



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, July 5

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News Excerpts

July 5, 2018

Ha'aretz

EU Slams Demolition of West Bank Bedouin Village

The European Union on Thursday criticized the planned Israeli demolition of the Bedouin community at Khan al-Ahmar in the West Bank. The EU said the demolition, "together with plans for new settlement construction for Israelis in the same area, exacerbate threats to the viability of the two-state solution and further undermine prospects for a lasting peace." Israeli bulldozers arrived on Wednesday morning at Khan al-Ahmar as clashes broke out. Eleven people were arrested and dozens of Palestinians were reportedly wounded. The expulsion of several dozen Bedouin families from Khan al-Ahmar is seen as enabling expansion of the settlement of Kfar Adumim.

Times of Israel

Defense Min Prepares to Implement Law Cutting PA Funds

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman announced Tuesday the establishment of a task force to combat terror financing and track payments by the Palestinian Authority to convicted terrorists and their families. The body, to be known as the National Bureau for Counter Terror Financing, will be tasked with implementing a new law slashing the equivalent amount of the payments from tax revenues Israel collects for the PA. The bipartisan law was passed Monday and resembles US legislation known as the Taylor Force Act.

Ha'aretz

Erekat: Israel Breaking Law, US Acting Like Real-Estate Firm

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said that Israel was acting as if it was "above the law," violating international agreements and blasted the US, saying that the administration was acting like a real-estate firm. Erekat said that Israel's decision to cut funds to Palestinian prisoners was tantamount to shutting down the Palestinian Authority, and that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, along with the Trump administration are trying to dictate their peace terms to the Palestinian.

Ha'aretz

PM Says MKs May Visit Temple Mount Every Three Months

Knesset members can resume visiting the Temple Mount on a regular basis, as long as they don't do so more than once every three months and coordinate their visits with the police in advance, Netanyahu has told Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, Israeli television reported Tuesday. For the past three years, Netanyahu has greatly restricted MKs' access to the temple complex, under an agreement Israel reached with Jordan via American mediation. The deal was reached following a wave of Palestinian attacks in Jerusalem in 2014 and 2015, which were spurred by claims that Israel planned to change the status quo at the site.

Times of Israel

Poll: Gantz Could Make Left Competitive, or Break it

Ex-IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz may be the most popular candidate on the Israeli center-left — and he hasn't even announced an intention to run. A poll published in the daily Yedioth Ahronoth on Wednesday found that Gantz would draw some 24 Knesset seats if he ran at the head of the Zionist Union faction, second only to the ruling Likud party at 30. If he founded a new party, it would crush the Zionist Union, the poll found. Gantz's party would take 14 seats, in third place after Likud's 29 and Yesh Atid's 15, while an Avi Gabbay-led Zionist Union would come in fourth with 10.

Reuters

Poll: Palestinians Favor Barghouti as Abbas Successor

Marwan Barghouti, a Palestinian uprising leader jailed for life by Israel, would win most votes if an election were held to find a successor for 82-year-old President Mahmoud Abbas, a survey released on Wednesday found. Thirty percent of respondents named Barghouti, a member of Abbas' Fatah faction whom an Israeli court handed five life sentenced for murder in 2004, as their favorite to replace the president. Israel accuses Barghouti, 59, of masterminding attacks by Fatah's armed wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Seen as a pragmatist, he enjoys strong grassroots support and has good relations with all factions, including with Islamist group Hamas. The next most popular candidate was Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Islamist faction Hamas, with 23 percent support.

Ha'aretz

Bill Advances for Housing in E. Jerusalem's 'City of David'

A bill backed by the City of David Foundation, a right-wing group better known as Elad, that would enable housing to be erected in areas zoned for national parks within municipal boundaries was approved on Wednesday by the Knesset Interior and Environment Committee, despite objections voiced by Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit. It will now go to the Knesset plenum for its first of three votes. If enacted, the law would enable homes to be built in the City of David national park, an archaeological site where the ancient city of Jerusalem was built. The area of the park houses thousands of Palestinians and hundreds of Jews – almost all of the latter being associated with Elad. Aside from running the archaeological dig, Elad is also striving to populate the neighborhood with Jews.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Women Rally in Solidarity With Gaza Women's March

A group of about 50 Israeli activists gathered and marched in solidarity on Israel's side of the Gaza border Tuesday evening during the first planned women's march of the ongoing Gaza protests. Standing Together organizes Jews and Arabs around campaigns for peace, equality and social justice, and the group co-organized Tuesday's solidarity event with a group of residents from the Gaza border communities called Other Voice.

