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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, May 17

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News Excerpts

May 17, 2017

Yedioth Ahronoth

Intel Official: 'We'll Reevaluate Which Info We Share w/ the US'

The stormy reactions in the Israeli intelligence community were not long in coming in the wake of reports that US President Donald Trump leaked to Russia classified information that was received from an American "ally." Experts yesterday spoke in closed door meetings about their "grave concern" about the report in the *New York Times* about very sensitive information that Israel recently shared with the United States about the situation in Syria—and called for all of the secret information that has been shared with the Americans to be reexamined.

See also, [*"Israel Said to Be Source of Secret Intelligence Trump Gave to Russians"* \(New York Times\)](#)

See also, [*"Russians Are Having a Field Day with Trump's Intel Bleak Bombshell"* \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Times of Israel

Trump, Netanyahu Speak by Phone, But Did Not Discuss Leaks

US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have spoken by phone, an Israeli spokesman said Wednesday, as controversy brewed over the US president's sharing of intelligence with Russia that came from Israel. A spokesman in Netanyahu's office confirmed the phone call took place on Tuesday afternoon but did not say who initiated it. "There was a call yesterday between the president and prime minister for about 20 minutes," the spokesman said. "The only topic discussed was the upcoming visit."

See also, [*"Israel Lauds US Security Ties Following Trump Disclosures"* \(Washington Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Arab States Offer Israel Improved Ties for Peace Concessions

Various Arab Gulf nations are reportedly prepared to improve ties with Israel if Jerusalem takes what they deem as significant efforts to relaunch the stagnant peace process with the Palestinians. As part of the normalization process, the Gulf states would reportedly be willing to set up telecommunication lines between the countries, allow for Israeli businesses to trade with their Arab counterparts and allow for Israeli planes to fly over their airspace. In return, Israel would have to freeze settlement construction and relax trade restrictions with the Gaza Strip.

See also, [*"Gulf States Offer Unprecedented Steps with Israel in Exchange for Partial Settlement Freeze"* \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Times of Israel

US Officials Pressuring Trump Not to Recognize J'lem as Capital

Senior officials in Washington are pressuring US President Donald Trump not to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital or announce a move of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem when he visits next week. With the president said to still be undecided on the issues, a number of long-time US officials in the Department of State, Department of Defense and the broader intelligence community have issued stern warnings to the West Wing, suggesting the decision could harm the peace process and spark unrest in the region, the report said.

See also, [*"Nikki Haley Calls for US to Move Jerusalem Embassy"* \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

Tens of Thousands of Pal. in East J'lem Unaccounted for in Data

Next week, ahead of "Jerusalem Day", the Jerusalem Institute will publish official data regarding the city, starting with the number of Jews and Arabs that call it home. However, Jews may comprise a much smaller majority in Jerusalem than official statistics claim, data collected by the municipal water corporation shows. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, there are 542,000 Jews and 324,000 Arabs in the city, meaning Jews comprise 63% of the population and Arabs 37%. But the water corporation data shows tens of thousands of Palestinians living within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries are missing from the official count. If they were taken into account, experts say, the Jewish majority would shrink to about 59%, while the Palestinian majority would grow to 41%.

Israel Radio News

Ya'alon Threatens to Go Public If No Indictment on Sub. Affair

The former defense minister, Moshe Ya'alon, said if no indictments were filed in the submarine affair, he would make public everything known to him on the matter. Ya'alon tweeted he had given testimony to the police and provided all the information in his possession. He said [the facts] spoke for themselves, and people involved in the affair should not project a sense of panic and stress but rather should cope with the grave facts. Sources in the Prime Minister's Bureau said in response that Ya'alon's statements were utter nonsense, and his blatant lies would prove false in the near future.

