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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, May 18

Headlines:

- ‘Chaos Galore’ Amid Preparations for Trump Visit
- Intel Trump Gave the Russians Came from Jordan, Not Israel
- Trump Rules Out Moving Israel Embassy to Jerusalem for Now
- Al-Sisi Lauds Trump, Urges Israel Not to Miss ‘Chance for Peace’
- Israeli and PA Finance Ministers Hold Private Meeting
- All 50 American Governors Sign Anti-BDS Statement
- Settler Shoots Palestinian Dead After Firing Back at Stone-Throwers
- Trump Passes Up Chance to ‘Rip Up’ Iran Nuclear Deal

Commentary:

- Yedioth Ahronoth: “Scandal and Festival”
 - By Nadav Eyal, Foreign News Editor, Israel Channel Ten News
- TOI: “Barghouti Is Forcing Israel to Decide Between Bad and Worse”
 - By Avi Issacharoff, Middle East Analyst, Times of Israel

News Excerpts

May 18, 2017

Yedioth Ahronoth

'Chaos Galore' Amid Preparations for Trump Visit

In the face of ever-mounting criticism, US President Donald Trump is preparing for his visit to Israel on Monday—a visit that has not been prepared completely. Trump is scheduled to arrive in Israel in another 4 days, but many of the specifics have not been finalized; officials in Jerusalem are waiting for answers from Washington, and the Americans continue to make changes to the president's itinerary. "It's chaos galore," said last night one Israeli official. "We don't really have anyone to talk to on the American side." For example, it still isn't clear if the reception at Ben-Gurion Airport will include introductory speeches by President Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Rivlin, or if the event will be kept brief, as the US requested, without speeches and handshakes.

Times of Israel

Intel Trump Gave the Russians Came from Jordan, Not Israel

Jordan, not Israel, was likely the original source of secret intelligence information given by US President Trump to the Russians, the Qatar-based *al-Jazeera* news network reported Thursday, citing current and former Jordanian intelligence officials. Speculation has swirled as to which country provided information that Trump disclosed to Russians officials in the White House last week. Trump later confirmed and defended the passing over of sensitive details about potential terror threats.

See also, "[Jordanian Spies Provided ISIL Bomb Intel](#)" (*Al-Jazeera*)

See also, "[Jordanians Claim Leak Was Theirs, Not Israeli's](#)" (*Jerusalem Post*)

Bloomberg

Trump Rules Out Moving Israel Embassy to Jerusalem for Now

President Donald Trump has decided not to immediately move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a senior White House official said, violating a campaign promise but avoiding a provocation that could drive Palestinians away from peace talks. The official said the administration considers its discussions with both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority to be promising, with the Palestinians in particular agreeing to talk without preconditions.

See also, "[Unfazed by Western Wall Row, Jerusalem Mayor Still Expects Trump to Move Embassy](#)" (*Times of Israel*)

See also, "[US Officials: Trump Shelves Plans to Move US Embassy to Jerusalem](#)" (*Ha'aretz*)

Ynet News

Al-Sisi Lauds Trump, Urges Israel Not to Miss Chance for Peace

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi stated in an interview with Arab media Wednesday he has great faith in US President Donald Trump in ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while urging Israel not to "miss the opportunity to make peace." When asked if there is any hope for a solution to the Palestinian issue under Trump's leadership, al-Sisi responded "the Palestinians are open to peace, the Arabs are open to peace and Israel believes that there is an opportunity for it."

See also, "[Egypt's Sisi: Trump Vital to Resolving Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#)" (*Jerusalem Post*)

See also, "[Jordan, Egypt Coordinate Stands on Regional Issues](#)" (*Jordan Times*)

Israeli and PA Finance Ministers Hold Private Meeting

Israeli and the Palestinian Authority (PA) Finance Ministers met in Jerusalem yesterday. Moshe Kahlon and Shukri Bishara discussed good will gestures and economic incentives before US President Trump's visit to the region next week. Plans agreed by the two are expected to be submitted to and approved by the Israeli cabinet on Sunday. They include having the Allenby Bridge crossing between the West Bank and Jordan open 24 hours a day, the development of two industrial zones at Jalame and Tarkumiya, and improvements to the system used by Israel to transfer taxes it collects for the PA. The Palestinians' chief concern was the high level of unemployment among university graduates, which has hit 30%, and how to bring them into the work force.

Jerusalem Post

All 50 American Governors Sign Anti-BDS Statement

Governors of all 50 states have signed a pledge to reject the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel. Organized by the American Jewish Committee, the Governors United Against BDS statement declares that "the goals of the BDS movement are antithetical to our values and the values of our respective states, our support for Israel as a vital US ally, important economic partner and champion of freedom." The statement does not commit the governors to specific actions, although signers "reaffirm our support for Israel as a vital US ally, important economic partner and champion of freedom." At least 16 states have passed legislation targeting BDS, usually by banning state entities from investing in businesses that boycott Israel or its settlements.

