in Aid to Syrian Refugees

AMMAN (Dispatches) — Jordan has warned of decline in international aid to support the Syrian refugees and their host countries.

The warning was issued by Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Safadi during his meeting with EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Christos Stylianides in the capital Amman.

with needed support to help the kingdom overcome the burden of hosting 1.3 million Syrian refugees, around 90 percent of whom live outside refugee camps, Safadi said.

The only solution to the Rukban camp for Syrian refugees, which is located in the Syrian territory, is to secure their safe return to their cities and towns, the minister noted.

He said the international community should shoulder its responsibilities in the issue of Syrian refugees.

Meanwhile, Safadi reiterated the need for a political solution in Syria that ensures the unity of all Syrians and the territorial integrity of the country.

Discussions also focused on regional issues including the need to end the Zionist occupation of the

Palestinian territory on the basis of the so-called two-state solution that leads to the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

For his part, Stylianides voiced appreciation for Jordan's efforts and services provided for the Syrian refugees.

Jordan is a strategic partner of the EU in the region and the EU will continue to support the Arab kingdom, the EU official said.

Sheikh ...

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Last month, a botched Israeli intelligence operation in the Gaza Strip unleashed brief skirmishes after which Tel Aviv accepted a ceasefire after about 500 rockets were fired from the besieged territory at Israeli in a matter of several hours.

Qassem also said the situation on the ground in Syria is improving day by day, where victories achieved by the Syrian Army and its allies are quite visible now.

He said a political solution has to be found to the crisis but the United States is preventing it through its military operations in the Arab country and supporting certain militant groups.

Finance ...

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The movement has spread beyond France's borders, with around 400 arrested at a "yellow vest" event in Brussels on Saturday and peaceful demonstrations taking place in Dutch towns.

In France, authorities have also launched an investigation into social media activity from accounts allegedly drumming up support for the protests, sources told AFP.

New York ...

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The case has pitted Trump against several members of his own political party, some of whom have called for the U.S. to impose sanctions against MBS.

Trump has so far insisted on keeping strong ties to Saudi Arabia, saying the Saudi government is a key ally in the fight against Iran and has signed billions of dollars worth of military contracts with U.S. companies.

On Saturday, the Times noted that on the month Trump was elected, a delegation of Saudis close to MBS visited the U.S. and produced a report identifying Kushner as a crucial focal point in the courtship of the new administration. He brought to the job little knowledge of the Middle East, a transactional mind-set and an intense focus on reaching a deal with the Palestinians that met Israel's demands, the report noted.

Even before the inauguration, the Saudis were trying to position themselves as crucial allies who could help Trump fulfill his campaign pledges, the Times said. In addition to offering to help to resolve the dispute between the occupying regime of Israel and the Palestinians, the Saudis offered hundreds of billions of dollars in deals to buy U.S.-made weapons and invest in U.S. infrastructure.

Trump's "inner circle is predominantly deal makers who lack familiarity with political customs and deep institutions, and they support Jared Kushner," the Saudi delegation wrote of the incoming administration in a slide presentation obtained by the Lebanese newspaper Al Akhbar, which provided it to the Times.

Several Americans who spoke with the delegation confirmed the slide presentation's accounts of the discussions, Middle East Eye reported.

Zionist ...

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The wounded can often be seen gathering at a treatment clinic run by the Paris-based medical charity Doctors Without Borders in Gaza City, where Associated Press photographer Felipe Dana took portraits of some of them.

Some of those he photographed acknowledged throwing stones toward Zionist troops during the demonstrations. One said he had hurled a firebomb. But others said they were unarmed bystanders; one paramedic said he was helping rescue the wounded, while another man said he was waving a Palestinian flag and another said he was selling coffee and tea.

International human rights groups have said the military's open-fire rules are unlawful because they allow the use of potentially lethal force in situations where soldiers' lives are not in immediate danger.

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a Zionist military spokesman, rejected international criticism that the occupying regime's response has been excessive. Instead, he claimed that firing at people's legs was a sign of restraint.

Doctors Without Borders said this month that the huge number of patients was overwhelming Gaza's health care system, which has already been severely weekend by a blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt that has fueled economic stagnation and rampant unemployment, and devastated water and electricity supplies.

The Paris-based aid group said the majority of the 3,117 patients it has treated have been shot in the legs, and many will need follow-up surgery, physiotherapy and rehabilitation.

"These are complex and serious injuries that do not quickly heal," the group said. "Their severity and the lack of appropriate treatment in Gaza's crippled health system means that infection is a high risk, especially for patients with open fractures."

"The consequences of these wounds ... will be lifelong disability for many," the aid group said. "And if infections are not tackled, then the results could be amputation or even death."

Gaza's Health Ministry says it has carried out 94 amputations since the protests began, 82 of them involving lower limbs.