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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 1, 2017

Ha'aretz

Trump's Mideast Peace Envoy: PA Must Rule Gaza

Jason Greenblatt, U.S. President Trump's special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, said on Wednesday that the Palestinian Authority needs "to resume its role in the administration of Gaza," in light of the damage that Hamas has caused to the Gaza Strip. Greenblatt made this statement during a tour of the Israel-Gaza border area together with IDF Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories. Greenblatt said at the conclusion of the tour that "it is clear that the Palestinian Authority needs to resume its role in the administration of Gaza, as Hamas has substantially harmed the people of Gaza and has failed to meet their most basic needs." This is the first time a senior official of the Trump administration has publicly stated such a policy towards Gaza. See also, ["Greenblatt's Gaza proposal leaves more questions than answers" \(Jewish Journal\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Trump Pushed Out US Envoy to Jordan at King's Request

A career US diplomat who served as ambassador to Jordan under the Obama administration was pushed out of her role by President Donald Trump shortly after he took office, allegedly at the request of the nation's king, Abdullah II, a US magazine reported. The article, published in *Foreign Policy*, claims that Alice Wells had a tense relationship with Abdullah throughout the final stages of Obama's nuclear talks with Iran. The king opposed the resulting deal in private, fearing it would embolden the Shi'ite power already deeply involved in the Syrian civil war spilling over Jordan's northern border. See also, ["Trump Dumped U.S. Ambassador to Amman at Request of King" \(Foreign Policy\)](#)

Reuters

After Tense Talks, U.N. Renews Peacekeepers in Lebanon

The United Nations Security Council unanimously voted to renew the mandate for a peacekeeping mission in Lebanon on Wednesday, following tense negotiations amid U.S. and Israeli criticism that U.N. troops should do more to stop Hezbollah gaining arms. The U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) - established in 1978 - patrols Lebanon's southern border with Israel. Washington regards Hezbollah, which supports the Syrian government and has a strong presence in south Lebanon, as a terrorist organization. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said Washington wanted the French-drafted resolution to renew UNIFIL's mandate to "ensure UNIFIL is doing its job to the fullest extent possible." See also, ["UN chief affirms support for Lebanon peacekeeping commander" \(ABC News\)](#)

Times of Israel

UN Atomic Agency: Iran Complying with Nuclear Deal

The top UN official monitoring Iran's nuclear program on Thursday noted no violations by Tehran in its latest quarterly Iran monitoring report. At the same time, International Atomic Energy Agency chief Yukiya Amano's report said that the agency continues to hunt for "undeclared nuclear material and activities." It also rejected Tehran's claim that its military sites were off-limits to inspection, saying the agency needs access to all "relevant locations" if suspicions arise of possible hidden atomic activities. See also, ["Iran is adhering to nuclear deal limits, UN says, despite Trump claim" \(The Guardian\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu Says He Spoke to Adelson 40 Times a Year

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu disclosed on Thursday that he spoke with Sheldon Adelson, the American casino magnate and owner of pro-Netanyahu Israel Hayom daily, about 160 times between 2012 and 2015. "Adelson has been a close friend of mine for about 30 years, and I am happy to speak with him from time to time," the prime minister wrote in his post. "Between 2012 and 2015, I spoke with him an average of 0.75 times a week." With regard to his contacts with Israel Hayom's editor at the time Amos Regev, Netanyahu added: "I spoke with him 1.5 times a week on average." See also, ["PM admits to speaking to news mogul Adelson '0.75 times on average a week' for years" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Reuters

