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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, May 10

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News Excerpts

May 10, 2017

Times of Israel

Trump to Announce Netanyahu-Abbas Talks During Israel Visit

US President Donald Trump will announce the resumption of peace talks between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during his upcoming visit to the region, Palestinian media reported Wednesday. According to the London-based daily Al-Hayat, Trump is expected to announce a trilateral summit with the two leaders during his one-day visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority on May 22.

See also, ["Ex-UN Chief: Israeli-Palestinian Peace Is Impossible with Current Leaders" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Top PA Official to JPost: Abbas Is Flexible on Land Swaps

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is still willing to negotiate "minimal" land swaps along the 1967 borders, Nabil Sha'ath, the Palestinian leader's foreign policy adviser, said on Monday. "[Abbas] has not changed that," Sha'ath told *The Jerusalem Post* in an interview at the Grand Park Hotel in Ramallah, alluding to Abbas's position on land swaps. "He is a flexible person." Land swaps refer to exchanges of territory between Israel and the Palestinians, in which the two sides would agree to modifications to the 1967 border in a final agreement. Practically, land swaps would allow Israel to maintain some settlements and the Palestinians to annex parts of Israel.

Yedioth Ahronoth

White House Requests: Only 15 Minutes at Yad Vashem

While the American working teams have been working around the clock to prepare President Trump's visit to Israel in another 12 days, it seems that the sides have been unable to reach an agreement on one detail that is particularly important, at least for Israel—a visit to Yad Vashem. In preliminary talks, the Israeli side clarified it attached importance to having Trump visit the national Holocaust museum—although this is not required, since it is a working visit, not a state visit. However, the Americans, who are trying to squeeze a large number of events into the brief one-day visit, appeared unenthusiastic: At first they asked to allocate about half an hour to Yad Vashem. After Israeli officials clarified that this was not enough, and explained that a visit to Yad Vashem required at least an hour and a quarter, the White House checked again and came back with an even more peculiar proposal: A 15-minute visit.

Yedioth Ahronoth

Amona Evacuees Left Hanging

One hundred days have passed since they were evicted from their homes in Amona. More than a month has passed since the cabinet decided to build a new settlement for them. On the ground, however, nothing has happened. The 30 families that agreed to voluntarily leave their homes and placed their trust in the government's promises have now found themselves without any permanent housing, and they are brimming with frustration and anger.

See also, ["30 Amona Families Still Without Permanent Homes" \(Ynet News\)](#)

IDF Trying to Fill in the Gaps on Front Line with Hezbollah

Israel has begun building an upgraded security fence along two stretches of the Lebanese border after an unarmed Lebanese citizen infiltrated into the area and walked several kilometers to Kiryat Shmona, the Defense Ministry confirmed on Tuesday. The upgraded barrier is expected to be similar to the “smart fences” along the border with Egypt and some 30 kilometers along the border with Jordan. The steel and barbed wire fence will have a height of six meters and stretch several kilometers. The project, which is projected to cost NIS 100 million and is expected to feature information-collection centers and warning systems.

Ha'aretz

Gaza: PA to Stop Sending Medicine, Baby Formula to Hospitals

The Palestinian Authority is to stop providing medicines and baby formula to hospitals in the Gaza Strip, which could have disastrous consequences for residents in the Strip, the Health Ministry in Gaza warned Tuesday. The director general of the Gazan Health Ministry's pharmacy department, Dr. Munir al-Bursh, was quoted on a number of Palestinian websites identified with Hamas as saying this was a political decision. He is in contact with senior officials in the Health Ministry in the West Bank to determine the meaning of the decision – which was announced by Ramallah on Tuesday – and how long it will be in effect, he said. “This is a decision that has destructive implications for the residents [of Gaza], and in particular for the chronically ill and children,” said Bursh.

See also, [*“Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian Venture Seeks Help on Gaza Resources Crisis” \(Jerusalem Post\)*](#)

Ynet News

Egypt's al-Sisi: Gaza Buffer Zone Not Enough

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said on Tuesday that the one-kilometer buffer zone defense project on the Gaza border is not enough to prevent smuggling. “We found tunnels that are three kilometers long and 35 meters deep. These are tunnels that can transport vehicles and not just people,” al-Sisi said at a youth conference in Ismailia. The Egyptian president arrived at the conference for the third time in his attempt to talk to the younger generation and shed light on Egypt's struggle against smuggling tunnels from Gaza to Sinai. Al-Sisi also pointed out that despite the Egyptian army's efforts, the problem is still ongoing and authorities “require more cooperation” from residents.

