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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, May 16

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News Excerpts

May 16, 2017

Ynet News

US, Israel Teams Clash at W. Wall Ahead of Trump Visit

Members of the American delegation preparing for President Donald Trump's arrival in Israel have reportedly asked the Israeli prep team to leave the Western Wall, telling them "this isn't your territory; it's the West Bank." The US and Israeli teams were visiting the site on Sunday ahead of Trump's visit. The Israeli team requested to have Prime Minister Netanyahu accompany Trump during his visit to the Western Wall, but were turned down by the Americans. This led to a loud argument between representatives from the two teams. Two officials from the US Consulate in Jerusalem spoke curtly to the Israeli team, telling them among other things: "We're asking you to leave, and we need to be left alone. See also, ["US OFFICIAL TO ISRAEL: WESTERN WALL NOT YOUR TERRITORY"](#) (*Jerusalem Post*)

Times of Israel

White House: Western Wall Comments were 'Unauthorized'

The WH on Monday said that comments from a US official who told his Israeli counterparts that the Western Wall is not part of Israel were "unauthorized" and do not represent the stance of the Trump administration. "The comments about the Western Wall were not authorized communication and they do not represent the position of the United States and certainly not of the president," a senior administration official told The Times of Israel. No serving US president has ever visited the Western Wall, because US policy has been that the final status of Jerusalem has yet to be resolved in negotiations. See also, ["Israel wants White House to explain U.S. official's Western Wall comment"](#) (*Reuters*)

Ha'arezt

Report: Officials Warn Trump not to Recognize Jerusalem

Senior officials in the U.S. intelligence community, the State Department and the Pentagon have reportedly warned U.S. President Donald Trump against recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Senior officials in a number of government agencies all contacted the White House to say that such recognition would hurt Trump's peace efforts and could ignite violence in the Middle East. Earlier on Monday, Netanyahu's office took a highly unusual step and published transcripts from Netanyahu's meeting last month, in order to dispel accusations that the Israeli prime minister asked the Trump administration not to follow through with its campaign promise to move the embassy to Jerusalem. See also, ["Trump to dive into Mideast conflict on first presidential trip"](#) (*CNN*)

Jerusalem Post

New US Ambassador's First Stop in Israel: Western Wall

US Ambassador David Friedman's first stop on the job in Israel was the Western Wall, where a simple prayer at the Biblical site, turned into a larger diplomatic statement. Friedman, who is a practicing Orthodox Jew, headed to Jerusalem's Old City right after he landed at Ben-Gurion International Airport. Friedman arrived amid reports that a US official had told an Israel team preparing for President Trump's visit, that the site was in the West Bank and was not part of Israel.

Reuters

Pal' Envoy: 2-state solution Basis for any Trump Plan

Just days ahead of President Donald Trump's Middle East trip, the Palestinian envoy to the United States said any new Israeli-Palestinian peace push must be based on a two-state solution but that the U.S. administration had yet to present an actual plan for reviving negotiations. While welcoming Trump's promise to pursue what he has called the "ultimate deal," Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian Authority's new chief representative in Washington, insisted on Monday that any final agreement would have to satisfy the "legitimate aspirations" of the Palestinian people for a state of their own. Trump, who will meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem on May 23, has stopped short of recommitting to the goal of Palestinian independence, a longtime bedrock of U.S. policy. See also, ["P.A. Envoy: 'I Promise There Will Be a Palestinian State' " \(CBN News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Barghouti Threatens to Escalate Prisoners' Hunger Strike

Terrorist Marwan Barghouti has threatened to further escalate the Palestinian prisoners' hunger strike, issuing the Israel Prison Service (IPS) a list of demands on Monday. Barghouti, who is leading the hunger strike, has been put in solitary confinement since it began almost a month ago. The only visitors he has been allowed to have are representatives of the Red Cross and his attorney. His lawyer, Hader Shkirat, told Ynet after their meeting on Sunday that if no agreement is reached between the striking prisoners' leadership and Israeli authorities in the coming days, the prisoners would also stop drinking water in addition to not eating. "It could happen in the next two or three days," Shkirat said. See also, ["Barghouti Meets Lawyer for First Time" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

