



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, September 7*

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- Hamas Leader: We're Ready for Long-Term Cease-Fire with Israel
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- Largest Settlement Expansion in East Jerusalem to be Approved
- Poll: Most Palestinians Believe Trump not Serious about Peace
- PM Bars Al Jazeera's Israel Chief from Government Press Seminar on Freedom of Speech
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# News Excerpts

September 7, 2017

## i24 News

### **Israel Reportedly Strikes Syrian Chemical Weapons Facility**

Syrian news media reported in the early hours of Thursday morning that Israeli aircraft bombed the site of an alleged chemical weapons plant near the city of Hama. According to the reports, the target was the Scientific Studies Researchers Center, or Centre D'Etudes et de Recherches Scientifiques (CERS). The Israeli military would neither confirm nor deny the reports. Reports on social media from Syria suggested that the planes carried out multiple hits, perhaps even multiple sorties. There were also initial reports of casualties. In April the United States blacklisted 271 employees of the CERS, saying that the agency was responsible for the development of chemical weapons. See also, ["Israel Strikes Assad Regime Target Linked to Chemical Weapons in Syria, Foreign Media Reports" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Hamas Leader: We're Ready for Long-Term Cease-Fire with Israel**

Hamas is ready to strike a long-term cease-fire deal with Israel, if it lifts its closure on the Gaza Strip, senior Hamas official in the West Bank Hassan Yousef told *The Jerusalem Post* on Wednesday. "Hamas is prepared to make a long-term cease-fire with the Israeli occupation, in return for it allowing the residents of Gaza to live like all other people in the world with everything that they need," Yousef, who helped found Hamas, said in an interview in his living room in Beitunya, a suburb of Ramallah, the de facto political capital of the Palestinian Authority. See also, ["Haley: Hamas Iran remarks 'stunning admission'" \(JewishNews\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Netanyahu to Embark on First-Ever Trip to Latin America**

Prime Minister Netanyahu is set to visit three Latin American countries next week, as a part of his ongoing effort to boldly go where none of his predecessors has gone before. While Israeli presidents have previously visited the continent — most recently Shimon Peres in 2009 — Netanyahu's four-day trip to Argentina, Colombia and Mexico marks the first time a sitting Israeli prime minister goes to South America. After his journey through Latin America, he is headed to New York, where he will address the United Nations General Assembly and is expected to meet with US President Donald Trump. See also, ["Argentinean Jewry to partly pay for Netanyahu visit" \(Globes\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Largest Settlement Expansion in Jerusalem to be Approved**

The Jerusalem Planning and Building Committee will convene on Sunday to discuss granting building permits for 176 housing units for Jews in the heart Jabal Mukkaber neighborhood in East Jerusalem. The move, first reported by Kan, the newly formed public broadcasting corporation, would constitute a significant expansion of the Nof Zion settlement, which was populated six years ago near Jabal Mukkaber. The settlement today includes 91 apartments, and if the expansion is approved it would become the largest settlement inside the Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem – surpassing Ma'ale Zeitim with its 200 families. See also, ["Jerusalem to reportedly okay tripling Jewish enclave inside Arab neighborhood" \(TOI\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **Poll: Palestinians Believe Trump not Serious about Peace**

An overwhelming majority of Palestinians believe that US President Donald Trump is not serious about renewing peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah, a public opinion poll found. A total of 79.3% of Palestinians believe Trump is either somewhat or very unserious about renewing the negotiations, whereas 11.9% hold that the American president is either somewhat or very serious about reviving them. The poll of 1,199 people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was conducted on August 13-21 by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, a Ramallah-area polling and information center. The margin of error was 3%. The survey also found that a majority of Palestinians prefer peace talks to armed conflict with Israel. See also, ["Palestinian politics is shifting, according to new JMCC poll" \(JMCC\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **PM Bars Al Jazeera f. Press Seminar on Freedom of Speech**

Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered the Government Press Office to remove Al Jazeera's Jerusalem bureau chief Walid Al-Omari from a state-sponsored seminar on freedom of speech planned for Thursday. "The prime minister instructed that legal steps be taken to deny press passes of all Al Jazeera journalists working in Israel and to close their offices in Israel," the GPO announced in a Facebook post. Last month, the GPO announced its intentions to revoke the press accreditation of an Israeli Al Jazeera correspondent over comments he made on another TV network last year. See also, ["Foreign Ministry Warned Moves Against Al Jazeera Will Damage Israel's Image" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **Lapid to English Speakers in Jerusalem: I'll Fight Corruption**

Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid told an audience of some 400 English speakers in a speech in their language at Jerusalem's Bible Lands Museum on Wednesday night that he will run in the next general election on an agenda that includes fighting against political corruption. Speaking amid reports of PM Netanyahu's criminal investigations gathering steam, Lapid vowed to limit prime ministers to two terms and to change the electoral system to enable a government to last for four years. He said Israel's government and electoral system were both corrupt and dysfunctional. "We have the right to tell our government, if you are only preoccupied with yourselves, we can replace you with people who will be preoccupied with us," Lapid said. "That is the beauty of democracy." See also, ["Speaking to immigrants, Lapid urges expulsion for African migrants" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

## **Munich Marks 1972 Olympic Games Attack on Israeli Team**

Victims of the attack on the Israeli team at the 1972 Olympic Games were remembered by Germany and Israel on Wednesday with a memorial, following a long campaign by their relatives. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his Israeli counterpart Reuven Rivlin attended the inauguration of the "Munich 1972 massacre memorial" at Munich's Olympic Park, 45 years after the attack by Palestinian gunmen. "Relatives of the victims and the state of Israel waited almost half a century for this moment," Rivlin said. "45 years have passed for an official Israeli delegation to return to this place. The Munich Olympics became the blood Olympics."

## **Noose of Investigations Tightens Around Netanyahu**

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor Israel Pulse

- It has been almost two years now that Israeli police investigators have been searching — at first secretly, then intensively — for the other side of the bribery equation involving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu's associate, Israeli-American billionaire Arnon Milchan, willingly provided the police who are working File 1000 with the details of the benefits of the \$100,000 that he had in recent years showered on Netanyahu and his wife, Sara. The missing piece of the puzzle was the answer to one question: Did Milchan serve to gain anything from his generosity?
- As long as nothing was known about what, if any, benefits Milchan received in exchange for what he provided, the suspicions against Netanyahu remained the relatively mild violations of fraud and breach of trust. The prevailing assessment was that Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit would be hard put to generate an impeachment process against an incumbent prime minister over an indictment for breach of trust or fraud, but when it comes to bribery, that is a different story altogether. At the end of August, the police appeared to be coming close to a milestone.
- It turns out that Milchan, an international movie mogul who divides his time between Los Angeles and Israel, has been questioned under caution on several occasions at the Israeli Embassy in London. The police have prima facie evidence according to which Netanyahu used all his weight to convince British Jewish billionaire Len Blavatnik to acquire shares in Israeli Channel 10. A significant portion of those shares were held by Milchan in an investment gone bad, in which he stood to lose tens of millions of dollars. When Blavatnik acceded to Netanyahu's request and acquired the channel, which he still controls, it redeemed Milchan's failed investment. The acquisition by Blavatnik was worth a fortune to Milchan.
- Now that the police investigation rests on this factual base, it is likely that a serious indictment will be filed against the prime minister in the near future. Of note, the decision regarding an indictment is not made by the police, but by the attorney general. It must be emphasized that Blavatnik is not under suspicion for anything. He legally acquired the commercial television channel, period.
- This has been one of Netanyahu's worst weeks. Just prior to anticipated trips to South America and North America, starting Sept. 11, the noose of investigation is tightening around the neck of Israel's eternal prime minister. In addition to his increasingly bleak-looking position regarding File 1000, the investigation in File 2000 — involving Netanyahu's conversations with publisher Arnon Mozes for an alleged deal for positive media coverage — is also advancing. In addition, the submarine and naval vessel affair ratcheted up a notch, with another wave of arrests shaking up the Israeli military and political establishments. Netanyahu is currently not under suspicion in the submarine affair, but since the investigation has only recently gotten underway, and a large percentage of the suspects are close associates and advisers of Netanyahu, anything is possible.