See also, ["Ya'alon Warns: If Netanyahu Isn't Indicted for Graft, I'll Tell All" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Friedman: Pal. Drop Settlement Freeze as Precondition for Talks

The United States has not asked for a settlement freeze and the Palestinians have dropped that demand as a precondition for talks with Israel, America's new Ambassador David Friedman told the Hebrew daily *Yisrael HaYom*. "We have no demands for a settlement freeze and [Palestinian Authority head Mahmoud Abbas] Abu Mazen wants to meet [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu without any preconditions," Friedman said in an interview published on Wednesday. He spoke in advance of US President Donald Trump's May 22-23 visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

CNN

McMaster Declines to Say Whether Western Wall is in Israel

H.R. McMaster, national security adviser to President Donald Trump, declined to say Tuesday whether the Western Wall is in Israel, furthering a controversy over the site ahead of Trump's visit to the country next week. McMaster, speaking to reporters to preview Trump's first foreign swing, said questions about the location of the Western Wall -- one of the holiest sites in Judaism -- "sounds like a policy decision." His remarks came a day after a diplomatic spat opened between US and Israeli officials over Trump's planned stop at the site next week. The White House was forced to disavow comments by a US official planning Trump's stop who claimed the Western Wall was in the West Bank, and not a part of Israeli territory.

See also, ["US Officials Said to Promise: 'We'll Move the Embassy, Just Give Us Time'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Dangerous Amateurism

By Yossi Melman

- Israeli officials were very careful yesterday not to comment even implicitly on reports from the US, according to which US President Donald Trump shared top secret intelligence in his meeting last week with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and with the Russian ambassador to Washington. That's all senior security officials need, to get into trouble with the unpredictable Trump prior to his visit to Israel next week.
- American media outlets assessed yesterday that the secret information came from Jordan or from Israel—two countries whose intelligence communities have very close ties with American intelligence. Both also have good capabilities. The Jordanians [specialize] more in handling agents; Israel, presumably, [specializes] in technological intelligence—in coverage of Syria and ISIS. Last night the New York Times already reported that the information came from Israel, which had requested that the US handle it with extreme caution.
- In any case, the information, irrespective of its source, dealt with ISIS terrorist plots. We can assume that Trump said what he said in order to mobilize and spur the Russians into taking action against the terror organization, which is a front on which they are dragging their feet. However, sharing the information is a double-edged sword. The Russians, who are working in Syria to fortify Bashar Assad's regime, might share the information to him and perhaps even to his allies/their allies in the civil war in Syria—Iran and Hizbullah. Each of these could make use of the information, if it comes to their attention, in such a manner that would jeopardize intelligence operations and expose sources of information. And in this shadow world, there is no worse sin than failing to protect sources and exposing agents—as in the affair involving Eli Zeira, the Mossad and Egyptian agent Ashraf Marwan.
- In democratic countries, the intelligence communities are committed to give all their information at their disposal to the political echelon. There are leaders, in Israel, too (such as the late Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin), who insist on receiving not only the executive summary, but also knowing about the sources that are behind the information. Presumably, Trump delivered the information not out of malice, but simply due to his lack of understanding of the rules of the game in the [sphere of] intelligence. If he did this with malicious intent, then that is a different story, which borders on treason and espionage.
- Sharing the information with a third party without permission from the supplying source undoubtedly undermines the trust between the two countries. And intelligence cooperation is based first and foremost on trust. There is no doubt that officials in the US intelligence community are also embarrassed by the president's amateurism. But at this point what can they do? They are on a collision course with him in any case, and the affair of the dismissal of former FBI director James Comey is only one example. Besides, after all, he is the elected president and the commander-in-chief of the military.
- Before being elected president, Trump had already become entangled in slips of the tongue and leaking intelligence, to which he was exposed in briefings that he received.

- Now there are reports in Europe that following the incident, some countries are weighing the option of scaling down their cooperation with the United States. This is empty talk. The US is an intelligence power, and all the intelligence communities in the Western world, certainly small countries like Israel, are more dependent on it than it is on them. The relationships here are not among equals, and are more similar to the relationship between horse and rider. Even those who are angry at Trump will not be able to take counter-measures, since then they would be exposed to American revenge and punitive action. If the information is indeed from Israel or Jordan, have no fear—both countries will continue to cooperate with the United States, mainly because they have no alternative. However, they will be more cautious.

Yossi Melman is an Israeli journalist and writer who specializes in security and intelligence affairs. He is a recipient of the Sokolov Prize, Israel's highest award for journalist and Nieman Fellow at Harvard. His latest book which he co-authored with CBS News Reporter Dan Raviv is "Spies Against Armageddon: inside Israel's Secret Wars."

