



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, May 4

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News Excerpts

May 4, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Report: Trump to Ask IL to Withdraw from Parts of E. Jerusalem

The Trump administration will reportedly ask Israel to withdraw from four Arab neighborhoods in east Jerusalem, which will likely become the capital of a future Palestinian state, Israeli officials told The Jerusalem Post's sister publication Maariv on Thursday. The sources claimed Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman was told of the plans in meetings with the White House peace team in Washington last week. US officials categorically denied the report, speaking to The Jerusalem Post. President Donald Trump's plan has not yet been completed but has entered its final stages of development. According to the Israelis, the transfer of control over the neighborhoods – Jebel Mukabar, Isawiya, Shuafat and Abu Dis – was presented to Liberman as just one piece of the larger peace plan the administration has been working on.

i24 News

Abbas Reappointed Head of PLO Despite Antisemitic Comments

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Friday was reappointed by consensus as chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The widely expected reappointment came at the end of a four-day convention in Ramallah that saw the Palestinian National Council choose a new Executive Committee. The elected members of the most senior body of the PLO are veteran negotiator Saeb Erekat, legislator Hanan Ashrawi and Azzam Al-Ahmad. Abbas's election comes after he incurred worldwide condemnation for remarks he made in a speech linking the role of Jews in the banking sector to the Holocaust. See also, ["Abbas re-elected PLO head amid furor over anti-Semitic speech" \(TOI\)](#)

Reuters

Israeli Court Convicts Arab Poet of Incitement

An Israeli court on Thursday convicted an Arab poet of online incitement to terrorism for using a poem as the soundtrack to images of Palestinians in violent confrontations with Israeli troops. Dareen Tatour, 36, posted to Facebook and YouTube a video of herself reading out her poem "Resist My People, Resist", accompanying footage of masked Palestinian youths throwing stones and firebombs at Israeli soldiers. It was published in October 2015 during a wave of deadly Palestinian street attacks on Israelis. The Israeli-Arab poet was arrested a few days later, and prosecutors said her post was a call for violence. Tatour, who denied the charges, said her poem was misunderstood by the Israeli authorities. See also, ["Dareen Tatour: Israeli Arab poet convicted of incitement" \(BBC\)](#)

CNBC

Iran Warns: We'll Not Renegotiate Nuclear Deal

Iran's foreign minister said on Thursday U.S. demands to change its 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers were unacceptable as a deadline set by President Donald Trump for Europeans to "fix" the deal loomed. Trump has warned that unless European allies rectify the "terrible flaws" in the international accord by May 12, he will refuse to extend U.S. sanctions relief for the oil-producing Islamic Republic. "Iran will not renegotiate what was agreed years ago and has been implemented," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a video message posted on YouTube.

Netanyahu Takes 5 Days to Delete Fake News Post

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took down a Facebook post erroneously accusing fans of the Arab-Israeli soccer club Bnei Sakhnin of whistling and booing during a minute of silence in memory of the 10 teenagers who drowned in southern Israel last week. The prime minister deleted the post on Thursday, five days after posting it. Netanyahu based his post on a story on the Arutz Sheva news website, but an inquiry found that the accusation was baseless and that the team's fans had neither whistled nor booed during the moment of silence. On Sunday, the day after a match between Bnei Sakhnin and Hapoel Ra'anana, Netanyahu wrote on his Facebook page, "It's a disgrace and a shame. I expect of all leaders, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, to strongly condemn this shameful behavior." See also, "[Netanyahu removes divisive post against soccer team](#)" (*Ynet News*)

Ynet News

Sharon Afek Becomes First Openly Gay Major General in IDF

The Military Advocate General, Brig. Gen. Sharon Afek, will be promoted to the rank of major general, making him the first openly gay IDF officer to hold that rank. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman has decided to adopt the recommendation of IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot to promote Afek and extend his term to five years with the option of extending it further by another year, meaning he will remain in his role until at least 2020. The defense minister determined that the Military Advocate General, who is promoted to the rank of brigadier general upon entering office, will be promoted to major general after three years in the position. See also, "[Sharon Afek, openly gay IDF officer, promoted to Major General](#)" (*JPost*)

Times of Israel

Giro d'Italia Bike Race Set for Historic Ride through Jerusalem

The world's best bike riders were slated to gather in Jerusalem Friday for the start of the Giro d'Italia cycling race, sweating through unseasonably hot conditions to kick off Israel's historic hosting of the event. The time trials for the world-famous bike race up and down the capital's hilly streets will mark the first time a cycling Grand Tour will ever be held outside Europe and is being touted as the largest sporting event ever hosted by the Jewish state. A total of 176 cyclists from 22 teams, including an Israeli delegation for the first time, will take part in the time trials, starting at 1:30 p.m. The 9.7-kilometer (6-mile) route will take riders near the Old City and some of Jerusalem's holiest sites, but organizers have been careful to avoid any politically sensitive areas.

