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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, May 8*

### Headlines:

- **Ministerial Committee Approves 'Nationality Law'**
- **Ministers Advance Bid to Apply Israeli Laws in West Bank**
- **Israeli Ministers Heap Praise on Trump at Jerusalem Post Conference**
- **Ismail Haniyeh Elected New Head of Hamas**
- **Netanyahu: Palestinians Don't Educate to Peace**
- **Before Netanyahu talks, Steinmeier Vows to Back Israel**
- **Saying 'anti-Semitism defeated,' Israelis fete Macron victory**
- **MK Rosenthal: Police will Recommend Charging Netanyahu**

### Commentary:

- **Israel Hayom: "Trump to Israel Hayom: Looking Forward to a Productive Visit"**  
– By Boaz Bismuth, Editor of Israel Hayom
- **New York times: "Mixed Signals from Trump Worry Pro-Israel Hard-Liners"**  
– By Mark Landler and Maggie Haberman, reporters at New York Times

# News Excerpts

May 8, 2017

Ynet News

## **Ministerial Committee Approves 'Nationality Law'**

The Ministerial Committee for Legislation unanimously approved the '[Nationality Law](#)' on Sunday, four years after the controversial legislation to officially define Israel as a Jewish state was first proposed. The Nationality Law would enshrine as a Basic Law the concept that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people. The legislation determines that all Israeli law must be interpreted according to this principle. The legislation, which is considered its opponents as discriminatory towards Arab Israelis, specifies some of the practical aspects of the State of Israel being the nation-state of the Jewish people. See also ["Ministers approve controversial 'Jewish State' bill" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Ministers Advance Bid to Apply Israeli Laws in West Bank**

Ministers Ayelet Shaked and Yariv Levin are advancing a directive that would require ministers to decide whether each government-sponsored bill would apply in the West Bank. Currently Israeli legislation is applied in the West Bank through military orders or by being incorporated in the regional and local councils' regulations. In the latter case, the laws only apply to Jewish settlements within the councils. Rarely is legislation explicitly applied across Area C.

See also, ["Ministers seek to automatically apply all Israeli laws to citizens in West Bank" \(Ynet News\)](#)

See also, ["Editorial: The Ideological Blindness of Two Right-wing Israeli Ministers" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

JTA

## **Israeli Ministers Heap Praise on Trump at JPost Conference**

A parade of Israeli cabinet ministers praised President Donald Trump and lambasted the Palestinian Authority at the Jerusalem Post's annual conference. Five ministers from Israel's right-wing governing coalition, spoke at the conference, held Sunday in New York City. They presented variations on the same message: The Trump administration is pro-Israel, and peace with the Palestinians is close to impossible. Education Minister Naftali Bennett, Jewish Home's chairman, reiterated his opposition to a Palestinian state, instead calling for a "Trump Plan" to invest in the Palestinian economy.

See also, ["Jewish Trump Confidant: Trump has convinced Abbas to make concessions" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Ismail Haniyeh Elected New Head of Hamas**

Hamas's former chief in the Gaza Strip, Ismail Haniyeh, has been elected to lead the Palestinian terror group, succeeding Khaled Mashaal, the organization announced Saturday. Mashaal, who lives in exile in Qatar, has completed the maximum two terms in office. He became the leader of Hamas in 2004 following the Israeli assassinations of Hamas founders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi. "The Hamas Shura Council on Saturday elected Ismail Haniyeh as head of the movement's political bureau," the group's official website announced.

See also, ["Hamas selects popular Gaza politician Ismail Haniyeh as its new leader" \(LA Times\)](#)

Associated Press

## **Netanyahu: Palestinians Don't Educate to Peace**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the Palestinians are not educating their children toward peace. Netanyahu spoke Sunday at his weekly Cabinet meeting ahead of U.S. President Donald Trump's upcoming visit to Israel. Netanyahu said Trump's first overseas trip as president reflects the strong bond between the nations. He welcomed Trump's push to resume peace talks, but criticized Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for "praising terrorists and paying them" - and lying about preaching peace to children. The Palestinian "martyrs' fund" pays about 35,000 families of Palestinians killed and wounded in the long-running conflict with Israel, and says the money amounts to welfare payments to victims. Israel has long said the payments glorify terrorism and provide an incentive to kill. Last week, Netanyahu urged Abbas to "fund peace and not murder."