Israel Suspends Decision to Bar Al Jazeera Journalist

Israel on Wednesday backtracked from a decision to revoke the accreditation of an Al Jazeera journalist, saying he explained that comments he made last year did not amount to support for Palestinian violence. Elias Karram, an Arab citizen of Israel, had told a Turkish-based TV station last year that his role as a journalist in Israeli-occupied territories where Palestinians seek statehood was inseparable from the "work of the resistance". In a statement, Israel's Government Press Office (GPO) said Karram clarified at a hearing on Aug. 21 that those comments did not constitute support or sympathy for violence. The GPO said that, in response to his explanation and after consultations with security officials, it had frozen for six months the lifting of Karram's accreditation and would review his news reports during that period. See also, ["Israel backs away from shutting Al Jazeera" \(TOI\)](#)

i24 News

Netanyahu Ramps up Anger in Visit to South Tel Aviv

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the economically depressed neighborhoods of south Tel Aviv will be returned "to the citizens of Israel" as he visited the area in the aftermath of a [Supreme Court decision that frustrated his government's attempt to deport asylum seekers](#). "We will return south Tel Aviv to the citizens of Israel, they are not refugees, but infiltrators looking for work," Netanyahu said during his first visit to the area in years, according to *Haaretz* newspaper. "If needed, we will legislate an amendment to the law or change the agreements with the African countries, or both," he added, referring to deals with Rwanda and Uganda to take in thousands of illegal migrants deported from Israel. See also, ["Netanyahu vows to 'give back' south Tel Aviv to Israelis" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

S. Court Rejects Petition to Recognize Same Sex Marriage

The High Court of Justice rejected on Thursday a petition by the Israeli Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Association to recognize same-sex marriage. Justices Elyakim Rubinstein (former deputy to the president), Neal Hendel and Anat Baron rejected the claim that according to interpretations of the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, same-sex marriage should be recognized. They said there is no contradiction in the state's current position regarding this issue. The justices added that it is up to the legislators, and not the High Court, to determine this matter. It was stated in the verdict that because the appeal is wrong in its basis because the High Court is a civil court, not a rabbinical one. See also, ["Israel's High Court Rejects Petition to Recognize Same-sex Marriages" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

He Was once Netanyahu's Housekeeper. Now He's on a Mission to Bring him Down

By Loveday Morris and Ruth Eglash, Washington Post Reporters

- **Meni Naftali is not tall, but he's easy to spot among the hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside a shopping mall chanting raucously for their prime minister to be jailed. Illuminated by a glare of light from a television crew, he holds a phone above the crowd to stream live on Facebook. Well-wishers approach for hugs, handshakes and selfies.**
- **It's a far cry from his day job as a house painter and manual laborer. But the 39-year-old former security guard, who struggled in school and says he never had much interest in politics, has become the unlikely standard-bearer for a band of Israeli citizens fed up with corruption in the halls of power.**
- **Naftali says he sees himself as a David, taking on the Goliath who is Israel's longtime leader Benjamin Netanyahu. Naftali once worked as his housekeeper. Each Saturday for the past 40 weeks, Naftali has led a protest near the home of Israel's attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, calling on him to indict the prime minister, who is increasingly dogged by allegations of corruption.**
- **Netanyahu has officially been named a suspect in two cases. In the first, he is being investigated for allegedly receiving illegal gifts, including expensive cigars and champagne from billionaire benefactors. In a second, he is accused of attempting to cut a deal with an Israeli newspaper for better coverage in return for political favors. A third case does not name him directly, but his lawyer is among those in his close circle being investigated for irregularities in a multimillion-dollar deal to buy German submarines.**
- **Netanyahu denies any wrongdoing and has said the investigations and the protests are part of a conspiracy by the left wing and the media to bring him down by undemocratic means. In a speech to supporters Wednesday, he dismissed the demonstrations as a "joke," attacking them — and Naftali — for close to 10 minutes.**
- **As allegations have swollen, though, so have the demonstrations. What started as a few dozen people shivering in the rain had grown to a crowd of about 2,000 Saturday night. They blew whistles and beat drums. "We are going to be here as long as it takes to get Netanyahu out," said Naftali, with anti-Netanyahu stickers plastered across his tight-fitting T-shirt and a blue whistle hanging around his neck.**
- **It has already been a long battle for Naftali. It began when he took a job as a housekeeper in Netanyahu's residence six years ago, organizing the laundry, the events and even making sure the flowers were fresh. "It was then I realized that in the top spot, anything goes," he said of the excessive spending he said he witnessed. In 2014, he sued the Netanyahus and the state of Israel for damages, claiming he was mistreated and misled over whether his position would be made permanent. Israeli newspapers lapped up every detail of his courtroom testimony, including allegations about first lady Sara Netanyahu's champagne habit, angry outbursts and racist remarks about Naftali's Middle Eastern background. On one**

occasion, he said, she called him at 3 a.m. to berate him for buying milk in a bag rather than a carton.