Ynet News

Clashes in NW Syria After De-escalation Zones Take Effect

Syrian government forces and rebels clashed in the northwestern province of Hama on Friday shortly after a Russian-led deal to establish de-escalation zones took effect, a monitor and a rebel official said. Fighter jets fired at the rebel-held village of al-Zalakiyat and nearby positions in the Hama countryside, where the combatants exchanged shelling, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The Britain-based war monitoring group said government forces shelled the nearby towns of Kafr Zita and Latamneh. There was no immediate comment from the Syrian army.

See also, [*“Syria Safe Zones on Hold Amid Concern of Over How Deal Will Be Enforced” \(The Guardian\)*](#)

Trump, the Middle East Peacemaker? Give Crazy a Chance

Naïve, ignorant, narcissistically over-confident. Does that mean Trump can broker Middle East peace?

By Rabbi Eric Yoffie

- **Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's fierce attack yesterday stunned Israel and I hate to do it, but maybe it's time to say a good word about Donald Trump.**
- **Against the advice of the Middle East experts, the think tanks, the foreign policy wonks, the international affairs scholars, and the America Firsters, President Trump has decided to push for an Israeli-Palestinian deal. My take: Good for him. It's worth the risk. When everything else has failed, what exactly do we have to lose?**
- **I am not a fan of the President and disagree with him on virtually everything. But here he has shown some guts and daring. Let's give him credit and see where this goes.**
- **American expert opinion, on both the right and the left, has been urging the President to push Israelis and Palestinians for, at most, some modest confidence-building measures. The argument is that the two sides are simply too far apart to do more than that. On the Palestinian side, Hamas remains firmly rejectionist and Mahmoud Abbas, while well-intentioned, is still pathetically weak. And Benjamin Netanyahu, facing personal scandals and a hardline government, lacks the resolve to push his coalition partners toward compromise of any sort.**
- **The experts note, furthermore, that the President lacks the skills, patience, understanding, and common sense to make anything happen. He is ignorant of the history and the current realities of the Middle East. And he is also absurdly confident that he can do what no President has been able to do for 70 years. Some of this misplaced confidence is simple narcissism while some, perhaps, is an attempt to divert attention from his struggles and frustrations on the domestic front.**
- **In substantial measure, all of these concerns are justified. The odds of a major breakthrough are slight. Nonetheless, there are other ways to look at what is happening and something to be said for a Trumpian initiative.**
- **Most important, Trump has a solid and respectable foreign policy team, led by James Mattis and H.R. McMaster. Mattis and McMaster are pushing their boss back into the arms of America's traditional Arab allies, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. They look to the Saudis and the Egyptians to bring the Palestinians along on a possible deal and for America to twist Israel's arm if necessary. And why push for a deal at all? Because, as these veteran military men recognize, the current drift of events is deeply worrisome. Iran gains strength with every passing day, and the civil war in Syria is still dangerously disruptive and potentially explosive.**
- **An agreement between Israel and Palestine has no direct connection to the Iranian nuclear deal. Mattis and McMaster do not expect that deal to be cancelled. But they do believe that Israeli-Palestinian peace would be helpful in creating a united front against Iranian expansion and subversion in the region.**