Summary:

In any case, the information, irrespective of its source, dealt with ISIS terrorist plots. We can assume that Trump said what he said in order to mobilize and spur the Russians into taking action against the terror organization, which is a front on which they are dragging their feet. However, sharing the information is a double-edged sword. The Russians, who are working in Syria to fortify Bashar Assad's regime, might share the information to him and perhaps even to his allies/their allies in the civil war in Syria—Iran and Hizbullah. Each of these could make use of the information, if it comes to their attention, in such a manner that would jeopardize intelligence operations and expose sources of information. And in this shadow world, there is no worse sin than failing to protect sources and exposing agents—as in the affair involving Eli Zeira, the Mossad and Egyptian agent Ashraf Marwan.

Israel-Palestine: The Real Reason There's Still No Peace

The possibility of a lasting deal seems as far away as ever – and the history of failed negotiations suggests it's largely because Israel prefers the status quo.

By Nathan Thrall

- Scattered over the land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea lie the remnants of failed peace plans, international summits, secret negotiations, UN resolutions and state-building programs, most of them designed to partition this long-contested territory into two independent states, Israel and Palestine. The collapse of these initiatives has been as predictable as the confidence with which US presidents have launched new ones, and the current administration is no exception.
- In the quarter century since Israelis and Palestinians first started negotiating under US auspices in 1991, there has been no shortage of explanations for why each particular round of talks failed. The rationalizations appear and reappear in the speeches of presidents, the reports of think-tanks and the memoirs of former officials and negotiators: bad timing; artificial deadlines; insufficient preparation; scant attention from the US president; want of support from regional states; inadequate confidence-building measures; coalition politics; or leaders devoid of courage.
- Among the most common refrains are that extremists were allowed to set the agenda and there was a neglect of bottom-up economic development and state-building. And then there are those who point at negative messaging, insurmountable skepticism or the absence of personal chemistry (a particularly fanciful explanation for anyone who has witnessed the warm familiarity of Palestinian and Israeli negotiators as they reunite in luxury hotels and reminisce about old jokes and ex-comrades over breakfast buffets and post-meeting toasts). If none of the above works, there is always the worst cliché of them all – lack of trust.
- Postmortem accounts vary in their apportioning of blame. But nearly all of them share a deep-seated belief that both societies desire a two-state agreement, and therefore need only the right conditions – together with a bit of nudging, trust-building and perhaps a few more positive inducements – to take the final step.
- In this view, the Oslo accords of the mid-1990s would have led to peace had it not been for the tragic assassination of the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. The 1998 Wye River Memorandum and its commitment to further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank would have been implemented if only the Israeli Labor party had joined Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition to back the agreement. The Camp David summit in July 2000 would have succeeded if the US had been less sensitive to Israeli domestic concerns, insisted on a written Israeli proposal, consulted the Arab states at an earlier phase, and taken the more firm and balanced position adopted half a year later, in December 2000, when President Clinton outlined parameters for an agreement. Both parties could have accepted the Clinton parameters with only minimal reservations had the proposal not been presented so fleetingly, as a one-time offer that would disappear when Clinton stepped down less than a month later.