Ynet News

Alibaba Founder in a Visit Vows to Keep Investing in Israel

Chinese business magnate and chairman of Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, said during his visit to Israel that his company will continue to invest in the country. In a conversation with students at Tel Aviv University, Ma said he considers Israel to be one of the three countries eligible to house Alibaba's new offices. "We invested in five companies here in recent years and I think we will continue to invest here," he said. Ma was awarded with an honorary doctorate from the university. He told the students that Alibaba is considering expanding its investments in Israel. "We considered Israel among three countries in which to establish offices. We invested in five different companies here, and I am being accompanied by 40 senior managers. I believe we will continue to invest here," he said. See also, "[Israel is One of the Three Countries Alibaba is Considering for Expansion, Says Jack Ma](#)" (*Calcalist*)

Israelis Deserve to Know: Is Netanyahu Pursuing War with Iran?

Sometimes, war is inevitable. Sometimes, in the event of an existential threat, there's no escape from initiating a war. But one of the lessons we have learned from the wars of the past is that playing with fire is dangerous. Anyone who decides to provoke the other side should first make the risks, the intentions, the goal and the price clear to our side.

By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- The Mossad should be applauded for its intelligence achievement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should be applauded for his presentation. While we Israelis weren't exactly surprised to hear that the Iranians had lied, the findings play a significant part in the propaganda war waged by the Israeli government.
- We're not the only ones. The Obama administration, as well as the leaders of Europe, Russia and China, assumed the Iranians were lying when they said their nuclear project was of a peaceful nature. If they didn't know what the Iranians were really building in the Fordow nuclear facility, they wouldn't have gone to so much trouble to reach an agreement.
- The world powers chose to pretend they believe Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's lies. They examined the alternatives and reached the conclusion the agreement is the lesser of two evils. The French president and the German chancellor visited the White House last week for an urgent round of talks with the US president. Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel and Donald Trump knew what Israel had gleaned from the Iranian archive. Nevertheless, each side stuck to its stance—the Europeans in favor of the agreement, Trump against the agreement. By May 12, Trump will likely order a US withdrawal from the agreement. What happens the day after depends mainly on the Iranians.
- When Netanyahu completed his beautiful presentation in English, including the props, and when he finished summarizing it in Hebrew, I expected him to turn to his voters—the citizens of the State of Israel—and share his plans with them. Is he pursuing a war with Iran? If he is, Israelis are entitled to know about it before purchasing all-inclusive packages for a summer vacation in Turkey.
- The World Cup is about to kick off in a month and a half from now, this time in Russia. Israel didn't qualify for the games, but it has its own way of participating in them. Both in 1982 and in 2006, Israel got involved in a war during the World Cup. It's quite possible we are headed to a third war. Two Syrian army bases, which are used by Iranian forces as well, were attacked from the air Sunday night. One near the city of Aleppo, the other near Hama. Like in the previous strike, at the T-4 airbase in northern Syria, there were reports of Iranian casualties.
- While official Israel didn't take responsibility for the attack, an anonymous source went to the trouble of telling the New York Times that 200 long-range Iranian missiles had been destroyed in the strike. If it's true, we should be happy: We would rather see Iranian missiles exploding in Syria than on Israeli territory. But the question remains: Is Israel pursuing a war with Iran?

