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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, May 8*

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# News Excerpts

May 8, 2018

Ha'aretz

## **Estimation: Trump Will Announce U.S. Exit from Iran Deal Tonight**

U.S. President Donald Trump will announce he is pulling out of the landmark nuclear accord with Iran, European diplomats told the New York Times hours ahead of the president's highly-anticipated decision. According to diplomats, Trump had always wanted to scrub the deal, but was convinced there was no viable alternative by his former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. However, the two were replaced with John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, two of the deal's most vocal critics. According to one diplomat with close knowledge of attempts to try to convince Trump to remain committed to the agreement, the chances of such a scenario were "very small." See also, [\*"Trump Is Expected to Leave Iran Deal, Allies Say" \(New York Times\)\*](#)

Reuters

## **Paraguay to Move its Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem**

Paraguay will move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem by the end of May, a Paraguay government spokesman and the Israeli foreign ministry said on Monday, following the United States and Guatemala. The status of Jerusalem is one of the thorniest disputes between Israel, which says the city is its eternal and indivisible capital, and the Palestinians, who want the eastern part of the city as the capital of their own future state. "Paraguay President Horacio Cartes plans to come to Israel by the end of the month to open an embassy in Jerusalem," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon said in a statement. See also, [\*"After US and Guatemala, Paraguay to move its embassy to Jerusalem" \(Jerusalem Post\)\*](#)

Times of Israel

## **Abbas Urges Latin America Not to Follow US On Embassy**

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas urged Latin American countries Monday night not to emulate the controversial US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem. The United States is pushing ahead with plans to relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv on May 14, a move welcomed by Israel that has sparked major protests by Palestinians, who seek East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. "We hope that some countries across Latin America won't go moving their embassies to Jerusalem, because that is against international law," Abbas said during a meeting with Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas. See also, [\*"Abbas urges Latin America not to follow US example on embassy" \(Ynet\)\*](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Minister: We'll 'Eliminate' Assad if He Let's Iran Operate in Syria**

Israel will "eliminate" Syrian President Bashar Assad if he continues to let Iran operate from Syria, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said Monday. Steinitz told Israeli news site ynet that Assad needs to know it will be his end if he allows Iran to turn Syria into military base in order to attack Israel. "It's unacceptable that Assad sits quietly in his palace and rebuild his regime while allowing Syria to be turned into a base for attacks on Israel," he said. Steinitz later clarified his comments reflect his personal opinions. Israeli defense officials are bracing for the possibility of an Iranian revenge attack from Syria in the near future, in the form of rocket and missile launches at northern Israel.

## **Iran President Warns of 'Problems' as Trump Decision Looms**

Iran's president on Tuesday warned the country could face "some problems" ahead of President Donald Trump's decision on whether to pull out of its nuclear deal with world powers. Without directly naming Trump, Rouhani's remarks at a petroleum conference in Tehran represented the first official Iranian comment on the US president's overnight tweet that he'd make an announcement on the deal Tuesday. "It is possible that we will face some problems for two or three months, but we will pass through this," Rouhani said. Rouhani also stressed Iran wants to keep "working with the world and constructive engagement with the world." That appeared to be a nod to Europe, which has struck a series of business deals with Iran since the landmark 2015 nuclear deal."

Jerusalem Post

## **Agriculture Terror in the Gaza Area Leaves Farmers Helpless**

Helium balloons outfitted with flammable materials were sent by Palestinians from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory, igniting seven separate fires in Israel. Firefighters were able to put the fires out, but a wheat field situated between Kfar Aza and Kibbutz Mefalsim caught fire, suffering tens of thousands of shekels in damages. A fire was also lit in the Be'eri forest. No injuries were reported from either fire. The fires were put out by the firefighters and local residents were able to return to their daily routines. Farmers complained that this loss of wheat, mere days before the harvest, will cost them tens of thousands of shekels in damages. Ofer Liberman from Kibbutz Nir Am explained to Maariv that he feels "helpless when tackling the terror kites" because there are thousands of acres that are potentially vulnerable. "I can't keep a tractor in all that space just to put fires out," said Liberman. "I don't want to imagine what might happen if a combine harvester operator is trapped there during a fire," he said.