- The negotiations in Taba, Egypt, in January 2001 were on the brink of agreement but failed because time ran out, with Clinton just out of office, and Ehud Barak facing almost certain electoral defeat to Ariel Sharon. The two major peace plans of 2003 – the US-sponsored road map to peace in the Middle East and the unofficial Geneva accord – could have been embraced had it not been for a bloody intifada and a hawkish Likud prime minister in power.
- And on it goes: direct negotiations between the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Netanyahu in 2010 could have lasted more than 13 days if only Israel had agreed to temporarily halt construction of some illegal settlements in exchange for an extra \$3bn package from the United States. Several years of secret back-channel negotiations between the envoys of Netanyahu and Abbas could have made history if only they hadn't been forced to conclude prematurely in late 2013, because of an artificial deadline imposed by separate talks led by secretary of state John Kerry. And, finally, the Kerry negotiations of 2013–2014 could have led to a framework agreement if the secretary of state had spent even a sixth as much time negotiating the text with the Palestinians as he did with the Israelis, and if he hadn't made inconsistent promises to the two sides regarding the guidelines for the talks, the release of Palestinian prisoners, curtailing Israeli settlement construction, and the presence of US mediators in the negotiating room.
- Each of these rounds of diplomacy began with vows to succeed where predecessors had failed. Each included affirmations of the urgency of peace or warnings of the closing window, perhaps even the last chance, for a two-state solution. Each ended with a list of tactical mistakes and unforeseen developments that resulted in failure. And, just as surely, each neglected to offer the most logical and parsimonious explanation for failure: no agreement was reached because at least one of the parties preferred to maintain the impasse.
- The Palestinians chose no agreement over one that did not meet the bare minimum supported by international law and most nations of the world. For years this consensus view supported the establishment of a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 lines with minor, equivalent land swaps that would allow Israel to annex some settlements. The Palestinian capital would be in East Jerusalem, with sovereignty over the holy site known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary or al-Aqsa mosque compound, and overland contiguity with the rest of the Palestinian state. Israel would withdraw its forces from the West Bank and release Palestinian prisoners. And Palestinian refugees would be offered compensation, a right to return not to their homes but to their homeland in the State of Palestine, acknowledgment of Israel's partial responsibility for the refugee problem, and, on a scale that would not perceptibly change Israel's demography, a return of some refugees to their pre-1948 lands and homes.
- Although years of violence and repression have led Palestinians to make some small concessions that chipped away at this compromise, they have not fundamentally abandoned it. They continue to hope that the support of the majority of the world's states for a plan along these lines will eventually result in an agreement. In the meantime, the status quo has been made more bearable thanks to the architects of the peace process, who have spent billions to prop up the Palestinian government, create conditions of prosperity for decision-makers in Ramallah, and dissuade the population from confronting the occupying force.

- Israel, for its part, has consistently opted for stalemate rather than the sort of agreement outlined above. The reason is obvious: the deal's cost is much higher than the cost of making no deal. The damages Israel would risk incurring through such an accord are massive. They include perhaps the greatest political upheaval in the country's history; enormous demonstrations against – if not majority rejection of – Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem and over the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary; and violent rebellion by some Jewish settlers and their supporters.
- There could also be bloodshed during forcible evacuations of West Bank settlements and rifts within the body implementing the evictions, the Israeli army, whose share of religious infantry officers now surpasses one third. Israel would lose military control over the West Bank, resulting in less intelligence-gathering, less room for maneuver in future wars, and less time to react to a surprise attack. It would face increased security risks from a Gaza-West Bank corridor, which would allow militants, ideology and weapons-production techniques to spread from Gaza training camps to the West Bank hills overlooking Israel's airport. Israeli intelligence services would no longer control which Palestinians enter and exit the occupied territories. The country would cease extraction of the West Bank's natural resources, including water, lose profits from managing Palestinian customs and trade, and pay the large economic and social price of relocating tens of thousands of settlers.
- Only a fraction of these costs could be offset by a peace agreement's benefits. But chief among them would be the blow dealt to efforts to delegitimize Israel and the normalization of relations with other nations of the region. Israeli businesses would be able to operate more openly in Arab states, and government cooperation with such countries as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates would go from covert to overt. Through a treaty with the Palestinians, Israel could attain the relocation of every Tel Aviv embassy to Jerusalem, and receive additional financial and security benefits from the US and Europe. But all of these combined do not come close to outweighing the deficits.
- Nor have the moral costs of occupation for Israeli society been high enough to change the calculus. Ending international opprobrium is indeed important to the country's elites, and as they find themselves increasingly shunned, the incentive to withdraw from the occupied territories will likely increase. But so far Israel has proven quite capable of living with the decades-old label of "pariah", the stain of occupation and the associated impact on the country's internal harmony and relations with diaspora Jews. For all the recent fretting about decreasing American Jewish support for Israel, the conversation today is not so different than it was at the time of the first Likud-led governments decades ago. Similarly enduring – and enduring – are the worries that occupation delegitimizes Zionism and causes discord within Israel. More than 30 years ago, former deputy mayor of Jerusalem Meron Benvenisti wrote of growing numbers of Israelis who had doubts about Zionism, "expressed in the forms of alienation, emigration of young Israelis, the emergence of racist Jews, violence in society, the widening gap between Israel and the diaspora, and a general feeling of inadequacy". Israelis have grown adept at tuning such criticisms out.
- It was, is, and will remain irrational for Israel to absorb the costs of an agreement when the price of the alternative is so comparatively low. The consequences of choosing impasse are hardly threatening: mutual recriminations over the cause of stalemate, new rounds of talks, and retaining control of all of the West Bank from within and much of Gaza from without.