Netanyahu, Bennett Continue to Clash ahead of Visit

Prime Minister Netanyahu and Education Minister Naftali Bennett continued their back-and-forth on the latter's demand to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem. "My consistent and unequivocal position is that the US Embassy should move to Jerusalem, as should other embassies," Netanyahu said during a Likud party meeting in response to Bennett's calls that he presses the matter during US President Donald Trump's visit to Israel next week. "I presented my position in meetings with US and world leaders, with the diplomatic staff in Israel, and" the prime minister added. Bennett and his Bayit Yehudi party are pushing to set the narrative for Trump's visit to Israel.

Times of Israel

Israel Appoints First Female Judge to Sharia Court

President Reuven Rivlin and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked installed the first ever female judge, or qadi, for Israel's Sharia Court system on Monday in Jerusalem, along with three other regional qadis. "This is testament to the positive changes in the status of women," said Rivlin as he praised Hana Mansour Khatib, a lawyer from the Galilee of town of Tamra who previously specialized in family and Sharia law. "This is testament to the inescapable understanding that it is our duty to ensure that half of the world's population has an equal part in determining and implementing policies and laws in all spheres of life. Today, I will allow myself to express the hope that the appointment will be the first of many." See also, ["In Home of Israel's First Female Sharia Judge, Husband Does the Cooking" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Netanyahu Trapped Between Trump and Israeli Right Wing

By Ben Caspit, senior columnist at AI Monitor Israel Pulse

- Tension continues to rise with only one week to go before President Donald Trump's visit to Israel May 22. The Israeli right had originally hoped to turn his visit into a modern-day version of the coming of the Messiah, but the real world refused to cooperate. The blasts of the shofar announcing the Messiah's arrival have been replaced by a bitter political skirmish with the potential to turn into a real political struggle as soon as Trump leaves, tearing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, and maybe even his party, to shreds. It might all happen even before the Trump administration defines its basic principles on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or puts together a comprehensive peace plan.
- The opening salvo was fired right here, in a May 8 AI-Monitor interview with HaBayit HaYehudi Chairman Naftali Bennett. In it, he complained about Israel, i.e., Netanyahu, having made no effort to influence its future or for that matter the incoming president. Instead of filling the vacuum that has emerged between the two administrations, the Israeli government has lowered its head, waiting to find out what lies in store for it. Days later, on May 13 in a press briefing by US national security adviser H.R. McMaster, it was revealed that Trump is considering recognizing the Palestinians' right to self-determination during his visit to the region.
- Although Israel has long recognized this right, that has not helped to lower the flames on the right. To the contrary, Bennett actually turned them up, asserting, "We cannot continue to run a 'bunker' policy, or Israel's fate will be decided by others."
- Once again, Bennett rose to explicitly criticize Netanyahu, who continues to maintain radio silence on every step Washington takes. Netanyahu is walking on tiptoe, quietly freezing West Bank settlement construction and restraining himself from pressuring Trump until these days of rage are over or at least until the presidential visits end peaceably.
- This game of Ping-Pong was ratcheted up a notch on May 14, when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that Trump is carefully considering his election promise to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem. According to Tillerson, his deliberations will take into account the two parties' positions, with particular emphasis on the Israeli position, as well as on the question of how the move might affect the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.
- It is not as if anyone in Jerusalem is actually waiting for the embassy to be moved, as much as they might want that to happen. Yet Tillerson's remarks provoked an expected reaction by Bennett, in which he called on Netanyahu "to make it clear that we expect the US administration to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem and recognize a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty."
- In the past, Netanyahu would have responded harshly to such a provocation and issued a brusque statement condemning Bennett. This time, however, he rose to the challenge. Just moments after Bennett issued his statement, the Prime Minister's Office released a statement

of its own, calling on the secretary of state to support moving the embassy: “Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem will not only not harm the peace process, it will advance it by correcting a historical wrong and by shattering the Palestinian fantasy that Jerusalem is not the capital of Israel.”