- The long-standing mantra of Netanyahu's office and his fans — “There won't be anything, because there was nothing” — now seems divorced from reality. Netanyahu has no intention of vacating his seat willingly, however, and will fight for it with all the means at his disposal. One of his political rivals in the Likud told Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity, “Netanyahu won't hesitate to burn down the house over its inhabitants. His personal [political] survival is more important to him than the public good.”
- The submarine affair now threatens the Israeli defense establishment and is lifting the veil over the Israeli defense acquisition process itself, which is worth tens of billions of dollars. Netanyahu's former chief of staff David Sharan was arrested Sept. 3 on suspicion of accepting bribes. (Sharan had also served as senior aide to Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz.) Others arrested were Brig. Gen. (res.) Shai Brosh, the former commander of Shayetet 13, Israel's esteemed naval commando unit, and former minister Eliezer Sandberg, who is close to the Netanyahus.
- Thus one sees how media advisers, political pals and business middlemen are striding in lockstep to police interrogation rooms. All this is the result of evidence obtained from state witness Miki Ganor over the course of a month. Ganor had been the representative for the German concern ThyssenKrupp, from which Israel is purchasing Dolphin submarines.
- Amid all this, contacts are moving toward closure on a deal in which Israel will acquire another three Dolphins from Germany at a cost of billions. The Germans have already declared that if it emerges that the deal is tainted with corruption, it will be canceled. As of now, however, no corruption has been revealed on the German side. Meanwhile the Israeli side, or rather the Israel Police, is conducting its investigation under a heavy cloak of secrecy.
- To date, quite a number of the prime minister's close associates are under suspicion in the investigation. They include, in addition to Sharan and Sandberg, Netanyahu's lawyer and cousin David Shimron, former Netanyahu chief of staff Ari Harow and Avriel Bar-Yosef, the former deputy head of the National Security Council (to which Netanyahu had appointed him). Netanyahu continues to assert that he didn't know a thing, including that his cousin Shimron served as legal representation for ThyssenKrupp in Israel.
- The big question is this: Will the police succeed in proving that Netanyahu did know about Shimron's involvement in the billion-dollar deal? It was, after all, a deal that he, as prime minister, led. As of now, that question remains unanswered. Regardless, Netanyahu's position looks precarious on all fronts.
- If Netanyahu did know about Shimron's involvement with the submarines, he will face criminal charges in this affair as well. If he didn't know, it could cause a lot of people to wonder if such a person is sufficiently competent to lead the country. The submarine and naval vessel deal is viewed as a strategic transaction involving Israeli national security, and as such, it was administered and led by the prime minister himself. Responsibility for the deal was placed on his shoulders alone. “I didn't know” is an excuse that could extricate Netanyahu from criminal charges, but not from the public's blame.

**SUMMARY:** The big question is this: Will the police succeed in proving that Netanyahu did know about Shimron's involvement in the billion-dollar deal? It was, after all, a deal that he, as prime minister, led. As of now, that question remains unanswered. Regardless, Netanyahu's position looks precarious on all fronts. If Netanyahu did know about Shimron's involvement with the submarines, he will face criminal charges in this affair as well. If he didn't know, it could cause a lot of people to wonder if such a person is sufficiently competent to lead the country. The submarine and naval vessel deal is viewed as a strategic transaction involving Israeli national security, and as such, it was administered and led by the prime minister himself. Responsibility for the deal was placed on his shoulders alone. "I didn't know" is an excuse that could extricate Netanyahu from criminal charges, but not from the public's blame.

## **Russia's Moves on Hezbollah Expose How Trump's Mideast Policy Endangers Israel**

By Tzvi Barel, columnist at Ha'aretz

- **Russia's threat to veto the UN Security Council resolution renewing UNIFIL's mandate in Lebanon if it cited Hezbollah as a terrorist organization appears to reflect an approach that could undermine Israel's security interests. As Barak Ravid reported in Monday's Haaretz, it also attests to the fierce disagreements between Israel and Russia on proposed arrangements in Syria.**
- **Admittedly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov moved swiftly to reject this interpretation, saying, "We told the Israelis that if they have any worries about their security being impacted, there is no reason to worry, since we are committed to ensuring that this doesn't happen." But his statement probably didn't reassure Jerusalem.**
- **Israel and Russia have deep disagreements over the establishment of de-escalation zones in Syria – primarily over the presence of Iranian forces, or pro-Iranian forces like Hezbollah, near Israel's northeastern border, but also about Iran's presence elsewhere in Syria. Consequently, the defensive shield Russia provided for Hezbollah at the United Nations is being perceived as a diplomatic test of the seriousness of its reassuring statements about Israel.**
- **But it's worth recalling that the agreement on the de-escalation zones was obtained with America's consent, and it doesn't mandate the removal of either Iranian or Hezbollah troops. Russia and Iran agreed that some of the pro-Iranian forces stationed along Syria's borders with Jordan and Israel would be redeployed, and that Russian forces would supervise implementation of the truce in the southern de-escalation zone. Israel had several opportunities to voice objections to this agreement, both to the U.S. administration and to Russian President Vladimir Putin, but both great powers have interests that go beyond Israel's concerns.**
- **The fact is that Russia wants to secure a cease-fire covering all of Syria, an ambition Washington shares. And to achieve it, Russia must take Iran's interests into account, because Iran has become a full partner in managing the crisis in Syria.**
- **For Moscow, Hezbollah's deployment in southern Lebanon and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the Second Lebanon War of 2006, are marginal issues. In Russia's view, even if Hezbollah is violating the resolution, this doesn't detract from UNIFIL's authority to supervise its implementation or provide a reason to amend its wording, to which Israel consented when it passed in 2006.**
- **Incidentally, the proposed change in wording has no practical significance for Israel either, since even if Hezbollah isn't defined as a terrorist organization by the United Nations, Israel considers itself free to fight it by any means necessary.**