Jerusalem Post

## **Square near U.S. embassy in Jerusalem to be named for Trump**

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat announced his intention to formally name the square near the US embassy site the "United States Square in honor of President Donald Trump," the Jerusalem Press Office released on Tuesday. An official event with American dignitaries will be held in the future to celebrate the naming. "This is the way in which Jerusalem returns love to the president and residents of the United States who stand by the state of Israel," said the mayor. "President Trump decided to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish people, stand on the side of historical truth and do the right thing." Located at the junction of David Flusser Street and Kfar Etzion Street, the square was formally green lighted to get a new name a year ago by the naming committee of Jerusalem.

Ynet News

## **Elor Azaria Released from Prison after 9 Months**

Former IDF soldier Elor Azaria, who was convicted of manslaughter after shooting dead a neutralized terrorist in Hebron, was released from prison after serving a nine-months sentence on Tuesday morning, two days early. Azaria, whose original release date was May 10, asked to be released two days early so he could attend his brother's wedding on Wednesday. Commanders at Prison 4 in Tzrifin decided to grant his request after he met the terms that allow early release under such circumstances. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was asked by reporters about the release before leaving for a short trip to Cyprus, said, "I'm glad this event has come to an end."

## **How Israelis See the World**

By Yossi Klein Halevi, senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute

- In 2002, when much of the international community was severely criticizing Israel for its tough military response to the wave of Palestinian suicide bombings known as the Second Intifada, the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, asked with rhetorical exasperation, “Can Israel be right and the whole world wrong?”

Most Israelis would have surely answered: Of course.

- After all, only two years earlier, Israel had offered to withdraw from virtually the entire West Bank and Gaza. In return, it received the worst wave of terrorism in its history. That Israeli narrative of why the peace process failed transformed Israel’s politics for a generation, leading to the near-total collapse of the left as a viable political force. Meanwhile, much of the world ignored Israel’s spurned overture and continued to fault the Jewish state for the continuing occupation it had sought to end.
- Today, we Israelis are experiencing another moment of radical disconnect with much of world opinion. Every Friday for the past several weeks, the Islamist Hamas has mobilized tens of thousands of demonstrators, who have embarked on a “march of return” toward Israel. The initial goal is to destroy the fence and cross Israel’s internationally recognized border. The long-term goal is to demographically destroy the Jewish-majority state through a “return” of descendants of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war.
- In response, Israel has used live fire against the demonstrators, killing dozens and injuring over a thousand in the last month of protests.
- Israel has been fiercely condemned by United Nations officials, European leaders and human rights organizations, who insist that the Israel Defense Forces is, once again, resorting to disproportionate force. But for Israelis, the weekly demonstrations — which are accompanied by firebombs and burning kites dispatched into Israeli fields and breakthroughs by small groups of Hamas members into Israeli territory — are an intolerable threat.
- Israelis view these demonstrations as part of a wider assault that includes continual attempts, along every border, to penetrate the country’s defenses — whether through tunnels from Gaza, periodic waves of missiles and rockets fired from Gaza and Lebanon and, most worrying of all, threats from the growing Iranian military presence in Syria. Those assaults are part of an increasingly successful Iranian plan to surround Israel’s borders with what Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has called “the golden ring in the chain of resistance.”
- While the world sees images that confirm the Jewish state as the region’s Goliath, many of us regard our country as Goliath and David simultaneously. In our conflict with the Palestinians, we are the overwhelming power. But in our conflict with much of the Arab and Muslim worlds, we are vulnerable. Israel has in the past been the underdog. And if we lessen our alertness, we could be again. The presence of terrorist enclaves on almost every one of Israel’s borders helps explain the determination of the I.D.F. to prevent demonstrators from trying to break through the fence.
- But that resolute posture creates another strategic threat for Israel. The very tactics that keep us relatively safe in one of the world’s most dangerous regions are undermining our moral

credibility abroad. This, then, is Israel's dilemma: Can it maintain its deterrence in the Middle East without fatally undermining its position in the West?

