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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, May 19*

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## News Excerpts

May 19, 2017

### Jerusalem Post

#### **Egypt: Trump Vital to Resolving Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said Wednesday that US President Donald Trump serves as a crucial link in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Speaking at a meeting with the chief editors of three Egyptian newspapers, Sisi expressed his confidence in Trump, saying "I believe in him and his abilities to resolve conflict." "Trump is a great man who is not satisfied with anything but success, and we have confidence in his abilities and his promises," the Egyptian leader said. Sisi made the remarks ahead of Trump's first presidential foreign trip that includes stops in Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Vatican. See also ["Egyptian president: 'I believe in Trump's ability to solve Middle East conflict'" \(WIN\)](#)

### Ynet News

#### **WH: No Trump-Netanyahu-Abbas Meeting Planned for Visit**

A summit meeting between US President Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Abbas is not on the cards for Trump's visit to Israel next week, a White House official said Thursday. Even though such a meeting is not on the agenda for the American president's upcoming visit to the region, it is included in future plans, the official said. According to the official, Trump will use his visit on Monday to tell the Palestinians that he recognizes their right for self-definition and that they deserve to be treated with respect. See also, ["Trump told Abbas he'll be able to reach a deal within a year, says Palestinian minister" \(AFP\)](#)

### Washington Post

#### **Israel Wants Trump to Stop Pal' Payments to Prisoners**

As the president prepares for his first foreign trip aboard, which will include two days in Israel and the West Bank next week, Israel's right-wing government and its supporters in Congress are pressing the Trump administration to cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority unless the payments stop. U.S. diplomats have quietly pressed the Palestinians to stop the payments, but during the Obama administration, U.S. officials kept the issue below the radar. To pacify donors, the Palestinian Authority also transferred responsibility for making the payments to the Palestine Liberation Organization. See also, [" Hamas selects popular Gaza politician Ismail Haniyeh as its new leader" \(LA Times\)](#)

### Reuters

#### **India's Modi: I Back a Sovereign Independent Pal' State**

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Tuesday discussed Middle East peace process with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and sought New Delhi's cooperation to end the long-standing conflict with Israel. Earlier this month, US President Donald Trump vowed to do "whatever is necessary" to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians as he hosted Abbas at the White House, but gave no sign of how he could revive long-stalled negotiations. Abbas reasserted the goal of a Palestinian state, saying it must have east Jerusalem as its capital with the borders that existed before the 1967 Six Day war. See also, [Hope to see sovereign Palestine coexisting with Israel, says PM Modi" \(iE\)](#)

Reuters

## **US-led Coalition Attacks Syrian Army, Pro-Iranian Militia**

US-led coalition jets hit a convoy of Syrian and Iranian-backed militias that were heading towards the Tanf base in southern Syria where US special forces are based, a rebel official with a Pentagon-backed rebel group said on Thursday. Muzahem al Saloum, from the Maghawir al Thwra group, told Reuters that the jets struck after rebel forces clashed with advancing Syrian and Iranian militias that were about 27 kms away from the base along the Damascus-Baghdad highway. "We notified the coalition that we were being attacked by the Syrian army and Iranians in this point and the coalition came and destroyed the advancing convoy," Saloum said. See also, ["US: Pro-Syrian forces hit in strike posed threat" \(abc News\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Israeli and US Spymasters 'Frustrated' by Trump Leak**

The United States and Israel are publicly brushing aside President Donald Trump's reported sharing of a highly classified tip from Israel with Russia, but spy professionals on both sides are frustrated and fearful about the repercussions to a critical intelligence partnership. "I know how things work in Israeli intelligence," said Uri Bar-Joseph, a professor at Haifa University in Israel who has studied and written widely about the Jewish state's spy operations. "I have some friends I talk with. They're upset. They are sincerely frustrated and angry." Another former intelligence official said the concern is that Israel will start "fuzzing" intelligence it shares with the US, avoiding specifics or detailing how information is obtained. Both individuals spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to relay the sentiments they gleaned from conversations with current intelligence officials. See also, ["Former top Israeli officials call Trump leak very troubling" \(LA Times\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **Poll: Trump's Popularity Plummeting among Israeli Jews**

The percentage of Jewish Israelis who consider US President Donald Trump more pro-Israel than pro-Palestinian has taken a nosedive since his inauguration, according to a Smith Research poll published on Thursday and taken for *The Jerusalem Post*. The poll of 500 Israelis representing a statistical sample of the adult Jewish population found that, just days ahead of Trump's arrival in the country, he will need to take steps to persuade Israelis that he is on their side. Only 56% of Jewish Israelis said they considered the Trump administration more pro-Israel than pro-Palestinian, down from 79% on January 11. See also, ["Trump approval rating hits new low in poll" \(Market Watch\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Trump Says Joe Lieberman is Front-Runner for FBI Chief**