- Netanyahu himself does not believe this — but on the other hand, he is fed up with losing prestige among the right and bleeding voters to Bennett. In other words, the prime minister is stuck between a rock and a hard place, between Israel's right-wing electorate and Trump.
- Bennett learned something from Netanyahu in the last 2015 elections when the prime minister gobbled up a significant part of Bennett's electorate in the final days leading up to the vote. Now Bennett is the one eating away at him on the right, drawing clear lines to distinguish himself from Netanyahu by putting indirect pressure on Trump.
- In any other circumstance, Netanyahu would back away from the pied piper that is Bennett. The problem is that he is facing Trump, the orange-haired man that no one in the world wants to upset. This includes Netanyahu, who doesn't want to end up like former FBI Director James Comey.
- This sense of awe, not to mention abject fear of Trump, has left Netanyahu paralyzed. He is like a deer in the headlights, utterly unable to move. Bennett's announcement was the electric shock that jolted Netanyahu into action and forced him to release his statement on moving the embassy to Jerusalem benefiting peace.
- The drama is also playing out behind the curtains. Tillerson's remarks implied that the Americans were expecting help from Netanyahu. In recent conversations between the concerned parties, the possibility was raised that Israel would either hint at or quietly acquiesce to reports that there are serious security consequences to moving the embassy. Doing so would allow Trump to climb down off his high horse. While Netanyahu did not explicitly confirm that he would agree to such a gesture, he did give it consideration.
- The idea was shelved, however, on May 14. Netanyahu's breaking point had been reached: He prefers the calculated disappointment of the US administration over the continued cannibalization of his right-wing voter base by Bennett. How will the Americans respond? It looks like we'll find out in the coming days.
- As of now, no one in Jerusalem — or anywhere else, for that matter — knows how determined Trump is to broker the “ultimate deal” between Israel and the Palestinians. As far as Netanyahu is concerned, the deal will be nothing short of a nightmare, and he has to wake up from it somehow. So far, however, that hasn't happened. While he doesn't (yet) miss former President Barack Obama, at least openly, that unfamiliar feeling is starting to stir in the dark. If Trump presents Netanyahu with a cruel choice, the biggest problem that the prime minister will face will be from within his own party.
- According to a senior political source who spoke on the condition of anonymity, these problems — coupled with criminal investigations against Netanyahu that never seem to ease up — led him to state repeatedly to his associates on May 14, “The current government will finish up its term in October 2019.” This translates as, “Don't start eulogizing me prematurely.

I'm not going anywhere. Anyone who tries to take advantage of this weakness to show off their nationalist and right-wing fortitude will be dealt with severely."

- **A week before the leader of the free world pays a visit, Netanyahu is trying to buttress his leadership in Israel. The question is to what extent Likud members buy into it. In other words, what will scare them more: the rage of a scarred and weakened Netanyahu, or the rage of Likud voters solidly seated on the far right and unwilling to hear about a two-state solution or the establishment of a Palestinian state? The sense is that sometime in the near future, all the players in the Middle East will have to decide.**

A White House at War with Itself Can't Make Peace in the Middle East

Hopes that President Donald Trump might be able to achieve the 'ultimate deal' between Israel and the Palestinians is a misplaced fantasy given the current chaos in his administration