Survey: Israelis Love Trump and Want US Jews to Stay Quiet

By Chemi Shalev, Columnist, Ha'aretz

- The origin of the phrase “In God We Trust” is in the fourth stanza of “The Star Spangled Banner.” During the Civil War, the United States Mint began engraving the motto on its coins, testament to the justice of the Northern cause against the rebellious South. Close to a century later, on July 30, 1956, at the height of the Cold War and in response to “godless communism,” President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the law that turned “In God We Trust” into the official motto of the United States. Since then, it has appeared on all the bills produced by the U.S. Treasury’s Bureau of Engraving and Printing.
- A special Haaretz poll conducted by Dialog in honor of the 242nd Independence Day of the United States finds that if America puts its trust in God, Israel puts its trust in America. A whopping 84 percent of the Israeli public believes that if the country faced an existential military crisis, the United States would come to its aid. Confidence that Uncle Sam is a friend indeed for a friend in need spans all sectors of the Israeli public, including, to a lesser extent, Israeli Arabs. For a nation schooled in slogans such as “a people who dwell alone,” “all the world is against us” and “If I am not for myself, who will be?,” the Israeli trust in the United States is both extraordinary and remarkable.
- A substantial majority of the Israeli public also believes that its alliance with the United States is eternal and will withstand the tests of time. 62 percent of Israelis believe the special relationship between the two countries will endure, compared to only 24 percent who fear it may weaken or collapse. Confidence in the U.S. is also shared across the spectrum, including Israeli Arabs, though they may see the strength of the alliance in a negative light. Only the ultra-Orthodox harbor doubts — and the gap is intriguing. Perhaps they refuse to put their trust in a government of flesh and blood, especially one of non-Jews, or they may carry stronger strains of the Jewish gene that views the treachery of nations as inevitable. Possibly they feel more comfortable with the U.S. motto “In God We Trust,” even if said God isn’t exactly the same.
- The United States is the most admired country among the seven we presented, though it’s fair to say that it wasn’t much of a contest. Admiration for the U.S. neared 90 percent among all Jews but encompassed Arabs as well, albeit less enthusiastically. Next in line, surprisingly, was Argentina, possibly in a vote of sympathy for the early ejection of superstar Leo Messi and his team from the World Cup. China, we were surprised to see, came in third, ahead of France, and both are far more popular than Russia, despite the large Russian contingent in Israel and the close ties between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Arabs, for their part, have positive feelings for Russia and China — but their clear favorite is France. Contrary to what you might think, there’s no love lost between Israeli Arabs and Egypt or Iran either, which, when combined with Jewish disapproval, round out the bottom of our standings. Iran garners sympathy from very few Jewish Israelis.

- Israel's infatuation with America is also linked, of course, to personal contacts. 43 percent of Israelis have visited the United States, and 23 percent say they've done so multiple times. 17 percent of Israelis, including 30 percent of Israeli Arabs, say they have first-degree relatives — parents, children or siblings — living in the United States. 32 percent say that given the opportunity, they would like to emigrate — “move to and live” in the poll — to the United States. Young people are more attracted than their elders to the Land of Opportunity as are secular Israelis in relation to more religious ones. Only 5 percent of Haredim express any interest in moving to the goldene medina, as their forefathers dubbed it, and none of them with any great fervor, in line, perhaps, with the Rambam's edict that going abroad is akin to idol-worship. Comparing the overall Jewish population with Israeli Arabs, the latter seem more devoted to the Palestinian principle of “sumud,” or attachment to the land. 69 percent of Israeli Arabs said they wouldn't even consider moving to America, compared to only 31 percent equally unequivocal Jews.
- The natural inclination is to link the trust of Israelis in America to their much-ballyhooed admiration for Donald Trump, but there are two flies in this ointment. First, similarly high levels of confidence in the U.S. were registered a decade ago, at the end of President George W. Bush's tenure and the start — though not the end — of President Barack Obama's. On the other hand, even if the poll shows a return to normally high levels of trust, rather than a dramatic change, a poll conducted last year by Pew Research showed that Israel is the only democratic country in which confidence in the U.S. president ability to handle world affairs remained unchanged following Trump's election, and actually went up a notch or two.
- The second, somewhat surprising reservation is that Israelis like Trump — far more, certainly, than his predecessor Obama —but less than what might be expected. All in all, 49 percent of the Israeli public views the president favorably, compared to 45 percent who don't. It's a respectable outcome for Trump, though less categorical than expected, unless one compares it to the dismal approval ratings for Obama: Only 19 percent view Obama positively, compared to 76 percent who don't. This result also flies in the face of global trends, with the exception of countries such as Russia, Vietnam and the Philippines.
- According to the poll — and possibly as a direct consequence of Trump's endless capacity for self-aggrandizement and his infamous approach to women — there is a distinct gender gap in Israeli attitudes to the president. 33 percent of Israeli men say they are very favorably disposed toward Trump, compared to only 15 percent of women. Religion is also an indicator: Only 48 percent of secular Israelis like Trump, compared to 60 to 70 percent of those who describe themselves as traditional, religious or ultra-Orthodox. The Arabs, as expected, can't stand the U.S. president, with 65 percent saying they have no sympathy for him whatsoever. But they're not too enamored with Obama either: Only 25 percent of Israeli Arabs say they like him. Among Jews, sympathy for Obama is low even among secular Israelis, but still double that of their more religious compatriots. Haredi admiration for Obama is virtually nonexistent, a dislike that could

