



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, May 11

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News Excerpts

May 11, 2017

Ha'aretz

PMO Postpones Settlements Committee Until After Trump's Visit

The Prime Minister's Office had the Civil Administration's High Planning Committee postpone a meeting supposed to convene this week to approve building projects in West Bank settlements. A senior official told *Ha'aretz* that Netanyahu's office asked that the meeting only take place after U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to the country on May 22 ends. The senior official, who asked to remain anonymous, stated that the postponement was intended to avoid friction between Israel and the U.S. over the issue of settlement construction a short while before the presidential visit.

See also, [*"Diplomats to Disrupt Trump Visit with Strike, Despite Wage Assurances"* \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Yedioth Ahronoth

Ministers: Bibi Afraid of Trump's Determination to Reach Deal

Senior ministers close to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he is troubled by the mounting interest US President Donald Trump has shown in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and his hope of reaching the "ultimate deal" at any price. Netanyahu's concern stems first and foremost from the fact that, as opposed to when Barack Obama was in office, Netanyahu now has no "brakes" in Congress to use against Trump. The Democrats will support any diplomatic initiative, as will the Republicans. The senior ministers said they believed Netanyahu is going to cooperate with Trump's initiative and will try to maneuver to the best of his ability, all the while counting on Abu Mazen's rejectionism.

See also, [*"In DC, Justice Minister Shaked Speaks Out Against Trump's Peace Push"* \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ma'ariv

Nationality Bill Approved Despite Protest

Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People passed yesterday in a preliminary reading to vigorous protest from left wing MKs. A total of 48 MKs, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, supported the bill. A total of 41 MKs opposed it, including Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid, while Benny Begin (Likud) was absent from the vote. The debate was fierce, with Jamal Zahalka (Joint List) tearing the bill into pieces and being removed from the room while yelling "Apartheid! Apartheid! Apartheid!" His fellow party member Hanin Zuabi and Abd al-Hakim Hajj Yayhe were removed from the debate for interrupting it. The controversial bill states, among other things, that Israel is the state of the Jewish people, that Hebrew is the official language and Arabic will receive "special status."

See also, [*"Nationality Bill Passes Preliminary Knesset Reading"* \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

3rd Straight Year, Hamas Defeats Fatah in Student WB Elections

Hamas defeated Fatah in student council elections at Bir Zeit University, the 2nd largest university in the West Bank. Student elections in the Palestinian territories are viewed as important barometers of public opinion, since Hamas and Fatah have not competed against each other in municipal, legislative or presidential elections since the 2006. The Hamas-affiliated Islamic Bloc won 25 seats on the council, whereas the Fatah backed Shabibah garnered 22 seats. More than 8,000 students voted.

Leading Hamas Official Says No Softened Stance Towards Israel

One of Hamas's most senior officials said on Wednesday a document published by the Islamist Palestinian group last week was not a substitute for its founding charter, which advocates Israel's destruction. Speaking in Gaza City, Mahmoud al-Zahar, a regular critic of Israel, said the political policy document announced in Qatar on May 1 by Hamas's outgoing chief Khaled Mashaal did not contradict its founding covenant, published in 1988.

See also, [*"Hamas Assures Critics Israel's Destruction Still Its Goal" \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

IDF Accuses B'Tselem of 'Manufacturing' Conflicts

In a rare move, the army's spokesperson lambasted the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem on Wednesday for publishing a video of an IDF officer guarding outside the a West Bank settlement, which he said was filmed purely to "manufacture an incident." In the video in question, one of the organization's Palestinian photographers and two other people approach the officer and his soldiers, who tell the three men to stay back. There is then a brief, mostly verbal altercation between the photographer and the officer, before the soldiers detain him and apparently use tear gas to force the other two men to leave the area. In a Facebook post, IDF Spokesperson and Head of the Manpower Directorate Maj. Gen. Moti Almoz defended the officer's actions and accused B'Tselem of "provocation."

Israel Asks US to Nullify UNSC Settlement Resolution 2334

The Israeli Foreign Ministry appealed this week to US Envoy to the UN Nikki Haley to nullify Security Council Resolution 2334 which calls for an end to settlement construction while simultaneously declaring them illegal, both in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem. The issue was just one in a series of requests made to Haley, in an effort to garner American support in implementing a number of changes vis-a-vis the world body's treatment of Israel. Another central request put forth by the Israelis is to reduce the activities of UN bodies which dedicate significant, oftentimes disproportionate, resources and efforts toward the Palestinian issue. To this end, Israel has asked to slash the budget and manpower intended for such activities. Moreover, the American are also asked to reduce the number of discussions held by the Security Council on Israel, which are currently held once a month.