- One of the lowest moments in the Israeli disconnect with world opinion occurred in 2010, when the Turkish ship, Mavi Marmara, tried to break the Israeli sea blockade of Gaza. Israeli commandos boarded the ship and in the ensuing skirmish, 10 Islamist activists were killed and several dozen wounded, along with 10 wounded Israeli soldiers. Israel argued that enforcing its sea blockade was essential in preventing Iranian missiles from reaching Hamas. Moreover, insisted Israel, its soldiers were in mortal danger from armed passengers. But the international consensus against Israel was devastating: Israel had killed supposedly peaceful humanitarian aid workers, and its blockade against Gaza was a war crime.
- A year later, the United Nations released the surprising results of its inquiry into the incident. While it faulted Israel for excessive force, it acknowledged that soldiers faced organized violence. Most surprising of all, the investigation supported both Israel's right to board the ship and to impose the blockade as acts of self-defense consistent with international law — the first time in memory that the United Nations had upheld an Israeli position. Yet today those findings are almost entirely forgotten, and Israel once again stands accused of maintaining an immoral blockade of Gaza.
- The moral dissonance between Israel and the international community only strengthens the Israeli hard right, which argues, in the words of an old Israeli song, that “the whole world is against us.” Disproportionate criticism — for example, the fact that Israel is criticized in United Nations forums more often than all the other countries in the world combined — reinforces that isolationist mind-set. When critics trivialize a threat to Israel's border as “peaceful demonstrations,” Israelis conclude that world opinion is either obtuse or hostile. The result is a dismissal of any criticism.
- By contrast, when Israelis sense a willingness in the international community to consider their concerns, they tend to respond with greater openness to the moral critiques of outsiders. The Oslo peace process was born in part because of the changed atmosphere toward Israel in the early 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had led the diplomatic campaign against Israel, resulted in numerous countries establishing relations with the Jewish state.
- The promise of the State of Israel to the Jewish people was to end its seemingly eternal otherness and restore it to the community of nations. Part of remaining faithful to that vision is to heed the warnings of outsiders, especially friends, and not withdraw in bitter isolation. But no less important for the fulfillment of Israel's promise is to ensure that those who seek to destroy it are kept from breaching its borders. How to balance those two imperatives defines the challenge facing Israel today.

**SUMMARY:** While the world sees images that confirm the Jewish state as the region's Goliath, many of us regard our country as Goliath and David simultaneously. In our conflict with the Palestinians, we are the overwhelming power. But in our conflict with much of the Arab and Muslim worlds, we are vulnerable. Israel has in the past been the underdog. And if we lessen our alertness, we could be again. The presence of terrorist enclaves on almost every one of Israel's borders helps explain the determination of the I.D.F. to prevent demonstrators from trying to break through the fence.

## **Bibi's Fix It or Nix It Moment on Iran Is Finally Here**

*After nearly a decade of trying, Netanyahu is finally about to see the U.S. administration adopt his doctrine toward Iran. But can it work?*