US President Donald Trump indicated Thursday that onetime Democratic vice presidential nominee Joe Lieberman is the favorite to become the next head of the FBI, after the shock dismissal of James Comey last week. Asked whether the 75-year-old was a front-runner, Trump responded "yes" — confirming Lieberman's surprise candidacy. Trump has said he could name a new director before he leaves the country Friday for the Middle East, on his first overseas trip as president. Lieberman, who is Jewish and staunchly pro-Israel, is a former independent senator from Connecticut.

## **The Middle East's Optimistic About Trump's Visit. He Just Has to Stay On-script**

*In DC, Trump is facing meltdown. In the Middle East, from Saudi Arabia to Israel, he's considered a welcome change. Can he keep the good vibes going?*

By Ilan Goldenberg, member of the American Team during the 2013-2014 Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

- As President Trump heads out on his first trip abroad, his administration is in full meltdown mode engulfed by one scandal after another. But in the Middle East the story is different. Optimism about the Trump Presidency reigns supreme.
- In the Arabian peninsula, Trump's style of personal diplomacy has been a welcome change from Obama's more aloof approach. His reliance on family for advice, and willingness to overlook questions of human rights for harder security concerns, appeals to these partners. For Israelis, Trump passes the "kishkes test", building a good rapport with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and speaking a language they can relate to.
- Even more important than style, on a policy level, Trump's willingness to take a confrontational approach towards Iran has been welcomed by both Israel and the Gulf States. The President's visits to Saudi Arabia and Israel will be a success if he can keep these good vibes going, continue the positive trajectory on the ISIS fight, articulate a plan for countering Iran's actions, and make some small progress between Israelis and Palestinians.
- First, President Trump must show discipline and avoid the unforced errors. He is already off to a terrible start, with news that he revealed highly sensitive Israeli intelligence to the Russian foreign minister. Israeli officials will publicly downplay the incident and Prime Minister Netanyahu is deeply invested in the public optics of a successful visit. But behind closed doors, this will undoubtedly weaken security and intelligence cooperation and undercut the trust that is critical for U.S.-Israel security cooperation.
- The highest stakes public moments will be his speech on Islam in Saudi Arabia and his visit to the Western Wall. These events will be charged with religious and political symbolism, presenting opportunities to connect with the Israeli and Arab publics. But if they are poorly stage-managed or if the President goes off script could be disastrous (Imagine Trump talking about James Comey and Russia in front of the Western Wall).
- Second, the President will have to unify international partners behind his counter-ISIS strategy. This will not be too difficult, because his approach will be a natural follow-on from President Obama's strategy, which already had broad international support and focused on working by, with, and through local partners on the ground to slowly retake ISIS-held territory.
- Much more challenging will be articulating a clear strategy to counter Iran's destabilizing activities across the region in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Even though Trump has talked tough, it is not clear what he will actually do. And before leaving on his trip, he waived a series of sanctions on Iran thus signaling that he will at least for the moment not walk away from the nuclear agreement.

- It appears the administration will increase support for Saudi operations in Yemen to counter Iranian support for the Houthis, through greater intelligence sharing, provision of precision-guided weapons, and increased interdiction of Iranian arms shipments. In Iraq, American options are more limited, as by virtue of history, geography, and culture Iran will always be a player. But the United States can leverage its military and political investment to offset some of Tehran's influence in Baghdad.
- In Syria, the U.S. approach will likely not focus on ejecting Bashar al Assad, but instead on negotiating with the Russians to end the war while trying to limit Iran's influence. Any agreement should ensure that moderate forces in southern Syria control the areas on the Israeli and Jordanian border, keeping Sunni extremists and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps at bay. The United States should also prevent Iran from establish a land bridge from Tehran to Beirut, by ensuring American partners retake ISIS-held territory in southeastern Syria instead of allowing Assad, Russian, and Iranian forces to control that area.
- Finally, there is the question of whether the President can make any progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Reports that that the Gulf States have offered some confidence-building measures with Israel if the Israeli government makes gestures towards the Palestinians are promising. However, the devil will be in the details. Arab leaders will not go out on a political limb unless they see meaningful Israeli steps towards the Palestinians. But given the nature of the Israeli governing coalition, it is unlikely that Prime Minister Netanyahu will have much flexibility to make a grand gesture.
- Instead, Trump would be better off pushing for smaller steps that improve the situation on the ground including significant economic measures by Israel, such as handing over some portions of Area C to Palestinian control; a quiet, informal arrangement for Israeli restraint on settlements; and a Palestinian commitment to more directly tackle incitement.
- Ultimately, the President's first trip abroad is extremely ambitious. Success on the Middle East leg will require a disciplined approach by the President and an effective policymaking process below him. Thus far the administration has struggled mightily with both. Let's hope it changes.