- Naftali won a partial payout in the case but said acts of “revenge” that followed made him determined to keep up his fight. His gun license was revoked, he said, leaving him unable to work as a security guard, as he had before Netanyahu hired him. He can now find jobs only as a handyman. Since beginning the protests, he has been arrested four times.
- The Netanyahus accused him of slander, calling him a lying, disgruntled former employee with a personal vendetta. “You can’t believe a word coming out of the mouth of the serial offender and the serial liar,” Yossi Cohen, a lawyer for the Netanyahu family, said in a statement, accusing Naftali of falsifying a work deposition and attendance records.
- A colleague at the prime minister’s residence lodged a sexual harassment claim against Naftali, a case that is still under investigation. Naftali denies the allegation, contending that it is part of an attempt to smear him. “They always taught me in the army that if there was a terrorist in front of me, even if the bullets were finished in my gun, I should go forward and fight the terrorist with my hands,” said Naftali, who served in a commando unit during his military service. “So anytime there is someone who is against me, I will fight them. I will fight it with all my strength.”
- Nir Hefez, a spokesman for the prime minister, said Naftali’s claim that there is a campaign against him is “absurd” and “baseless.” Hefez also [shared an article](#) that alleged that spending in the prime minister’s residence had increased while Naftali was a housekeeper. Sara Netanyahu is being investigated for the misuse of funds at the residence. “Who ate all this food?” Benjamin Netanyahu joked in his speech. “It wasn’t my dog.”
- Joining Naftali in urging Israelis onto the street is Eldad Yaniv, an attorney who says he was once part of the country’s corrupt power politics but has now seen the errors of his ways. Netanyahu accused the media of not doing enough to investigate both men’s pasts. Earlier this month, Yaniv and Naftali were stopped by police as they drove their cars to a Saturday protest. They were handcuffed and arrested for Facebook posts allegedly encouraging an illegal demonstration. Police detained them overnight before releasing them.
- The police say the demonstrations are a nuisance in the residential neighborhood. But the arrests have only brought the men more attention. The pair say they were strip-searched four times in three hours in what they claim is a campaign of harassment sanctioned from on high. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said the arrests were “operational.” “Law-and-order issues have to be dealt with when things get out of hand on the ground,” he said. “Those on the scene had their reasons to carry out strip-searches.”
- Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan said in a television interview that the arrests were not the “smartest” decision. He told The Washington Post that “the protests had been allowed to proceed for 40 weeks, but that in most other countries police would arrest protest organizers if they had been asked not to demonstrate.”
- Last week, Israel’s Supreme Court ruled that the right to protest outweighed the right of the residents to peace and quiet, and that the demonstrations could continue — although it capped the number of people permitted to protest at 500. Naftali sat watching from the benches.
- At Saturday’s protest, a police officer used a hand-held clicker to count 500 demonstrators entering a pen set up outside the shopping center. But hundreds of others

gathered on the roundabout outside and a nearby hill. The most recent protest drew a mix of Israelis: older left-wing intellectuals, former soldiers and first-time protesters. Near the back of the crowd, one protester who described himself as a “couch potato” said he had never been to any kind of demonstration before. Naftali, though, had inspired him. “I’ve never met him, but I love him,” he said. “He’s sincere, honest, not corrupted.” The protester did not want his full name published, fearing repercussions for attending the demonstration in what he describes as an increasingly authoritarian environment. “I’m scared for him, actually,” he said of Naftali.