stem from his liberal positions, if we're being generous, but perhaps also from the color of his skin, if we're not.

- Unlike most of the world — and contrary to logic and known facts, one might add — the Israeli public believes that America's position in the world has grown stronger under Trump. 53 percent of Israelis believe this is the case, compared to 23 percent who say America has grown weaker and 14 percent who maintain that nothing has changed. Perhaps things you see from here you can't see from anywhere else, perhaps the Israeli public views Trump's unfriendly spats with ostensible U.S. allies — some of which are also habitual Israel-critics — as a sign of machismo and strength, and possibly we view the world through the narrow prism of the nixing of the Iran nuclear deal, the transfer of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and Trump's cold shoulder toward the Palestinians, to the exclusion of everything else.
- In this regard, at least, Israeli expectations of Trump's blueprint for the "ultimate deal" — which currently seems frozen in limbo — corroborate Palestinian apprehensions. 44 percent of the public expects the plan to be "pro-Israeli," compared to only 7 percent who fear it might be pro-Palestinian and another 31 percent who think it will be balanced. Expectations of a deal tilted in favor of Israelis are especially high among Arab Israelis, many of whom self-identity as Palestinians. All of this translates into high approval marks for Netanyahu's overall handling of relations with the United States. 66 percent approve of the prime minister's management of the special relationship, in appreciation no doubt for the close ties he's forged with Trump and the decidedly pro-Israeli turn in U.S. foreign policy. There is a clear gender gap at work here as well, with men approving of Netanyahu's American expertise far more than women. The emerging trends in this poll point to the possibility that the same overall gender gap that exists today in U.S. politics is prevalent in Israel as well, with men leaning rightwards, and women the other way.
- Netanyahu gets substantially lower marks, however, for his handling of relations with American Jews. Only 44 percent are happy with his performance, compared to 26 percent who aren't. Given the tensions between Netanyahu and the Reform and Conservative movements, it comes as no surprise that 90 percent of traditional, religious and Haredi Jews approve of Netanyahu's policies toward U.S. Jews, unlike secular Israelis — about 40 percent of the population — who disapprove by a 39 percent-34 percent margin.
- Strikingly, however, the same secular Jews are far less interested than religious Israelis in seeing the majority of American Jews immigrate, or make aliyah, to Israel. Some 43 percent of secular Jews state that they have no special interest in them coming to Israel. Only 8 percent say they would "very much like" to see American Jews move to Israel en masse, compared to 21 percent of traditional Jews, 51 percent of secular and 63 percent of the most observant Haredim. Overall, an amazing 98 percent of Haredim support such mass immigration, even though the influx of such a large number of Jews with liberal views could deprive them of their kingmaker position in Israeli politics. It should be remembered, however, that Jewish sages

ruled long ago that the commandment to settle in Israel is equal in importance to all the other mitzvot in the Torah combined.

- The poll also contains some very bad news and some very good news for American Jews. The bad news is that a sizable 52 percent-37 percent majority of Israelis maintain that American Jews do not have the right to criticize Israel in public, a position once accepted on both ends but lately seen as anachronistic. Curiously, on this question women seem much more strident than men, with an unequivocal 59 percent-28 percent majority of women telling American Jews to keep their mouths shut, compared to an even split among men. Perhaps women adhere more than men to the rule that one shouldn't wash dirty laundry in public and that arguments should stay discreet and in the family.
- On the other hand, the non-Orthodox majority of American Jews will be gratified to learn that contrary to the monopolistic attitude of their own religious hegemony, a significant plurality of Israelis support religious pluralism and favor equal rights for Reform and Conservative Jews, 47 percent-30 percent. Support for religious equality reaches an overwhelming 71 percent-11 percent among secular Israelis but also encompasses those who identify as traditional. Religious Jews, on the other hand, including a near unanimous ultra-Orthodox community, oppose recognition of Reform and Conservative Jews. Given that the ultra-Orthodox are perennial members of Israeli coalitions, and that their position enjoys wide support in Likud and Habayit Hayehudi as well, it still seems that American Jews will have to await the messiah to achieve equality, in the Western Wall and elsewhere, unless they decide to immigrate en masse to get the job done themselves. Whichever comes first.