By Anshel Pfeffer, Columnist at Ha'aretz

- Benjamin Netanyahu is so excited that he is cutting short his three-way summit in Cyprus and flying back so he can be in Israel when the Iran deal announcement comes through. For someone who loves summits as much as Bibi does, this is big.
- Whatever U.S. President Donald Trump announces on Tuesday, it is one of Netanyahu's proudest moments. To use the phrase he has coined, this is Bibi's fix it or nix it moment.
- From the moment he returned to power in 2009, Netanyahu has sought not only to put the Iranian nuclear issue at the top of the global agenda, but to persuade Israel's biggest ally – the world's only superpower – to adopt his tough attitude toward Iran. Whatever course Trump will embark upon Tuesday, whether or not he pulls out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action altogether and announces new sanctions, it will no longer be Barack Obama's diplomacy-focused Iran deal.
- It will almost certainly be something much tougher toward Tehran. Even if Netanyahu does not get all he is hoping for, he will thank Trump effusively and declare victory. This will be a new Iran deal, or no-deal, as Netanyahu has always tried to frame it. One where the Iranian regime is eternally suspected of trying to develop nuclear weapons and has to work much harder to earn an easing of the sanctions.
- Netanyahu has been working on changing the American approach toward Iran since his first White House meeting with Obama in May 2009. Now, nine years and one president later, he is about to get what he asked for. The U.S. administration is adopting the Netanyahu Doctrine.
- Contrary to popular belief, Netanyahu did not seek war with Iran. He sincerely believed that a much tougher agreement whereby Iran would first dismantle nearly all its uranium and plutonium programs before sanctions are lifted, and accept long-term limitations – much longer than those set out in the JCPOA – was possible.
- To do this, he wanted the Americans and Europeans to both drive a much harder bargain and not make do with Obama's formulation that "all options are on the table" – presenting instead a truly credible military option. That doesn't mean that, like his colleague during the years of negotiations of the so-called P5+1 world powers, then-Defense Minister Ehud Barak, he thought military strikes on Iran's nuclear installations were a desirable option. Netanyahu is risk-averse and always has been. Which is why Barak finally gave up on him and retired from public life in 2013. He realized that, under Netanyahu, he was not about to get a last chance at 70 to lead Israel in war.
- The Netanyahu Doctrine was tried out in a smaller scale on the Palestinians. Under Netanyahu, Israel has steadfastly refused to make any concessions to the Palestinians until the Palestinians make concessions of their own – not just any major shift in the diplomatic process, but even relatively minor concessions (recommended by senior Israeli army generals) such as allowing

workers in from the Gaza Strip, or reducing the entrance of Israeli troops to Palestinians cities in the West Bank.

- Has it worked? That depends whether you consider a tired and largely docile Palestinian population, with an ineffective and split leadership, an accomplishment. Now it seems the Netanyahu Doctrine is about to be finally tested on a grand scale.
- Netanyahu's belief has deepened in recent months as the Iranian economy has teetered on the brink of meltdown, complete with a collapse of its currency, the Rial, runs on the banks and widespread demonstrations. The Iranians can't afford new sanctions, much less fight a war, and Netanyahu is convinced they will be back at the negotiating table before long, prepared to sign a much tougher deal in return for sanctions relief.
- After Tuesday's great moment of victory for Bibi, it will remain to be seen over the next weeks and months if his doctrine works. If, despite the expected new sanctions, the Iranians do not immediately pull out of the agreement themselves and try to stick to it, without renewing large-scale uranium enrichment and escalating the situation in Syria, it will be a win for Netanyahu. He will claim Iran is imposing the JCPOA's limitations on itself, for fear of military action and without receiving anything in return.
- But if Trump's decision precipitates a historic split between the United States and its European allies, who will come up with a package of incentives for Iran, he will have only succeeded in driving a strategic wedge into the Western alliance. Worse, if pulling out of the JCPOA leads Iran to swiftly renew its nuclear development program and precipitates war, the Netanyahu Doctrine will be proved a failure.

**SUMMARY:** Contrary to popular belief, Netanyahu did not seek war with Iran. He sincerely believed that a much tougher agreement whereby Iran would first dismantle nearly all its uranium and plutonium programs before sanctions are lifted, and accept long-term limitations – much longer than those set out in the JCPOA – was possible. To do this, he wanted the Americans and Europeans to both drive a much harder bargain and not make do with Obama's formulation that "all options are on the table" – presenting instead a truly credible military option. That doesn't mean that, like his colleague during the years of negotiations of the so-called P5+1 world powers, then-Defense Minister Ehud Barak, he thought military strikes on Iran's nuclear installations were a desirable option. Netanyahu is risk-averse and always has been. Which is why Barak finally gave up on him and retired from public life in 2013. He realized that, under Netanyahu, he was not about to get a last chance at 70 to lead Israel in war.