## **What Donald Trump Can Expect on His Tour of the Middle East**

By Robin Wright, a contributing writer for the New Yorker

- In 1974, Richard Nixon became the first American President to visit Saudi Arabia and Israel—as well as Syria—on a swing intended to chalk up triumphs abroad and, more pointedly, to divert attention from the escalating Watergate crisis at home. It was a reassuring trip for the beleaguered President. He promoted a new peace process and talked up a regional realignment to stabilize the Middle East after the 1973 war. Leaders fêted him. Flag-waving crowds lined the streets, even in Damascus. The trip didn't change his fate. Two months later, Nixon resigned.
- This weekend, Donald Trump will try to escape the turmoil of his Presidency for a tour of the Middle East. He, too, will stop in Saudi Arabia and Israel. He, too, is talking about Middle East peace and a regional realignment, this time a coalition made up of Israel and the conservative Sunni monarchies, centered around the Gulf sheikhdoms, Egyptians, and Jordanians. He, too, is expected to be fêted. The world's most volatile region will offer Trump a diversion from Washington for at least a week, even though revelations that he spilled classified intelligence (provided by an ally) to the Russians are likely to dog him.
- On his first Presidential trip abroad, Trump has outsized ambitions—both naïve and godlike—laden with religious symbolism from all three Abrahamic faiths. He'll visit the birthplace of Islam; the Jewish homeland; the birthplace of Jesus, in Bethlehem; and, then, the Vatican. “What President Trump is seeking is to unite peoples of all faiths around a common vision of peace, progress, and prosperity,” the national-security adviser, H. R. McMaster, told reporters on Friday. A senior Administration official said that Trump's goal is “making sure that the three faiths work together.” Good luck.
- Saudi Arabia is an unusual choice for Trump's first stop as President, given his attitude toward the country during the Presidential campaign. He complained that the U.S. backs the kingdom “at tremendous expense,” and “we get nothing for it”; he tied the kingdom to the 9/11 attacks; and he wrote on his Facebook page, “Saudi Arabia and many of the countries that gave vast amounts of money to the Clinton Foundation want women as slaves and to kill gays. Hillary must return all money from such countries!” Just last month, Trump [told](#) Reuters, “Frankly, Saudi Arabia has not treated us fairly, because we are losing a tremendous amount of money in defending Saudi Arabia.”
- For the United States, Saudi Arabia is a second-tier ally, at best. The State Department's latest Human Rights Report, issued by the Trump Administration, in March, faults the monarchy for one of the world's worst records. In a checklist of bad practices, the State Department cites violence against women; restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, movement, and religion; arbitrary arrests; denial of due process by the judiciary; prosecuting human-rights activists and reformers; prisoner abuse; and pervasive discrimination based on gender, religion, race, and ethnicity. “Lack of governmental transparency and access made it difficult to assess the magnitude of many reported human rights problems,” it concludes.

