



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, May 9

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News Excerpts

May 9, 2017

Ha'aretz

Abbas to Trump: Peace Talks Should Start Where 2008 Left Off

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has urged U.S. President Donald Trump to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks from the offer made by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008. Abbas and his staff showed Trump documents and maps from Israel's talks with the Palestinians near the end of Olmert's term, explaining the proposal to him. The differences between the sides on borders narrowed a great deal in the 2008 negotiations.

See also, [*"Abbas Says He's Ready to Meet Netanyahu as Part of Trump Peace Push" \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

The Guardian

Israeli Ministers Back Proposed Law Demoting Arabic Language

Israeli ministers have approved the wording of a new law that would downgrade Arabic as an official language and which states that the right to self-determination in Israel "is unique to the Jewish people", despite the country's sizeable non-Jewish minority. The go-ahead for the nation state bill by the ministerial committee for legislation means it will now move forward to a vote by the country's parliament. The bill has to pass several stages in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, for it to become law and could also be challenged in the courts. Critics say the law is discriminatory and could undermine Israel's balance of being both a Jewish and democratic state by harming the rights of minorities.

See also, [*"Netanyahu Throws Strong Support Behind Jewish Nation State-Bill" \(Jerusalem Post\)*](#)

Times of Israel

Erdogan Lashes 'Racist' Israel, Calls Muslims to Flood Al-Quds

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday urged Muslims to throng to the Temple Mount in a show of solidarity with Palestinians as he issued a string of challenges to Israel, which he called "racist and discriminatory." "We, as Muslims, should be visiting Al-Quds more often," he said, referring to Jerusalem by its Arabic name. "Each day that Jerusalem is under occupation is an insult to us," he added, at the opening ceremony of the International Forum on al-Quds Waqf in Istanbul.

See also, [*"Erdogan Rebukes Israel Over Muezzin Bill and Calls on Muslims to Go En Masse to Al-Aqsa" \(Ynet News\)*](#)

Ynet News

'Price Tag' Sprayed on 20 Cars Near Arab Neighborhood

Twenty vehicles parked on Route 21 between Ramat Shlomo in eastern Jerusalem and Shuafat in north Jerusalem were discovered vandalized overnight Monday, with graffiti having been sprayed on some of the cars with the Hebrew words "price tag." Police also reported that some of the cars' tires were punctured by the vandals. The term "price tag" is commonly used by Jewish or political extremists in carrying out a revenge attack for a specific act.

See also, [*"Vandals Slash Tires, Spray Anti-Arab Graffiti in East Jerusalem and Northern Israel" \(Ha'aretz\)*](#)

US: Israel Removal from Saudi Video on Trump Trip 'Mistake'

The State Department called the posting of a video by the US Embassy in Saudi Arabia that removed Israel from an announcement about the president's upcoming trip to the region an "inadvertent mistake." On Monday, Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., criticized the State Department for "editing out" Israel in the video posted on the Riyadh embassy website and Arabic-language Twitter account. The videos were no longer available on Monday afternoon. "At a time when the US should be encouraging the governments of the region — and their people — to promote tolerance, respect and mutual recognition, this video implies that the US accepts Saudi Arabia's public rejectionist position toward Israel," Engel, the Jewish ranking member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Times of Israel

US Joint Chiefs Chairman Dunford Lands in Israel to Talk Syria

US military chief Joseph Dunford arrived in Israel on Monday to meet his Israeli counterparts for talks expected to focus on the situation in Syria, as well as the fight against the Islamic State. During the visit — Dunford's third as the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff — he will meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot and other military commanders, the army said. Among other topics, Dunford and the Israeli officials are expected to discuss the fighting in Sinai, where an Islamic State affiliate is engaged in a bloody war with Egyptian forces, as well as the situation in Syria, specifically the chemical weapons still believed to be in the control of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and the Iranian government's attempts to transfer advanced weaponry through the country to the Hezbollah terrorist group.

See also, [*"US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Receives Commendations at IDF HQ"* \(Ynet News\)](#)

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Iran and Saudi Arabia Exchange Threats

Iran and Saudi Arabia have exchanged threats as tensions rise between the two countries. In an interview yesterday to Al-Manar TV, Iran's Defence Minister General Hossein Dehghan issued a threat that in a conflict between the two countries nothing would be "left in Saudi Arabia except Mecca and Medina," the two holy cities. The Defence Minister went on to criticise Saudi Arabia's close relationship with the US as going against "the interests of Muslim nations", and accused the country of seeking to "please" Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in order to provoke Israeli action against Iran. He was responding to comments made by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Last week the Deputy Crown Prince said in an interview that there was no space for dialogue with Iran due to its Shiite ambitions "to control the Islamic world", and that Saudi Arabia would not wait for war, but "work so that it becomes a battle for them in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia".