Deutsche Welle

## **German President Steinmeier Vows to Back Israel**

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier paid a solemn visit to Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial on Sunday. "We Germans have burdened ourselves with unfathomable guilt," Steinmeier said on Sunday, adding that commemorating the Holocaust served as a reminder of his country's "pain, sadness and shame." "As part of taking responsibility for what happened, we stand firmly alongside Israel and are working together for our common future." Earlier on Sunday, Steinmeier met the writer David Grossman in Jerusalem. The author, whose son died in Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon's Hezbollah, has emerged as a frequent critic of Israel's settlement policy.

See also, ["German president: 'Germans brought unthinkable guilt on ourselves'" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Israelis Fete Macron Victory: 'Anti-Semitism Defeated,'**

Israeli lawmakers from across the political spectrum welcomed the victory of centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron in France's presidential election on Sunday, breathing a sigh of relief over the defeat of far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. Pro-European Macron overwhelmingly won France's landmark presidential election, according to first estimates, heading off a fierce challenge from the far-right in a pivotal vote for the future of the divided country and Europe. "I look forward to working with President Macron and together to take on the shared challenges of our two democracies," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement.

See also ["Emmanuel Macron wins presidency as France rejects far-right" \(CNN\)](#)

Ynet News

## **MK Rosenthal: Police will Recommend Charging Netanyahu**

MK Mickey Rosenthal (Zionist Union) said on Saturday that according to information he got from reliable sources, the police have decided to recommend that an indictment will be served against Prime Minister Netanyahu. "The police was also asked to complete their investigation on some levels, but they have definitively decided to recommend an indictment against the Prime Minister, charging him with two counts—accepting illicit gifts and breach of trust," said Rosenthal. "I say this based on facts that were shared with me; I'm not just saying things with no basis," he added.

## **Trump to Israel Hayom: Looking Forward to a Productive Visit**

*U.S. president tells Israel Hayom exclusively: "I'm honored to accept the invitation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu" • He says he looks forward to "wonderful, productive visit" and the two will discuss a "range of regional issues of mutual concern."*

By Boaz Bismuth, Editor of Israel Hayom

- In an exclusive statement given to Israel Hayom, U.S. President Donald Trump said he is eager to arrive in Israel on May 22 for his first visit as president, and that he aims to bolster the warm bilateral ties between the two countries.
- "I am honored to accept the invitation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for my first visit to Israel as president, where we will emphasize the need to further strengthen the U.S.-Israeli partnership, which has been a great success for many years," Trump said on Sunday. "We will discuss a range of regional issues of mutual concern, including the need to counter the threats posed by Iran and its proxies, and by ISIS and by other terrorist groups. We will also discuss ways to advance a genuine and lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I look forward to this wonderful and productive visit taking place later this month."
- Trump will arrive in Israel as part of his first overseas trip since his inauguration in January. He views the visit to Israel as an important part of his foreign policy agenda and as part of his desire to reassert America's presence in the region. The visit to Israel will also serve as an important milestone in the emerging ties between Israel and the new administration, which is keen to assume a more active and assertive role in the region and to fight terrorism more forcefully. This new posture was recently demonstrated by the U.S. missile strike in Syria.
- Israeli officials believe the 45th president will try to use the visit to jump-start a diplomatic initiative that would lead to a meeting between Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Diplomatic sources in Jerusalem believe that during or just after the visit the two sides will announce a meeting between the two leaders, which would lead to renewed negotiations. At this point it is unclear whether such an initiative is feasible, since Abbas has previously set preconditions for such a meeting and it is unclear whether he will try to do so again.
- Likud ministers want Netanyahu to release details on the possible talks he may have with Abbas and to ensure that Israel does not commit in advance to certain moves at the request of the Palestinians or the U.S. Netanyahu spoke about this during Sunday's cabinet meeting.
- "The American president would like to explore the possible ways to renew the peace process with the Palestinians; I share this desire," Netanyahu said. Habayit Hayehudi ministers have also voiced concern over Israel's stance on the Palestinians and the Americans. Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked recently warned that they would not accept any preconditions that would entail the release of prisoners or a moratorium on settlement construction.