- The White House said that Saudi Arabia reached out to Jared Kushner and unnamed others shortly after the election to encourage an early visit. In Riyadh, Trump will meet King Salman, hold a summit with a half-dozen leaders from the Gulf sheikhdoms, and dine with dozens of senior officials from the region. He'll start building his new coalition of conservative Middle East leaders there, too.
- "He will develop a strong, respectful message that the United States and the entire civilized world expects our Muslim allies to take a strong stand against radical Islamist ideology, an ideology that uses a perverted interpretation of religion to justify crimes against all humanity," McMaster said. "He will call for Muslim leaders to promote a peaceful vision of Islam."
- This is the same message that was repeatedly conveyed by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama over the sixteen years since the 2001 attacks by Al Qaeda. Both men ended up frustrated by a country that produced Wahhabism, the conservative brand of Islam that seeded extremist ideologies, and was the homeland of Osama bin Laden and thousands of jihadi fighters who joined Al Qaeda and isis.
- On his first trip to the kingdom, Obama tried to convince King Abdullah to make a concrete gesture to help revive the peace process. He also thought that his staff had brokered a deal for the monarchy to absorb all the remaining prisoners at Guantánamo Bay. The king turned him down flat on both, according to Bruce Riedel, a former C.I.A., Pentagon, and National Security Council staffer and the author of a forthcoming book on U.S.-Saudi relations.
- "It was a disaster," he told me. "Obama visited Saudi Arabia more than any President. He also sold more weapons to the kingdom—a hundred and twelve billion dollars' worth—than any American President. He got very little to show for it."
- Franklin Roosevelt was the first American President to hold a summit with a Saudi leader, in 1945, after his Yalta conference with Churchill and Stalin. He met King Abdulaziz ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi state, aboard the U.S.S. Quincy, in the Suez Canal. F.D.R. discussed plans to create a homeland for European Jews in Palestine. The king vehemently opposed the idea. But the two leaders did broker a deal that held for the intervening seven decades—through thirteen U.S. Presidents and five Saudi monarchs—to swap U.S. military support for access to Saudi oil.
- The Trump Administration is reportedly brokering a hefty arms deal worth a hundred billion dollars, though the foundation of the two countries' friendship seems less certain today, given the growing self-sufficiency in energy in the U.S. and questions about Saudi Arabia's long-term political stability. "The kingdom had unusually good leadership for a long period of time," Riedel told me. "In 1979, you could have predicted the future kings and the order they'd be in. That's over."
- King Salman, who is ailing and reportedly shows signs of dementia, has effectively created a new line of succession through his inexperienced, thirty-one-year-old son, Mohammed bin Salman, leapfrogging dozens of princes in the royal family who expected to be king. Mohammed bin Salman is the Minister of Defense, the deputy crown prince, and the chairman of the powerful Council for Economic and Development Affairs, which is charting a new economic future—roles that make him the second most powerful man in the kingdom. He makes many major decisions, current and former U.S. officials told me. He made the call to

intervene in neighboring Yemen, in 2015, in a war that is increasingly compared to the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The Saudis depend on U.S. warplanes and matériel to wage their campaign. This spring, the king appointed another of his sons to be the new Ambassador to the United States.

- In Israel, Trump is due to meet the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, to discuss the first steps in a renewed peace process. The two men have close ties, partly through the Kushner family, which has long been involved in Israeli causes. On a visit to the United States several years ago, Netanyahu stayed at the Kushners' home—and slept in Jared's bedroom. (Jared, then a teen-ager, camped in the basement, according to the Times.) Despite all the ties, the Israeli press reports that Netanyahu is nervous about what Trump—who shows few signs of understanding either history or diplomacy—might ask of him.
- Trump is also scheduled to travel to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, in what is now the West Bank, to meet the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas. The two met earlier this month, in Washington, when Trump expressed confidence that he could produce peace between Israel and the Arabs. “It’s something that I think is frankly maybe not as difficult as people have thought,” he said, at a joint press conference. Last week, Abbas expressed willingness to meet his Israeli counterpart—notably, without preconditions such as a halt to new settlements in the West Bank. While Trump talks about Middle East peace as just another deal that needs to be transacted, the core issues—including the status of Jerusalem, which both Israel and the Palestinians claim as their capital—remain as thorny for Trump as they were for every President since Nixon.
- Trump may get the coolest reception at the Vatican. Trump initially praised the election of Pope Francis, in 2013. “The new Pope is a humble man, very much like me, which probably explains why I like him so much!” Trump tweeted, on Christmas Day in 2013. But the President, who made billions in real estate, and the Pontiff, who eschewed the apostolic palace to live “a normal life” at a clerical guest house, have distinctly different world views. During the U.S. Presidential campaign, the Holy Father tweeted, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.” Trump called the comment “disgraceful.”
- The Pontiff has been discreet, implying but not naming the new American President. In February, after Trump signed an executive order banning immigrants from seven Muslim countries, the Pope tweeted, “How often in the Bible the Lord asks us to welcome migrants and foreigners, reminding us that we too are foreigners!”
- En route home from Portugal on Saturday, Pope Francis told reporters that he would be candid but respectful with the President. “I never make a judgment about a person without hearing him out,” the Pontiff said. In his conversations with world leaders, Pope Francis said that he always looks for “doors that are at least a little bit open” to build mutual agreement. “Peace is artisanal,” he said. “You do it every day.”
- President Trump has never brokered peace. And, unlike Richard Nixon, he has never negotiated a transformative diplomatic deal. The Middle East may offer warmer optics. But the trip is unlikely to produce big breakthroughs—or alter the tumultuous challenges Trump will face when he returns home.