- Naftali’s wife, Simona, said she is also worried about reprisals and tries to keep her distance from the protests. She sits around the corner from the crowd, outside a pharmacy, and keeps a cold bottle of water for her husband in a bag. “The children don’t like it, the spotlight,” she said. “We go to a restaurant and someone spots him, and comes over, and it stops being a family moment. You should see the number of messages he gets on his phone at night.”
- Naftali said that even if Netanyahu is jailed, he will have other battles to fight. “It’s about corruption in this country and the right to democracy,” he said. But his wife misses the days when life was simpler. “It’s not that I don’t see him. It’s his head is somewhere else,” she said. “I want him to come back to me, but that’s not going to happen now. That’s never going to happen.”

SUMMARY: It has already been a long battle for Naftali. It began when he took a job as a housekeeper in Netanyahu’s residence six years ago, organizing the laundry, the events and even making sure the flowers were fresh. “It was then I realized that in the top spot, anything goes,” he said of the excessive spending he said he witnessed. In 2014, he sued the Netanyahus and the state of Israel for damages, claiming he was mistreated and misled over whether his position would be made permanent. Israeli newspapers lapped up every detail of his courtroom testimony, including allegations about first lady Sara Netanyahu’s champagne habit, angry outbursts and racist remarks about Naftali’s Middle Eastern background. On one occasion, he said, she called him at 3 a.m. to berate him for buying milk in a bag rather than a carton. Naftali won a partial payout in the case but said acts of “revenge” that followed made him determined to keep up his fight. His gun license was revoked, he said, leaving him unable to work as a security guard, as he had before Netanyahu hired him. He can now find jobs only as a handyman. Since beginning the protests, he has been arrested four times.

Guterres and Greenblatt Outline Divergent Paths to Peace

In Jerusalem, the UN chief strikes a conciliatory tone but espouses traditional positions, while Trump's envoy pushes grassroots efforts to prepare the ground for reconciliation

By Raphael Ahren, diplomatic correspondent at The Times of Israel

- Two top foreign dignitaries visited the region this week, representing contrasting views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both are good news for Israel, relatively speaking. United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres advanced the traditional positions of the international community by pushing for a “two-state solution that will end the occupation.” US President Donald Trump’s Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt, on the other hand, focused on exploring grassroots efforts to bring the two sides closer together on the ground.
- The two men visited many of the same stations: the Prime Minister’s Office, the presidential compound in Ramallah, the Erez Crossing and the homes of Israelis living close to the Gaza Strip. But despite the similar itineraries, the two men, who on Monday briefly met in Jerusalem, came with different goals and different strategies.
- Guterres urged immediate steps to bring about peace, while Greenblatt seemed eager to explore ways to bring the two societies closer together to prepare the ground for a reconciliation that would precede peace.
- Greenblatt’s approach to the peace process is certainly more to the liking of Israel’s right-wing government, but it can also feel satisfied with Guterres, who went as far as he could given his position in expressing sympathy for the Jewish state.
- To be sure, he said some things Israeli officials could have done without. He reiterated that settlement activity is “illegal under international law,” expressed support for a Hamas-Fatah reconciliation and called for an end to Israel’s blockade of Gaza, describing the Strip’s state as a “dramatic humanitarian crisis.” And yet, his speeches and gestures here were more positive than Israelis could have expected from the head of an organization that is meant to remain “neutral” but is notorious for its relentless bashing of the Jewish state.
- While he sometimes disagreed with the Israeli government, on Monday he declared in Jerusalem that he remains committed to the UN’s “impartiality” — meaning that Israel must not be singled out for undue criticism — and stressed that he considers calls for Israel’s destruction “a form of modern anti-Semitism.” He repeated this idea several times this week. Israel has “fulfilled the rights and national aspirations of Jews throughout generations,” he said, which is as close as recognizing Israel as a Jewish state as a top UN official has ever come.
- After his visit to Nahal Oz, a kibbutz on the border with Gaza, the secretary general praised the residents of the rocket-struck kibbutz for suppressing “what would be natural feeling of anger” and instead sending “an extraordinary message of peace and reconciliation” and offering to help Palestinian civilians in the Hamas-run enclave.