- The strike was followed by public threats from Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman: Israel won't let Iran establish military presence in Syria. If Tel Aviv is attacked, Tehran will be attacked.
- The rhetoric left no room for doubt: Israel is stepping up its demands from Iran. At first, the red line was shipments of advanced weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Then, the red line turned geographical: Israel won't allow the Iranian-backed militias to approach the Israeli border. The wording of the threats and the attacks on Iranian facilities located hundreds of kilometers from the Golan Heights border point to a change in policy: Israel considers any Iranian military presence in Syria a red line.
- There is absolutely no chance Iran will take the hint and pull its forces out of Syria. There is absolutely no chance Iran will apologize for its past lies and give up its nuclear project altogether. These are unachievable goals. So we must once again inquire about the meaning of these initiated provocations: Is Israel pursuing a war with Iran?
- Let there be no misunderstanding: Iranian military presence in a country bordering Israel is major trouble. It calls for Israeli action in every possible way—diplomatically, covertly and militarily—as long as we know what we want to achieve, how to achieve it and at what cost. Any price, Lieberman says in his speeches. In a war on Iran, he is willing to pay any price. Before we chant “go Lieberman” and “let's go to Tehran,” we should remember what we're talking about: Iran—through Hezbollah, the Assad army and the militias it operates—is capable of launching tens of thousands of missiles at the Israeli home front from Lebanon and Syria. While Israel has the military ability to deal with this threat, its solutions are partial. The price we stand to pay in deaths, property damage and a paralyzed economy for many weeks will be heavy, possibly heavier than in previous wars. The price that would be paid by civilians on the other side will be even heavier. Will Iran disappear? That's very unlikely.
- Israel would like to control the process, to manage the conflict with the Iranians the way it decides. Unfortunately, neither player can control these types of conflicts. An overly accurate shell could send the sides into an all-out war. We all remember Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's words of regret over the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers that led to the Second Lebanon War. We all remember the artillery shell that hit Kafr Qana in 1996, immediately eliminating the achievements of [Operation Grapes of Wrath](#).
- Here's another example: Senior Hezbollah commander Jihad Mughniyeh was assassinated in Syria in December 2014, along with four or five other Hezbollah officers. The organization retaliated by firing seven Kornet missiles at a Givati convoy, killing two soldiers: Captain Yohai Kalangel and Sergeant Dor Nini. The IDF contained the event. Had 10 soldiers been killed, Israel would have had no other choice but to launch a third war in Lebanon.
- Sometimes, war is inevitable. Sometimes, in the event of an existential threat, there's no escape from initiating a war. But one of the lessons we have learned from the wars of the past is that playing with fire is dangerous. Anyone who decides to provoke the other side should first of all make the risks, the intention, the goal and the price clear to our side, to the Israeli public. The situation we are currently facing is somewhat similar to the Zafit Stream disaster. The Israelis are entering the stream with a sense of confidence. They're certain that everything will be okay. Someone at the top examined the risks and promised them that they will suffer no harm. And then comes the flood.

SUMMARY: Sometimes, war is inevitable. Sometimes, in the event of an existential threat, there's no escape from initiating a war. But one of the lessons we have learned from the wars of the past is that playing with fire is dangerous. Anyone who decides to provoke the other side should first of all make the risks, the intention, the goal and the price clear to our side, to the Israeli public. The situation we are currently facing is somewhat similar to the Zafit Stream disaster. The Israelis are entering the stream with a sense of confidence. They're certain that everything will be okay. Someone at the top examined the risks and promised them that they will suffer no harm. And then comes the flood.

Five Days of Fear for the Middle East - And for the World

By Ilan Goldenberg, part of the U.S. team during the -2014 Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