- **At the cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said that "Israel will have the honor to host President Donald Trump and his wife in two weeks' time, during his first overseas visit. The president will receive a warm welcome, as is appropriate for the leader of our greatest ally, the United States."**
- **The preparations for Trump's visit in Israel, which is set for May 22, are in full swing. Trump will arrive with his wife Melania, his daughter Ivanka and her husband Jared Kushner, Defense Secretary James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and other senior U.S. officials. The president will stay overnight at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, and all its 233 rooms and facilities will be used exclusively by the American delegation. Two more hotels will also be at the disposal of the American officials.**
- **Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford is expected to arrive in Israel on Tuesday. Dunford is scheduled to be welcomed by an honor guard, ahead of his meeting with the IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman.**
- **Although the visit has been planned in advance, it was kept under wraps. Dunford visited Israel in March 2016, and several months later Eizenkot reciprocated with his own visit to the United States. During Eizenkot's visit, he was presented with the second-highest degree of the Legion of Merit award, in what was an unannounced gesture.**

## **Mixed Signals From Trump Worry Pro-Israel Hard-Liners**

By Mark Landler and Maggie Haberman, reporters at New York Times

- **President Trump hosted Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, at the White House this week with all the usual bonhomie he displays for foreign leaders. Within hours, he wrote on Twitter that it had been “an honor,” adding, “Hopefully something terrific” would come out “between the Palestinians & Israel.”**
- **But then something odd happened. Within a day, the message vanished from Mr. Trump’s Twitter feed. The White House said it had no idea why that happened and that it stood by the original message. But stakeholders in the peace process have seen the unexplained disappearance as a sign of uncertainty from a president who has presented himself as Israel’s greatest friend but has then called it “an honor” to meet with its adversary.**
- **As Mr. Trump embarks on what he vows will be a historic effort to do what no president has done before and make peace between Israelis and Palestinians, he finds himself under pressure from his hard-line pro-Israel supporters. They worry that he and his aides are listening too closely to Arab and Palestinian arguments and diluting what they hoped would be uncompromising support for the current Israeli government.**
- **They are particularly concerned about the role of one of Mr. Trump’s closest Jewish friends, the New York billionaire Ronald S. Lauder, who is prodding Mr. Trump to forge an alliance with Mr. Abbas. Mr. Lauder is in frequent contact with Mr. Trump’s chief Middle East negotiator, Jason D. Greenblatt, who attended a dinner at Mr. Lauder’s Georgetown home with Mr. Abbas the night before the Palestinian leader went to the White House.**
- **Mr. Greenblatt got a very different message at an earlier dinner with two other prominent Palestinians, Salam Fayyad and Ziad Asali, and two American Jewish diplomats, Elliott Abrams and Dennis B. Ross. They all told him that a breakthrough was not realistic now, and that Mr. Trump would be better off pursuing incremental advances, like bettering the economic fortunes of the Palestinians.**
- **“There is a perception that he’s fundamentally sympathetic, but there is an uncertainty about where he wants to go,” said Mr. Ross, a Middle East envoy for Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. “Among those who think there is no such thing as a deal, or that Israel is being asked to make troubling concessions, there is unease.”**
- **So far, none of these objections are being made public. Conservative supporters of Israel view Mr. Trump as a vast improvement over Mr. Obama, whose blunt pressure on Israel to halt construction of settlements in the West Bank poisoned his relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.**
- **Mr. Trump has “done more in just 100 days than Barack Obama ever did in transforming the U.S.-Israel relationship into a U.S.-Israel partnership,” said Matthew Brooks, the executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition. But later this month, when Mr. Trump will test his ideas on his first foreign trip, to Saudi Arabia and Israel, one of his most powerful donors, the**

Las Vegas casino magnate Sheldon G. Adelson, will be in Israel when the president is, according to people briefed on his schedule.