- Guterres garnered much praise from Jerusalem and the wider Jewish world. Hosting him in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu slammed the UN's "absurd obsession with Israel" but in the same breath praised its new secretary general for his demonstrated desire "to turn a new page in relations."
- After a private meeting Monday, Israel Council on Foreign Affairs president Dan Meridor said he found Guterres to be "fair-minded." The Anti-Defamation League, too, lauded Guterres's equivalency between anti-Semitism and anti-Israel agitation as "significant." "These remarks, along with his recognition of the daily security and terror threats faced by Israelis, send a clear message and are an important signal that the Secretary-General understands the challenges Israel faces in the region," the group's CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, said.
- Guterres's somewhat unexpectedly sympathetic tone when addressing Israelis may have to do with the Trump administration's ongoing threats to withdraw funding from the UN if it doesn't rein in anti-Israel bias.
- In substance, however, his approach was not new. He espoused the exact same positions on Gaza and the peace process as his predecessors did before him. And that is where his approach fundamentally differs from that of Jason Greenblatt, who remained loyal to the US administration's policy of refraining from publicly subscribing to any clear-cut policy.
- In Tuesday's meeting with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, Guterres mentioned the two-state solution nine times. Greenblatt, by contrast, has never publicly endorsed the notion of two states for two peoples. Rather than making policy pronouncements, Trump's envoy met with officials and civil society leaders from both sides and continued his effort to strengthen Israeli-Palestinian coexistence projects.
- He visited two crossings into Gaza — where he met with Palestinian businessmen, walked through a Hamas terror tunnel and participated in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations over another power purchasing agreement.
- At the Ziv Hospital in Safed, he was "extremely impressed" by Israel's aid to thousands of Syrian refugees. "These are the stories of Israel the world needs to hear and stories like this show how peace in the region can be possible," he said.
- Greenblatt also toured the Jalameh (Gilboa) crossing, in the northern West Bank, to learn about Israeli-Palestinian economic and security cooperation and Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz's regional initiative to extend railroads to connect Israelis and Palestinians to Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.
- Greenblatt visited Rawabi — the first city built for West Bank Palestinians — and met with Palestinian academic leaders to "discuss [the] role of higher education in economic growth and a stronger civil society," and with a group of Gazans.
- Greenblatt also made time to stop by at a practice of a mixed Arab and Jewish soccer club in Jerusalem suburb Mevasseret Zion. "It's very important to face racism, to fight discrimination, and I'm very energized by programs like this. I think they're very important for what we're trying to accomplish in terms of peace," he said. "In my mind, a peace agreement will not be successful the day after, until the societies reconnect. And this is a perfect example of societies connecting," he said of the team.

- This nicely sums up Greenblatt's strategy. In parallel to talks with political leaders in Ramallah in Jerusalem, he is trying to see what civil society can do to help the process.
- Careful not to jeopardize his reputation as an honest broker, Trump's envoy made sure to say nice things about both Israelis and Palestinians, though his praise for the Israelis he met was much more effusive. More importantly, however, his tour this week underlined once more that the US administration, while keen on clinching the ultimate deal, remains hesitant to impose policies on Jerusalem. Rather, it appears that the White House has come to understand that any attempt to relaunch peace negotiations needs to be bolstered by a serious effort to nourish reconciliation and coexistence.

SUMMARY: Two top foreign dignitaries visited the region this week, representing contrasting views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both are good news for Israel, relatively speaking. United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres advanced the traditional positions of the international community by pushing for a "two-state solution that will end the occupation." US President Donald Trump's Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt, on the other hand, focused on exploring grassroots efforts to bring the two sides closer together on the ground. The two men visited many of the same stations: the Prime Minister's Office, the presidential compound in Ramallah, the Erez Crossing and the homes of Israelis living close to the Gaza Strip. But despite the similar itineraries, the two men, who on Monday briefly met in Jerusalem, came with different goals and different strategies.