- **Russia views Hezbollah not as a terrorist organization, but as a legitimate political one. Nevertheless, it has turned a blind eye to, and even permitted, Israel's attacks on Hezbollah arms convoys from Syria to Lebanon. Herein lies the contradiction in Russia's stance: If Hezbollah isn't a terrorist organization, why is Moscow willing to let Israel attack its arms shipments?**
- **The answer can be found in the informal agreements reached between Israel and Russia as part of their security coordination in Syria, which is meant to ensure that Israeli and Russian jets don't attack each other in Syrian skies. In an interview with Amos Harel, outgoing air force commander Amir Eshel said Israel has conducted at least 100 air strikes in Syria to thwart Hezbollah arms shipments.**
- **These informal agreements also didn't stem from any great concern for Israel's security on Russia's part, but rather from an understanding of the situation in Syria and a pragmatic view that it was better to avoid aerial fights with Israel to ensure that Russia's air force could operate in Syria unhindered. If arms shipments to Hezbollah were disrupted as a result, that was a marginal price to pay for the strategic benefit.**
- **But Russia also has diplomatic interests that go beyond Syria. The chasm between the Kremlin and White House creates a new risk that Russia will try to torpedo any initiative, diplomatic or military, proposed by Washington. Russia's absolute control of the Syrian theater, coupled with America's departure from it, allow Russia freedom of operation both on the ground and in the international arena.**
- **Russia's threat at the United Nations over the Hezbollah issue attests to this new trend. Admittedly, there's no guarantee Russia would have agreed to change the resolution's wording even if Putin's relations with U.S. President Donald Trump were superb. But under the circumstances, it was an opportunity for Russia to demonstrate its ability to torpedo American policy in other theaters. This, and not the UN's definition of Hezbollah, is where the real threat to Israel's security interests lies, because it's becoming increasingly clear that when it comes to defending Israel's borders, though Washington can still provide advanced weaponry and intelligence, in the diplomatic arena Israel has lost an essential mediator – this time through no fault of its own.**
- **In the not so distant past, Israel could rely on American presidents to help it mobilize, or even to lead, international coalitions to prevent strategic threats to Israel, such as Iran's nuclear program. But Trump's behavior has made him a "hostile party" not only in Russia's eyes, but in those of other Western states, which won't rush to cooperate with him to foil threats.**
- **A no less important consequence is that Israel must now conduct diplomatic and strategic negotiations directly with Russia, thereby turning Moscow into a crucial partner in maintaining Israel's security interests, without Jerusalem being able to rely on American backing to impress the Kremlin. For the first time, an American president has pushed Israel into a situation where it must divide its strategic planning between two rival powers and even serve as a board piece in a complex game in which Russia, which is seeking to crush American prestige, is liable to play very roughly with regard to Israel's interests.**



**SUMMARY:** Russia's threat to veto the UN Security Council resolution renewing UNIFIL's mandate in Lebanon if it cited Hezbollah as a terrorist organization appears to reflect an approach that could undermine Israel's security interests. As Barak Ravid reported in Monday's Haaretz, it also attests to the fierce disagreements between Israel and Russia on proposed arrangements in Syria. Admittedly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov moved swiftly to reject this interpretation, saying, "We told the Israelis that if they have any worries about their security being impacted, there is no reason to worry, since we are committed to ensuring that this doesn't happen." But his statement probably didn't reassure Jerusalem. Israel and Russia have deep disagreements over the establishment of de-escalation zones in Syria – primarily over the presence of Iranian forces, or pro-Iranian forces like Hezbollah, near Israel's northeastern border, but also about Iran's presence elsewhere in Syria. Consequently, the defensive shield Russia provided for Hezbollah at the United Nations is being perceived as a diplomatic test of the seriousness of its reassuring statements about Israel.