Sudden Attack

By Yossi Melman

- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's fierce attack yesterday stunned Israel and appeared like thunder on a clear day. It came out of nowhere and the Foreign Ministry, the security establishment and experts find it hard to understand the timing.
- The first explanation is the event at which this was said. This was a Muslim gathering in Istanbul to mark al-Quds Day. This kind of forum invites fierce, even inflammatory criticism, and it was said against the backdrop of the government's intent to pass the muezzin bill. It's hard to expect someone like Erdogan to miss such an opportunity.
- Another explanation is the personality of the Turkish president. He is impulsive and unpredictable. This has happened to him with respect to other countries and other leaders in the world, and we particularly remember his behavior toward late president Shimon Peres at the Davos conference.
- It could be that his statements yesterday were intended to be a warning signal to Israel about the way it has treated him. As far as is known, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu did not congratulate him, neither publicly nor by phone nor in a letter, for his victory in the referendum, as is customary among leaders, and as Netanyahu tends to do in similar cases. In this instance, Israel's reaction was chilly and more like Europe's reaction, unlike the embrace that Erdogan received from US President Donald Trump.
- The comments in the Israeli media comparing Erdogan to a latter-day sultan because of his steps against democratic institutions and against the media, also annoyed the Turkish leader. His ambassador to Israel, who is his very close associate, wrote an angry letter to the *Ha'aretz* newspaper in which he argued that the support that *Ha'aretz* expressed for the Kurds was essentially an expression of solidarity with terrorists. Erdogan's remarks yesterday were the harshest attack by the Turkish president on Israel since the reconciliation agreement between the two countries was signed a year ago, which put an end to the tension and to the deterioration in relations after the *Mavi Marmara* incident in 2010.
- After that reconciliation, relations steadily improved. Trade, economic and tourism relations, which had been decent even before, strengthened. True, security and intelligence relations, which were once the basis for the relationship, have not improved at the same rate as the civilian relations, but even here there has been a discernible trend of a desire to promote this. good will to advance them. Turkey recently appointed a military attaché to its embassy in Tel Aviv and Israeli and Turkish companies had begun to talk about resuming security initiatives, primarily in the fields of high-tech and cyber.
- It is obvious Erdogan's remarks will affect the rate of the normalization in relations and will not be of any help. Neither did Israel's incisive response help to put out the flames. A very speedy announcement by the Foreign Ministry (at the instructions of the prime minister) said "those who systematically violate human rights in his country, will not preach morality to the only true democracy in the region," a strong hint that Turkey is basically not a true democracy. Erdogan will not like reading this.

- **Israel hopes that the Turkish president's statement will be a one-time event and not a precursor of things to come and that relations will continue to normalize and strengthen. But with Erdogan, you never know.**

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:

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What Would Herzl Say About Nationality Bill?

Israel's leadership appears to have diverted from Theodor Herzl's path. Instead of striving to create equality and a common ground, it is doing everything in its power to incite and divide for the sake of a few more votes.

By Nasreen Hadad Haj-Yahya

- In recent years, I have often been under the impression that Israel's Arab citizens have gotten caught in a crossfire between politicians from the right side of the map, who are competing over "who will harm the Arabs more." The Nationality Bill, which was approved Sunday by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation, is a direct continuation of the Muezzin Bill, which has already passed a preliminary Knesset reading following direct pressure from the prime minister, and of a series of initiatives aimed at appealing to voters by harming Israel's Arab citizens.
- The Nationality Bill has two meanings—a declarative meaning and a practical meaning. On the declarative level, it's about pushing the Arab minority to the margins of society. Simply telling us that Israel is first and foremost an ethnocracy, a state whose top priority is nationality rather than democratic values, which is why we are considered second-class citizens.
- On the practical level, the law cancels the status of Arabic as an official language in the State of Israel, enforces and expands the "admission committees law" and, most importantly, legally enforces Judaism over democracy, which will have a lot of ramifications on future rulings on discrimination issues.
- If there were a real problem in the state's Jewish identity, the motives for the law may have been seen as relevant. If the anthem and the flag included no Jewish characteristics, if Shabbat was not the official day of rest, and if a series of Basic Laws enforcing democracy in Israel—like a Basic Law on freedom of speech—overshadowed the state's Jewishness. A foreign visitor would have likely thought that the Arab minority had gotten so strong, was serving in key positions throughout the country, and that the legislation was so liberal, that in order to keep just a little of the state's Jewish characteristics there was a need to enact a law that would defend the Jewish majority from a takeover by the Arab minority.
- I am often asked what would really make us, Israel's Arab citizens, feel "at home" in Israel. Sometimes it comes in the form of an accusing question: "Why aren't you loyal to the state?" Such laws conceal the real answer, and the next time the Jewish public asks itself why we don't feel part of the state, it should consider how we feel every time we are turned into a stationary target for politicians who wish to prove their patriotism at our expense, without any essential need.
- In a slightly symbolic manner, the Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved the Nationality Bill on Herzl Day, a day commemorating the visionary of the Jewish state, who stressed in his writings the importance of fair treatment of the minority and the value of equality. In "The Jewish State," for example, he wrote: "Every man will be as free and undisturbed in his faith or his disbelief as he is in his nationality."

- And if it should occur that men of other creeds and different nationalities come to live amongst us, we should accord them honorable protection and equality before the law.” So what would Herzl think about the Nationality Bill?
- Israel’s leadership appears to have diverted from Herzl’s path. Instead of striving to create equality and a common ground, it is doing everything in its power to incite and divide, thinking it will gain a few more votes. But it is precisely these kinds of laws that can and should lead to an opposite outcome, and the majority of the public understands their proposers’ transparent goal. The important mission of Jews and Arabs from all ends of the political spectrum, who don’t wish to be part of the hatred campaign, is therefore to propose legislation that reflects equality, to get our children to study together and apart about each other’s culture in school, to meet and discuss the differences of opinion between us out of respect and, of course, to oppose divisive and discriminatory initiatives. Our mission is that every such law will lead to both a practical and electoral boomerang effect.

Nasreen Hadad Haj-Yahya is co-director of the Arab-Jewish Relations Program at the Israel Democracy Institute.

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