- Of course, there are many who say that Trump's personal quirks make an Israeli-Palestinian peace impossible. The President is self-absorbed, inexperienced, and possessed of a bizarre and disturbing Twitter fetish. Nonetheless, when it comes to an Israeli-Palestinian deal, his unpredictability might actually work to his advantage. And my guess is that this is what his senior advisors believe.
- Speaking at Israel's Independence Day celebration in Washington, McMaster, in a case of classic understatement, noted that "The President is not a super-patient man." He went on to say that "some people have described him as disruptive. They're right. And this is good." And he emphasized the need for the United States to take advantage of the current moment of opportunity and use it to solve "intractable problems."
- All sides, I suspect, are pondering what it will mean to them that Trump is not "a super-patient man." The Saudis are likely thinking that Trump will have little tolerance for the Arab peace plan if that plan is so filled with ambiguities that it is rendered useless. The Palestinians are likely contemplating that Trump's team will expect them to put aside, once and for all, their ridiculous claims about refugee return. And Benjamin Netanyahu is likely recognizing that 50 years after the Six Day War, Trump will want Israel's government to say in plain English what it expects Israel's borders to be.
- In any case, all parties know that if Trump is serious about wanting a deal, the days of endless game-playing are over. Is Trump naïve? Maybe. Is he clueless about diplomatic history? Perhaps. Might he blow up any potential deal with a single ill-considered tweet? Absolutely. Nonetheless, what he won't do is let the Arabs dodge and the Israelis build settlements and proclaim that it doesn't matter. What he won't do is allow both sides to declare that they have "no preconditions" while waving a list of points on which compromise is absolutely impossible. And he won't hesitate to demand results, point fingers, and assign blame. And who knows? As unlikely as it seems, maybe this approach—Trump as both bulldozer and bully—could actually work.
- But the key is this: There is not a lot to lose. The status quo is not harmless; it is pernicious, undermining stability in the region and boosting Iran's power and status. And while the Palestinians and the Arab world are more to blame for the current impasse than the Israelis, settlement building and occupation continue to erode Israel's democratic institutions and her standing in the world. So yes, Trump is a bit crazy, but this may be the moment to give his particular brand of craziness a chance.
- And finally, a word of advice to Prime Minister Netanyahu. Assume that President Trump is serious about wanting a deal, whether you are happy about that or not. When he arrives for his visit, be ready with a plan. You haven't done well in recent years with U.S. Presidents, and you cannot afford to alienate this one too.
- Don't try to play him. Be prepared with specifics and concrete ideas. If the Palestinians and the Saudis are not ready for peace – which is the likely scenario – they will take the blame. But if, by some miracle, they are ready to move forward and you are not, even Sheldon Adelson will not save you. There will be hell to pay.

Eric H. Yoffie, a rabbi, writer and teacher in Westfield, New Jersey, is a former president of the Union for Reform Judaism.

Summary:

But the key is this: There is not a lot to lose. The status quo is not harmless; it is pernicious, undermining stability in the region and boosting Iran's power and status. And while the Palestinians and the Arab world are more to blame for the current impasse than the Israelis, settlement building and occupation continue to erode Israel's democratic institutions and her standing in the world. So yes, Trump is a bit crazy, but this may be the moment to give his particular brand of craziness a chance.

Could Hamas' Pragmatic New Leader Finally Reconcile w/Fatah?

By Shlomi Eldar

- Ismail Haniyeh has been elected as expected to head the Hamas political bureau and thus become the supreme leader of the movement. Haniyeh defeated Mousa Abu Marzouk, one of the founders of the political bureau in the US state of Virginia. He headed the bureau until his arrest in July 1995 by the US immigration authorities, following an Israeli request for his extradition. Abu Marzouk had hoped to return to the top of Hamas' political leadership, but on May 6, Haniyeh received a majority of the votes from the members of the movement's supreme body, the Shura Council.
- Haniyeh's election represents closure for Hamas on two levels. Outgoing leader Khaled Meshaal had lived in Syria and then Qatar. Now, with the Meshaal era over, the movement's leadership is returning to the Gaza Strip. In addition, the site on which the movement was founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the Shati refugee camp, is where Haniyeh was born.
- There were those in Israel's security system who used to belittle Haniyeh and call him by the nickname "the caretaker." This is because Haniyeh, as head of Yassin's bureau, was also responsible for the medical needs of the disabled sheikh. Now, 13 years after Yassin was killed, Haniyeh has been elected to the movement's highest position. One of Haniyeh's strengths is his amazing rhetorical ability, allowing him to stand in front of a crowd and speak to it just like a man on the street. But mainly he is well respected as a pragmatic person with his feet firmly on the ground. This image, in contrast with that of other Hamas leaders (such as Dr. Mahmoud a-Zahar), captivated the residents of the Gaza Strip and West Bank. In the 2006 elections, the rank and file voted for the "Change and Reform" bloc headed by Haniyeh, the man who would know how to deal with the enormous gap between the uncompromising Hamas Charter and a changing reality.
- "He understands exactly what is going on and what is expected of him," one of the associates of the leader-elect told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. This contact has been in Haniyeh's inner circles since 2006, when he was elected prime minister. According to the contact, Haniyeh knows that his life mission is to pry open the closure on Gaza. He intends to devote his life to saving the Strip's residents from hunger because "he himself was born in a refugee camp in Gaza."
- "That is where his family is planted, and that is where he intends to live until his dying day," said the source.
- Nevertheless, it is not clear whether Haniyeh will remain in Gaza to carry out his duties. After Israel assassinated Sheikh Yassin and his replacement Abd al-Aziz Rantisi in 2004, the movement's leadership decided to move its activities outside the Palestinian territories, far away from the Israeli air force. But now, there could be a different reason to leave. The new leader has freedom of movement only outside the besieged Gaza Strip, and he needs that freedom to raise money from Arab states and from Islamic charities. The member of Haniyeh's inner circle feels that the incoming leader will prefer to base himself in one of the Gulf countries, but "his real anchor will still be Gaza. That's where he was born, and that's where his people live."