By Allison Kaplan Sommer, correspondent at Ha'aretz English edition

- There may never have been a week of greater psychological disconnect between Washington and Jerusalem. In Israel, leaders across the political spectrum have twisted themselves into anxious knots anticipating President Donald Trump's arrival on May 22 – watching, waiting and worrying about what message he will carry, and how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should respond.
- On the Israeli right that forms the governing coalition, the nervousness is palpable. Those who prematurely hailed Trump's election as their salvation, who believed his campaign promises to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and drew hope when he refrained from advocating a two-state solution, are disturbed by growing signs of backtracking.
- Fear mounts that the more moderate, conventional rhetoric coming out of foreign policy surrogates like U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster will be echoed by Trump when he arrives and harden into policy. A public campaign has been launched to pressure Trump into allowing an embassy move to happen.
- On the other side of the political map, members of the opposition are drawing hope from the same events, dusting off their Kerry-era peace plans in readiness. MK Tzipi Livni (Zionist Union), who has become cozy with Trump peace envoy Jason Greenblatt, was quoted as saying she thinks Israel has “a huge opportunity” in Trump. “We have a president who thinks big and addresses the hard core,” one who is “not beating around the bush,” she declared. They are encouraged by reports that Trump could indeed use his visit to make an Obama-esque declaration of support for the right of the Palestinians to dignity and self-determination – possibly an explicit call for an independent Palestinian state – as are the Palestinians themselves.
- One can't really blame Israeli leaders for their reactions. After all, in a normal world, an American president's words, positions and stated policy should be taken seriously, at face value, and statements by his top foreign policy staff seen as reflecting a carefully coordinated effort and reflecting the president's own views. But, as anyone in Washington will tell you these days, nothing is normal in the corridors of power. What has played out over the past week, following the stunning firing of FBI Director James Comey, should hammer home a resounding message to Israelis and Palestinians alike: proceed with extreme caution.
- It is not business as usual inside the Beltway. If it were, conversations on “Meet the Press” or “Face the Nation” this weekend would also have focused on foreign policy fine-tuning ahead of the president's first overseas trip. Instead, the discussions were all about special prosecutors and obstruction of justice, and even impeachment, with Watergate comparisons the order of the day. Of particular interest to Israelis should be the “loyalty oath” Trump reportedly asked

Comey to take when he was summoned to a White House dinner in January – a vow Trump seemed to feel the former FBI director violated by remaining steadfast in his determination to get to the truth when it came to Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election.

- The Comey affair shows that Trump is incapable of distinguishing between his own personal interests and those of the country he is presumably leading. U.S. Ambassador David Friedman, who arrives in Israel on Monday, is preparing the ground for Trump's Israel visit, reportedly advising its leaders, first and foremost, to "refrain from getting into confrontations with the president and to help him implement his Middle Eastern policies."
- Haaretz's diplomatic correspondents have said Friedman repeatedly "stressed that given Trump's strong desire to make the 'ultimate deal' on the peace process, Israel must cooperate with his diplomatic initiative and help it succeed." Security for Israel, political rights for Palestinians and building a better future for both peoples clearly won't be the end goal of what is being formulated: The main purpose will be achieving a "win" for Donald Trump.
- Israel enters a Trump-sponsored, ego-driven peace effort at its own peril. This is beginning to become obvious to those on Netanyahu's right – both in Habayit Hayehudi and those on the right flank of his own Likud party, who are already distancing themselves from the U.S. president.
- But what of those who are clearly yearning to get a peace process going at any cost? Should the Israeli center-left not offer support to a Trump-led effort to bring the Palestinians and Israelis to the table, and support for Netanyahu if he agrees to go along with it?
- It is all too tempting to say yes. Hesitating to participate in any kind of diplomatic initiative, especially one led by the United States – which offers hope to end our bloody conflict and the corrosive occupation – seems wrong for both Israelis and Palestinians. Any hope at a U.S.-led effort should theoretically be grabbed, no matter what the party affiliation of the U.S. president offering it. All true. Yet it must be recognized that this isn't an issue of political partisanship, but of competence and reliability: Donald Trump in his current state simply isn't capable of bringing peace to Israel.
- Anyone who has followed the numerous U.S.-led peace efforts by many presidents knows that the process is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes calm determination, patience, consistency and a steady hand and eye for detail – none of which this president or his administration possess. It also requires discretion, which seems impossible with an administration that leaks like a sieve.
- Most of all, though, it requires credibility. Trump, at least for the moment, appears to be a frustrated and angry president, continually lashing out, making his own staffers look, as The New York Times put it, like "liars" or "fools."
- Chaos reigns in Trump World, and the Middle East has enough homegrown chaos and shortsighted, destructive leaders that there is no need to import more from abroad. No matter how elaborate one's fantasy might be that this renegade leader might just be the out-of-the-box solution to break the Middle East stalemate, it remains precisely that: sheer fantasy.
- Until the president puts out the fire burning in his own house, foreign nations with any common sense – including Israel – must beware of placing their trust, security and future in his hands.