Ha'aretz

Settler Shoots Pal. Dead After Firing Back at Stone-Throwers

A Palestinian man was killed and a photographer was wounded after a settler opened fire at stone throwers in the West Bank. According to the army, 200 Palestinians were protesting at the scene, near Hawara, some of them were throwing stones, the IDF says, and an Israeli who may have been hurt opened fire at the Palestinians. The army and local settlers claim the man first shot in the air. An eyewitness told Ha'aretz that a number of Palestinian youths blocked the road near Huwara. He claimed that an Israeli settler who passed by pulled out a gun and fired at them.

See also, ["Palestinian Shot Dead by Settler After Car Hit by Stone Throwers"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

Al-Jazeera

Trump Passes Up Chance to 'Rip Up' Iran Nuclear Deal

US President Donald Trump passed up a chance to derail the nuclear deal with Iran on Wednesday, a move analysts said reflected business interests at home and diplomatic relations abroad. During Trump's election campaign he vowed to "rip up" the nuclear agreement with Tehran if elected, calling it "the worst deal ever". Trump had until Thursday to extend a sanctions waiver on Iran, and the US state department announced a day earlier it would be signed, meaning old sanctions wouldn't be reimposed and the nuclear deal will continue - at least for now. However, the department also announced the imposition of new unrelated sanctions against Iranian defence officials and an Iranian "entity". It also pledged to continue reviewing the nuclear deal with withdrawal still possible.

See also, ["Iran Nuclear Deal Will Remain for Now, White House Signals"](#) (New York Times)

Scandal and Festival

By Nadav Eyal

- [The headline is a quote from an Israeli song.] The Saudis built a special website just for Donald Trump's visit. The Sunni countries have embraced Trump and aren't going to let go until they hear pop, pop—the sound of the Shiite-Russian-Alawite alliance breaking. Shimrit Meir, a commentator on Arab affairs, wrote yesterday that the Saudis are going to welcome the president of the United States as if he were a god.
- And in Israel? Israeli officials briefed a handful of foreign journalists that there might be demonstrations if Trump decides to visit the Western Wall with Ivanka by his side. After all, there's that problem of keeping men and women separate. And then they almost fought over who would get to accompany Trump to the Western Wall, the president or the prime minister. And then they asked plaintively why an Israeli politician wasn't going to accompany the president to demonstrate our sovereignty there.
- It isn't that the current Americans haven't acted foolishly and clumsily. Yes, senior American officials do not visit the Western Wall as a political statement. But why send American diplomats to tell Israelis that it isn't sovereign Israeli territory? Why did National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster have to say that sovereignty at the Western Wall was a "policy decision" and, by so doing to openly challenge an Israeli consensus? And if the American president is coming to Israel anyway, why gruffly announce that a mere 15 minutes are going to be dedicated to the traditional and important visit to Yad Vashem? What kind of thing is that to do? And who announces that a speech is going to be given on Masada, a dramatic development for Israelis, and then flippantly cancels it? All that certainly does pale in comparison to the truly problematic conduct, such as sharing with Russian secret Israeli means that are used to spy on ISIS. There is one unifying word for all this: balagan [a Hebrew slang word that can be roughly translated as "chaos," a "mess" or an "uproar," depending on context]. The Americans always used to comport themselves like a superpower. They were thorough, fully prepared weeks in advance and well-briefed. The Americans always used to gaze on scornfully at the Israelis as they improvised on the fly. This time the roles have been reversed: the Israelis are stunned by the Americans' conduct.
- Mister Balagan is coming to Israel. A memorandum that was written by the FBI director whom he fired might prove to be the gun in the first act for him. It's been one scandal after the next. The Republican Party is stunned, reeling from the unbelievable quantities of bad news. And now they're funneling into that a visit with "religious" value to the three religions? A meeting with the pope, a visit to the Western Wall and mainly a "speech about Islam" in Saudi Arabia? One American reporter wrote on Twitter that there isn't enough alcohol in Saudi Arabia to cope with Trump's speech about Islam there.
- And who is going to meet Mister Balagan? Mister Primaries. Prime Minister Netanyahu is in a permanent and neurotic state of running for the leadership of the right wing. One thing is clear: Netanyahu, who has always been accused of acting hastily, now appears to be a beacon of stability with Trump as his foil. But with him it's a different story: it isn't the chaos, but the tenacious and paralyzing fear about what Rivlin might do.