- Haniyeh made a name for himself as a fundraising wizard who even superseded Abu Marzouk, who was also known for his remarkable ability to attract contributions from Islamic charitable funds throughout the world. Haniyeh has his feet on the ground, said his associate. He knows how to maneuver among all the forces that be — Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Hamas' military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.
- Haniyeh's election has injected great optimism into the Fatah movement. Fatah leaders are well acquainted with Haniyeh, as opposed to Meshaal. Meshaal has lived his entire life outside the Palestinian territories, so the vast majority of Fatah activists have never even met him.
- "Haniyeh is the ticket to reconciliation," said a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and former Gaza resident on condition of anonymity. He said that Haniyeh is very interested in reconciliation with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and has in fact been operating behind the scenes toward this end. Haniyeh realizes that the only way to save Gaza and extricate it from its blockade is by resolving the long crisis between the two organizations. This Fatah higher-up argued that Meshaal did not succeed in this task because he is a foreigner in the West Bank and Gaza and never really understood the distress of the Palestinians. "He only knows how to inflame the masses, to talk about jihad. And that others should fight in his stead. By contrast, Haniyeh knows that only Palestinian unity will benefit the Gaza residents and the Hamas movement that he now heads," he added.
- Al-Monitor has learned that Meshaal's May 1 statement about Hamas' readiness to recognize the 1967 lines as the borders of a future Palestinian state was planned in advance as the first stage in reconciling the organizations and as preparation for Haniyeh's entrance into his new role. Meshaal did Haniyeh's dirty work for him by making a levelheaded, moderate public statement. If Haniyeh had announced recognition of the '67 lines close to his election, it would have been perceived as a change in his personal viewpoint, and not a resolution by the entire movement.
- After consulting with Haniyeh and Abu Marzouk, Meshaal made his announcement to pave the way for the next elected leader to begin to make contacts with the Palestinian Authority for a real reconciliation. They also wanted to show the international community that Hamas can compromise. Now, the new leader of the Hamas movement faces a giant hurdle. If he really desires reconciliation with Fatah and Abbas, who imposed sanctions on Gaza only about two weeks ago (by refusing to pay for its electricity and cutting the salaries of Fatah former employees in Gaza) — he will need to dismantle the Hamas army that was created after the coup in Gaza about a decade ago.
- Without this laying down of arms, Abbas cannot agree to a reconciliation. Will Haniyeh succeed in convincing the military wing? Can he convince Hamas military leaders Mohammed al-Deif and Yahya Sinwar that the lives of the Gaza residents are more important than keeping an armed military? This is the million-dollar question that even Haniyeh's closest associates find hard to answer.

Shlomi Eldar is a columnist for Al-Monitor's Israel Pulse. For the past two decades, he has covered the Palestinian Authority and especially the Gaza Strip for Israel's Channels 1 and 10, reporting on the emergence of Hamas. In 2007, he was awarded the Sokolov Prize, Israel's most important media award, for this work.

Summary:

Haniyeh's election has injected great optimism into the Fatah movement. Fatah leaders are well acquainted with Haniyeh, as opposed to Meshaal. Meshaal has lived his entire life outside the Palestinian territories, so the vast majority of Fatah activists have never even met him. "Haniyeh is the ticket to reconciliation," said a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and former Gaza resident on condition of anonymity. He said that Haniyeh is very interested in reconciliation with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and has in fact been operating behind the scenes toward this end. Haniyeh realizes that the only way to save Gaza and extricate it from its blockade is by resolving the long crisis between the two organizations. This Fatah higher-up argued that Meshaal did not succeed in this task because he is a foreigner in the West Bank and Gaza and never really understood the distress of the Palestinians. "He only knows how to inflame the masses, to talk about jihad. And that others should fight in his stead. By contrast, Haniyeh knows that only Palestinian unity will benefit the Gaza residents and the Hamas movement that he now heads," he added.