- In the age of Trump, the news cycle moves so quickly that important stories are missed or instantly forgotten, making it nearly impossible to differentiate the drama from the important. Amongst the cacophony, not enough attention is being paid to a critical five days that are upcoming in mid-May that could shape the Middle East's trajectory for the next few years - and impact the future of nuclear competition in the region, the return of ISIS, and an inflamed Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- First, on May 12 or sometime shortly before, President Donald Trump will decide on whether to continue to waive sanctions on Iran or, as looks increasingly likely, walk away from the nuclear agreement with Iran. This decision won't trigger an immediate conflict, instead setting off a slow motion crisis that will play out over a number of years. We do not know precisely how Iran will respond. Despite rosy claims that it will stay in the nuclear agreement, and try to separate Europe from the United States, it appears increasingly likely that Iran will feel the need to respond to political pressure at home from deal opponents and will not just sit on its hands.
- At the same time, Iran has spent 30 years methodically building its nuclear program not by dashing as quickly as it could to a bomb, but instead by crawling, slowly making progress while trying to not provoke a major international response. Tehran is likely to follow the same approach restarting some elements of its nuclear program while taking its time.
- International sanctions will return with mixed results. Certainly, many companies will quickly pull out of Iran for fear of losing the U.S. market, but there will also be significant political opposition in Europe and from China and Russia to the U.S. withdrawal. And China in particular is likely to push back; it's not about to start reducing its purchases of Iranian oil which played such a critical role in imposing the type of crippling sanctions regime that brought Iran to its knees in 2012 and 2013.
- Meanwhile, it will be nearly impossible to bring Iran back to the negotiating table with the U.S. for years to come, as its leaders will conclude that there is no point in concluding agreements with the United States. And so we will be left with a world where Iran inches towards a nuclear weapon, does not face sufficient pressure, and has no interest in negotiations. That means in a few years, the U.S. will be left with a stark choice: military action or living with a nuclear-armed Iran.
- Such a momentous decision would be enough to absorb any administration but May 12 is also happens to be Election Day in Iraq – a critical milestone that, if not properly managed, could create a new opening for ISIS. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has been a good partner for the United States, playing a vital role in stabilizing Iraq and pushing back ISIS, while pursuing a non-sectarian agenda that tries to knit Iraq back together.
- But if he were to be replaced by a leader who does not see the point of ruling with an inclusive approach, and pursues instead a sectarian Shia agenda, we may see a return to the days of 2013 under Nouri al-Maliki where Iraq's Sunnis became so alienated and desperate that they turned to ISIS. As has been the case since the fall of Saddam, the Iraqi political system is highly

fractured; no party on its own will win a governing majority. After the elections, Iraq will likely face a period of prolonged uncertainty as the parties pursue delicate negotiations. In the past, this process required serious diplomatic engagement from the United States to help break the deadlock as well as tacit agreement from the two most influential outside powers in Iraq – Washington and Tehran.

- Will the Trump administration be ready and willing to play this role? In the aftermath of an American exit from the JCPOA, will either Iran or the United States be willing to work together to support such a compromise? Or will the inevitable result of Iran pursuing a friendly, sectarian Shi'a government against an increasingly hostile Trump administration, committed to pushing Iranian influence out of Iraq, be military escalation?
- Such a dynamic could become dangerous - leaving Iraq in a prolonged state of political paralysis, and opening the door for extremist groups to take advantage, as they have done before. And even as all of this is going on, two days later on May 14, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump will be in Israel to participate in a ceremony marking the symbolic opening of the American embassy in Jerusalem.
- The situation between Israelis and Palestinians could not be more delicate. Tensions in Gaza have escalated in recent months with weekly protests that have left more than 20 Palestinians dead. The event is taking place on the 70th anniversary of the declaration of independence of the State of Israel – a highly symbolic day for both sides, one which is referred to by the Palestinians as the Nakba, or "the catastrophe." And to top matters off, the embassy move occurs the day before the start of Ramadan – always a politically charged time, given the religious undertones of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- The embassy move may pass without significant violence - just as President Trump's announcement back in December did not trigger the type of violence and instability in the Middle East that many had feared. Or it could explode - and we could find ourselves in the middle of a new war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Nobody knows, but it is irresponsible for the United States to be dumping gasoline on this potential fire. A toxic witches' brew of political instability and further potential violence is stewing in the Middle East.
- Such a flood of huge events would be challenging for any American administration to manage, but, unfortunately the Trump administration - with its massive vacancies in key positions across the Middle East, and undisciplined and erratic policy process -seems particularly ill-equipped to deal with these problems, many of whom are of its own doing.

SUMMARY: Iran has spent 30 years methodically building its nuclear program not by dashing as quickly as it could to a bomb, but instead by crawling, slowly making progress while trying to not provoke a major international response. Tehran is likely to follow the same approach restarting some elements of its nuclear program while taking its time. International sanctions will return with mixed results. Certainly, many companies will quickly pull out of Iran for fear of losing the U.S. market, but there will also be significant political opposition in Europe and from China and Russia to the U.S. withdrawal. And China in particular is likely to push back; it's not about to start reducing its purchases of Iranian oil which played such a critical role in imposing the type of crippling sanctions regime that brought Iran to its knees in 2012 and 2013