- And what Bennett might say and when Bennett might give an interview. And when should he issue a statement condemning him. And, most importantly: how can he keep his holy right wing base on the social networks from being stolen away from him. He is the prime minister and, obviously, it isn't going to be his fault if the president of the United States, yet another president, decides that the US embassy isn't going to be moved to Jerusalem. But Bennett is sniping at him and Netanyahu has to strike back. And the Trump administration is about to take a cumbersome step right into the middle of all this; you can almost hear the folks in Jerusalem pulling their hair out. For the time being they've been smart and have behaved themselves. But in the end, don't forget, there's the right wing "base." At the end of the day, that base is always the top priority.

Nadav Eyal is the foreign news editor at Israel's Channel Ten News.

Summary:

It isn't that the current Americans haven't acted foolishly and clumsily. Yes, senior American officials do not visit the Western Wall as a political statement. But why send American diplomats to tell Israelis that it isn't sovereign Israeli territory? Why did National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster have to say that sovereignty at the Western Wall was a "policy decision" and, by so doing to openly challenge an Israeli consensus? And if the American president is coming to Israel anyway, why gruffly announce that a mere 15 minutes are going to be dedicated to the traditional and important visit to Yad Vashem? What kind of thing is that to do? And who announces that a speech is going to be given on Masada, a dramatic development for Israelis, and then flippantly cancels it? All that certainly does pale in comparison to the truly problematic conduct, such as sharing with Russian secret Israeli means that are used to spy on ISIS. There is one unifying word for all this: balagan [a Hebrew slang word that can be roughly translated as "chaos," a "mess" or an "uproar," depending on context]. The Americans always used to comport themselves like a superpower. They were thorough, fully prepared weeks in advance and well-briefed. The Americans always used to gaze on scornfully at the Israelis as they improvised on the fly. This time the roles have been reversed: the Israelis are stunned by the Americans' conduct.

Barghouti Is Forcing Israel to Decide Between Bad and Worse

To negotiate with the hunger-striking Fatah leader and terrorist would give him legitimacy; to ignore him would risk igniting the Palestinian street as Trump flies in.

By Avi Issacharoff

- ‘The popularity of Marwan Barghouti has spiked significantly since the hunger strike launched,’ a well-known Gazan commentator, Naji Sharab, wrote on the Palestinian news site Donia al-Watan on Wednesday.
- Barghouti “has become a Palestinian national icon whose name is championed in every household,” said the Al-Azhar political science professor.
- Indeed. A month after Barghouti launched a hunger strike with over a thousand of his fellow Palestinian security prisoners, the Israeli side still apparently does not understand the implications it is having on the Palestinian public.
- Barghouti is now the name heard on every street corner, at every demonstration. The strike, which on Wednesday entered its 31st day, has not set the territories ablaze, but there is now a consensus among Palestinian commentators and decision-makers that it has turned Barghouti into nothing short of a national symbol. Were the Palestinians about to hold leadership elections — and they’re not — he’d win at a canter.
- The analysis provided by Gaza’s Sharab was in no way exceptional. Go to any and every Palestinian city in the West Bank and it rapidly becomes evident that prisoner number one, a terrorist serving five life terms after being convicted in an Israeli civilian court of orchestrating murders in the Second Intifada, is now regarded by the Palestinians as “our Nelson Mandela.”
- For now, the Israeli leadership prefers to ignore the impact of the hunger strike on Palestinian public opinion. It is possible that fear of criticism from the right — “What will they say if we agree to some of the prisoners’ demands?” — is a factor. Or, perhaps, the fact that the strike is not currently gaining momentum inside the prisons themselves: It currently includes “just” 850 Fatah participants — less than a third of the movement’s roughly 3,000 prisoners. And only a few Hamas inmates have joined.
- A capitulation to Barghouti’s demands would strengthen his position in jail and ostensibly grant him a kind of Israeli recognition. Again and again, there are Israeli voices heard saying that Barghouti does not actually enjoy a particularly influential status in prison, and the numbers make that contention hard to dispute. He has opposition in jail from other Fatah leaders. Outside, members of the Fatah Central Committee have tried to undermine the strike.
- But Barghouti cares most about his status with the Palestinian public. His decision to initiate the strike was a gambit intended to improve his position as the post-Mahmoud Abbas era approaches. In this, he has succeeded.

- Israel now has two options: one bad and the other worse. The first would be to talk to Barghouti — giving him legitimacy, but defanging the strike. The second: to persist with the “no surrender” approach, and enable Barghouti to depict himself as a tormented martyr, while risking the death of Palestinian prisoners, with President Donald Trump about to fly in.

Avi Issacharoff, The Times of Israel's Middle East analyst, fills the same role for Walla, the leading portal in Israel. He is also a guest commentator on many different radio shows and current affairs programs on television.

Summary:

Israel now has two options: one bad and the other worse. The first would be to talk to Barghouti — giving him legitimacy, but defanging the strike. The second: to persist with the “no surrender” approach, and enable Barghouti to depict himself as a tormented martyr, while risking the death of Palestinian prisoners, with President Donald Trump about to fly in.