Jordanian Air Force Brings Down Drone Near Border with Syria

Jordan's air force brought down a drone that approached the country's air space near its northern border with Syria on Wednesday night, the Jordanian military said in a statement. F-16 fighter jets brought down the drone after it repeatedly came close to the border, and the air force "gathered the drone's ruins" for inspection, the statement said. The statement did not identify the drone. On Tuesday, Syrian government warplanes struck rebel outposts near the Jordanian border, rebels in southern Syria said, bringing the war closer to Syria's US-allied neighbor.

See also, [*"Jordanian F-16 Shoots Down Drone at Syrian Border" \(Arutz Sheva\)*](#)

Settlers' Honeymoon with Trump Ends Sooner Than Expected

By Hofi Amos

- **US President Donald Trump will arrive in Israel in less than two weeks and the settlement community is already feeling a certain amount of tension. Trump, who is coming for a brief, 24-hour visit, has become increasingly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and will apparently try, during his visit, to resume the peace process between the sides. The American president met just last week with PA Chairman Abu Mazen. Abu Mazen announced today that he was willing to hold a summit meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu and with Trump during Trump's visit to Israel.**
- **Ariel Kahane reported here this morning that Trump has decided to use his waiver power not to move the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This report, in addition to indicating a change in direction by the US president, attests to a broader change in his approach. Whereas until recently his attitude toward the settlement enterprise could be interpreted in various ways ("the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal [of peace]" versus "we don't believe that the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace"), Trump is liable to show up with tougher messages and to shoot down the expansion of the settlement enterprise.**
- **Although it is as yet unclear what Trump's demands will be, the settlement leadership assumes that this will consist more of bad news than good. But the settlement leaders are concerned in any case. The Civil Administration has been postponing, for several weeks, meetings that were supposed to address the approval of construction plans in the settlements. The Civil Administration's supreme planning committee had scheduled several months ago to meet to approve the plans, but after it was learned that the American president intended to visit Israel, a decision was made by the political echelon to postpone the meetings without scheduling new dates for them. The impression is that the prime minister is concerned about the visit. The Prime Minister's Bureau does not know what Trump's peace plan is, if he has one, and that is a source of stress.**
- **The prime minister himself was involved for several years in and even set the agenda of the supreme planning committee, and every plan that is discussed must have Netanyahu's approval. The council chairpersons in the West Bank who have been battling to promote construction plans have been impatiently waiting for the supreme planning committee meetings. Approval of construction plans is like oxygen for the council chairpersons, who are suffering from a severe housing crisis. The assumption is that the prime minister will decide how many housing units will be discussed and when the committee will be convened only after Trump's visit, and on condition that Netanyahu does not promise a construction freeze of one sort or another in exchange for restarting the peace process.**
- **But the West Bank chairpersons, who are used to disappointment, are not surprised. Immediately after the celebrations over Trump's victory ended, the settlement leaders stressed again and again that the decision on the approval of the construction plans were in Netanyahu's hands and not in the hands of the president of the United States.**

- “Trump is influenced by Netanyahu,” the council chairpersons say in frustration. “He is no more right wing than Netanyahu, and the prime minister is cultivating hopes and dreams in the president about a peace agreement and a Nobel Prize rather than explaining reality to him.”
- A restart of the peace process would again spark false hope on the Palestinian side since their minimum demands do not meet the prime minister’s maximum willingness to give. And so when the peace negotiations again “blow up” and our neighbors and cousins are “disappointed,” the road to the umpteenth Intifada will be quite short.

Hofi Amos is a contributor to NRG.

Summary:

Although it is as yet unclear what Trump’s demands will be, the settlement leadership assumes that this will consist more of bad news than good. But the settlement leaders are concerned in any case. The Civil Administration has been postponing, for several weeks, meetings that were supposed to address the approval of construction plans in the settlements. The Civil Administration’s supreme planning committee had scheduled several months ago to meet to approve the plans, but after it was learned that the American president intended to visit Israel, a decision was made by the political echelon to postpone the meetings without scheduling new dates for them. The impression is that the prime minister is concerned about the visit. The Prime Minister’s Bureau does not know what Trump’s peace plan is, if he has one, and that is a source of stress.

How Can Zionist Parties Oppose the Nationality Bill?

What seemed like a unique opportunity to hold a fundamental and serious discussion on the State of Israel's definition, without right-wing and left-wing labels, ended with an automatic opposition lacking any national logic.