- Mr. Adelson was disappointed that Mr. Trump had not fulfilled a campaign promise to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. He will be watching closely to see how the president squares his vow to be a stalwart friend of Israel with his peacemaking ambitions.
- The deletion of Mr. Trump's Twitter message calling it "an honor" to meet with Mr. Abbas was widely noticed by Israeli news media. Curiously, similar messages on other social media were not deleted. Michael Anton, a White House spokesman, said that no one knew what had happened to the Twitter post but that "we stand by the message."
- Mr. Trump has borrowed a few pages from Mr. Obama's playbook. He, too, has leaned on Mr. Netanyahu to curb settlement construction to make it easier to pursue talks with the Palestinians. Mr. Greenblatt came to an understanding with Mr. Netanyahu that is not unlike the one between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, under which Israel agreed not to approve further construction outside existing settlement boundaries.
- After his promise to move the embassy to Jerusalem, Mr. Trump has set that issue aside for now, heeding the advice of King Abdullah II of Jordan and other Arab leaders, who warned him it could ignite violence among Palestinians. White House officials insist it may still happen; Mr. Trump must decide by June whether to renew the waiver of the congressional vote instructing that the embassy be moved.
- David M. Friedman, the bankruptcy lawyer who is Mr. Trump's ambassador to Israel, has told people he plans to divide his time between the ambassador's seaside residence near Tel Aviv and the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, where the State Department keeps an apartment for its envoy. But Mr. Friedman, who is moving to Israel in the coming days, has been a less central figure in Mr. Trump's peacemaking project than Mr. Greenblatt. An Orthodox Jew and an in-house lawyer who negotiated real estate deals for Mr. Trump, Mr. Greenblatt has impressed outsiders with his determination to learn the bedeviling history of Middle East peace.
- Mr. Greenblatt has met with a wide range of Arab leaders, ambassadors, and other officials, in a crash course that hard-liners worry will leave him sympathetic to those officials' arguments, for example, on settlements.
- The president's push on settlements unnerved Mr. Netanyahu, according to officials on both sides, though they avoided an open split over it. Mr. Netanyahu was determined not to antagonize another president, and the understanding on settlements was left unwritten, mitigating attacks on Mr. Netanyahu by pro-settler factions in his coalition.
- One of the biggest cheerleaders for a peace deal is Mr. Lauder, a cosmetics heir who has known Mr. Trump for decades. His mother, Estée Lauder, was among the first of the Manhattan social elite to accept Mr. Trump when he arrived on the scene as a young developer from Queens. Mr. Lauder's enthusiasm for a bold new initiative has alarmed some in Mr. Trump's circle, particularly his chief strategist, Stephen K. Bannon. Mr. Bannon speaks regularly with Mr. Adelson, who donated millions of dollars to outside groups to help Republicans in the 2016 elections.

- How much direct influence Mr. Lauder has on Mr. Trump is a matter of debate: Some close to the White House insist their contacts are frequent; others say there have been just three meetings, one in the Oval Office and two at Mar-a-Lago, Mr. Trump's Palm Beach club. But Mr. Lauder has an open line to Mr. Greenblatt; the dinner for Mr. Abbas testifies to his social clout. An adviser to Mr. Lauder denied he was pushing an alliance with Mr. Abbas, but described Mr. Lauder as an optimist.
- Mr. Adelson was frustrated that Mr. Trump did not fulfill his promise to move the embassy on "Day 1." But people who have spoken to him said he was heartened by the White House's silence when the Israeli government announced a new settlement to replace Amona, a settler outpost evacuated after it was declared illegal. A spokesman for Mr. Adelson declined to comment.
- Aides to Mr. Trump said they are well aware of the hurdles to a deal. But they say the president has an obligation to try, suggesting that his unconventional approach to diplomacy might unlock some doors.
- His hard-line pro-Israel supporters console themselves that Mr. Trump will soon recognize the futility of this undertaking. That pessimism, they note, is a view shared not just by hard-liners but also by most of the Israeli political establishment, left and right. "The administration is likely to discover what its predecessors learned: that there is no deal to be had right now because the parties have unbridgeable positions on most of the issues," said Noah Pollak, a Republican strategist who works with pro-Israel conservative groups. "Obama used the impasse as a way to condemn Israel," he continued. "We're not worried Trump will follow suit. We simply hope the process of the administration proving to itself that no deal is possible will be quick and undramatic."