- Meanwhile, Israel continues to receive more US military aid per year than goes to all the world's other nations combined, and presides over a growing economy, rising standards of living and a population that reports one of the world's highest levels of subjective wellbeing. Israel will go on absorbing the annoying but so-far tolerable costs of complaints about settlement policies. And it will likely witness several more countries bestowing the State of Palestine with symbolic recognition, a few more negative votes in impotent university student councils, limited calls for boycotts of settlement goods, and occasional bursts of violence that the greatly overpowered Palestinians are too weak to sustain. There is no contest.
- The real explanation for past decades of failed peace negotiations is not mistaken tactics or imperfect circumstances, but that no strategy can succeed if it is premised on Israel behaving irrationally. Most arguments put to Israel for agreeing to a partition are that it is preferable to an imagined, frightening future in which the country ceases to be a Jewish state or a democracy, or both. Israel is constantly warned if it does not soon decide to grant Palestinians citizenship or sovereignty, it will become, at some never-defined future date, an apartheid state. But such assertions contain the implicit acknowledgment that it makes no sense for Israel to strike a deal today rather than wait to see if such imagined threats actually materialize. If and when they do, Israel can then make a deal. Perhaps in the interim, the hardship of Palestinian life will cause enough emigration that Israel may annex the West Bank without giving up its Jewish majority. Or, perhaps, the West Bank will be absorbed by Jordan, and Gaza by Egypt, a better outcome than Palestinian statehood, in the view of many Israelis.
- It is hard to argue that forestalling an agreement in the present makes a worse deal more likely in the future: the international community and the PLO have already established the ceiling of their demands – 22% of the land now under Israeli control – while providing far less clarity about the floor, which Israel can try to lower. Israel has continued to reject the same Palestinian claims made since the 1980s, albeit with a few added Palestinian concessions. In fact, history suggests that a strategy of waiting would serve the country well: from the British government's 1937 Peel Commission partition plan and the UN partition plan of 1947 to UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the Oslo accords, every formative initiative endorsed by the great powers has given more to the Jewish community in Palestine than the previous one. Even if an Israeli prime minister knew that one day the world's nations would impose sanctions on Israel if it did not accept a two-state agreement, it would still be irrational to strike such a deal now. Israel could instead wait until that day comes, and thereby enjoy many more years of West Bank control and the security advantages that go with it – particularly valuable at a time of cataclysm in the region.
- Israel is frequently admonished to make peace in order to avoid becoming a single, Palestinian-majority state ruling all the territory from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea. But that threat does not have much credibility when it is Israel that holds all the power, and will therefore decide whether or not it annexes territory and offers citizenship to all its inhabitants. A single state will not materialize until a majority of Israelis want it, and so far they overwhelmingly do not. The reason Israel has not annexed the West Bank and Gaza is not for fear of international slaps on the wrist, but because the strong preference of most Israeli citizens is to have a Jewish-majority homeland, the *raison d'être* of Zionism. If and when Israel is confronted with the threat of a single state, it can enact a unilateral withdrawal and count on the support of the great powers in doing so. But that threat is still quite distant. [...]

This is an adapted extract from The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine, published by Metropolitan Books. Nathan Thrall is the author of The Only Language They Understand and is a Jerusalem-based senior analyst with the International Crisis Group.

Summary:

Israel, for its part, has consistently opted for stalemate rather than the sort of agreement outlined above. The reason is obvious: the deal's cost is much higher than the cost of making no deal. The damages Israel would risk incurring through such an accord are massive. They include perhaps the greatest political upheaval in the country's history; enormous demonstrations against – if not majority rejection of – Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem and over the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary; and violent rebellion by some Jewish settlers and their supporters.