By Dr. Yoaz Hendel

- **The Nationality Bill is the biggest missed opportunity of Zionist parties like Yesh Atid and the Zionist Union. What seemed like a unique opportunity to hold a fundamental and serious discussion on the State of Israel's definition, without right-wing and left-wing labels, ended with an automatic opposition lacking any national logic.**
- **Comparisons are always a sin, but the current Knesset appears to be characterized by higher than usual levels of populism and superficiality. Listen to the statements, watch the actions, and you'll understand why the public's trust in the political system is wearing off.**
- **The political system is preoccupied with the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation (IPBC), while no one understands the difference between the proposals and the reason behind the waste of time and money. It is preoccupied with arrogant threats that never come to fruition, talking about "how right-wing they are" and then doing exactly what the left-wing would do, and vice versa.**
- **And now, a unique opportunity has been created to discuss the question of our self-identity. The Nationality Bill, which I have supported since the moment it was conceived, could have served as a platform for a serious discussion of an essential question. Israeli politicians are allowed to do so as well.**
- **The bill was adopted by the Kadima party a decade ago. Avi Dichter, the initiator of the current law, is also the original initiator. He was backed by the party's leaders, including Tzipi Livni. The idea was simple: As the State of Israel has no constitution, the checks and balances characterizing us should be legally defined and enforced. Israel has a Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty, an important and influential law about our democratic nature, but there is no proper legal definition of us being a nation-state.**
- **This is how the Supreme Court turned into a national inventor of excuses. Every time Palestinians ask for a family reunion, the court objects for security reasons (which clearly cannot be true in all cases, statistically speaking).**
- **Every time Israeli Arabs are asked—and rightfully so—how come Arabic is an official language, yet the Knesset publishes its decisions exclusively in Hebrew and the courts are in Hebrew and the street numbers are in Hebrew, someone replies something and mumbles an explanation. Always vague, always lacking a definition. Well, the truth is that just like fog of war benefits guerilla forces and un-organized armies, rhetoric fog is convenient for a state under construction—a state which does not know, succeed or want to define itself, and definitely not a state which has existed for almost 70 years.**

- Absurdly, in the past few years, the greatest opposition has come from the direction of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of all people. He perceives basic laws as a headache. The Haredim don't like them, the political system rages, and the process requires decisions.
- Netanyahu's ideology is in the law, but who's talking about ideology here? And as it happens, a propitious time has come upon us. Netanyahu of the past year can no longer say no to a law discussing a nation-state, especially in light of the opponents.
- Allegedly, this is a cause for celebration, but it's a cause for concern as well. When a law turns into another Pavlovian response, there are too few Israelis who understand and are part of it, and much more Israelis and lawmakers whose only wish is to poke themselves in the eye and say 'to hell with the laws.'
- My guess is that Yesh Atid or the Zionist Union hardly held any serious in-depth discussions about the law. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised if apart from Dichter, Netanyahu and Ministers Ze'ev Elkin and Yariv Levin, no one in the Likud delved into it either.
- So for the sake of those who decide based on the other side, here are the clauses: The State of Israel is the Jewish people's national home, a Jewish and democratic nation-state in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence.
- The anthem is Hatikva, the flag is blue and white with a Star of David, the emblem is a menorah, the capital is Jerusalem, the state's language is Hebrew (Arabic has a special status, and its speakers have full accessibility rights), Independence Day is an official holiday, Memorial Day and Holocaust Day are official days. An ingathering of the exiles and the Law of Return. Religious and cultural rights for everyone, regardless of religion or nationality. Official statutory holidays according to the Hebrew calendar, and for members of other religions according to their heritage.
- And so, in summary, the lawmakers sought to reinforce what was espoused by the state's founders and what balances us as a democratic nation-state. Those who don't believe it should put in the effort and read the law for himself.
- I can understand the turmoil coming from those who oppose the Zionist idea, but from the Zionist Union and Yesh Atid? What exactly are they objecting to? The populism around the law is harmful, but it's no excuse to avoid a serious discussion of a serious law.

Dr. Yoaz Hendel serves as the Chairman of the Institute for Zionist Strategies. He also served as Director of Communications for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2011-2012). Dr. Hendel is a popular policy analyst with a weekly radio show and newspaper column in Israel. He has received Israel's most prestigious prizes for his work inside and outside government.

Summary:

Every time Israeli Arabs are asked—and rightfully so—how come Arabic is an official language, yet the Knesset publishes its decisions exclusively in Hebrew and the courts are in Hebrew and the street numbers are in Hebrew, someone replies something and mumbles an explanation. Always vague, always lacking a definition. Well, the truth is that just like fog of war benefits guerilla forces and un-organized armies, rhetoric fog is convenient for a state under construction—a state which does not know, succeed or want to define itself, and definitely not a state which has existed for almost 70 years. Absurdly, in the past few years, the greatest opposition has come from the direction of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of all people. He perceives basic laws as a headache. The Haredim don't like them, the political system rages, and the process requires decisions.