Hamas Leader Rejects Deal with Israeli to Ease Gaza Siege

By Shlomi Eldar, Analyst, AI Monitor

- What is more important to Hamas — the release of its inmates from Israeli jails or improved conditions for Gaza’s 2 million residents? This is not a hypothetical question. It is a real dilemma for the Hamas leadership and the movement’s Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar as they mull over various suggestions to relieve the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. London-based Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper reported on June 30 that the Hamas leadership was examining three proposals submitted by different intermediaries. One was conveyed by UN Mideast envoy Nickolay Mladenov, one by an Arab figure described by the paper as having strong links with Hamas and a third through a foreign state also with links to Hamas. The proposals include humanitarian aid and the full opening of crossings to and from the enclave for the passage of goods and persons — in return for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers killed in fighting in Gaza in 2014, Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin, and of the Israeli civilians believed held by Hamas.
- Among the proposals under scrutiny: establishing a joint Israeli-Palestinian industrial zone near the Erez border crossing into Israel, building a floating pier off the island of Cyprus through which goods destined for Gaza would be shipped, and a significant increase in the power supply to the Strip. Other proposals include allowing the entry of fuels into Gaza, easing Egyptian restrictions by establishing an industrial zone near Gaza’s border with Egypt that would provide jobs for the Strip’s residents and permanently opening the Rafah crossing into Egypt for the passage of food, raw material, fuels and more. Attempts at resolving the Gaza crisis stem from a US effort to resolve the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, in conjunction with the Gulf states, as a preliminary stage for rolling out the Trump administration’s much touted peace plan for the region.
- These proposals are the very goals Hamas has been trying to achieve since Israel imposed its blockade on Gaza when Hamas took control of the enclave in 2007. The movement’s leaders were willing to sacrifice thousands of Palestinians in armed clashes with Israel over the past decade for the sake of a significant Israeli easing of its blockade. However, now that various proposals are on the table, the Hamas leadership is rejecting them out of hand. Instead of embracing them, launching intensive negotiations and bargaining for additional Israeli concessions, Hamas refuses to even consider a return of the soldiers’ remains and of the Israeli civilians as part of any deal. It insists that these matters be discussed as part of a separate deal leading to freedom for Palestinian prisoners.
- A Palestinian source in the Gaza Strip told AI-Monitor that Sinwar is the main obstacle to an agreement since he insists on an Israeli commitment in advance to a mass Palestinian prisoner release of the magnitude that Hamas achieved in 2011 in return for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Shalit was freed after five years in Hamas captivity in return for 1,027 Palestinians from Israeli jails. Sinwar was the one who pushed more than any other Gaza leader for reconciliation with

Fatah, even at the cost of handing over civilian matters in Gaza to Fatah. He believed that reconciliation was imperative in order to improve conditions in the Strip. But now, faced with proposals to improve Gazans' living conditions, he is unwilling to budge from his pledge to Hamas inmates to obtain their release.

- He himself was freed in the Shalit exchange and sees himself as “the father of Palestinian prisoners.” In August 2017, following the resignation of Lior Lotan, the chief Israeli negotiator on the issue of missing and captive Israelis, Sinwar described to journalists in Gaza his determination on the prisoner issue so close to his heart. “The Shalit deal was delayed for two years because the mediators offered us things that did not reach the threshold of [Hamas'] demands,” he said. While a prisoner, Sinwar added, he held out for a more “honorable” deal for the release of Palestinian inmates that Israel was nixing. Given his steadfast position, Sinwar seems willing to forgo concessions for humanitarian relief in Gaza as long as he is not perceived as having violated his pledge to the prisoners held by Israel.
- Sinwar served 23 years in an Israeli jail. Ahmed Jabari, the former head of the armed Hamas militia Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, who held Shalit in custody, insisted Sinwar be included in the swap. Jabari was assassinated in 2012. During his lengthy sentence, Sinwar cemented his position as the leader of all Hamas prisoners in Israel. Last year he also underwent brain surgery in Israel to remove a tumor. Given his experience, Sinwar should be familiar with Israeli society and the country’s political mindset, and with the way Israeli leaders adopt decisions. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman have reiterated time and again that Israel would not free a large number of prisoners, certainly not in return for soldiers’ bodies. Although this was not spelled out, Israel does not see the release of a living Israeli soldier (Shalit) as akin to the freeing of soldiers’ remains. “We cannot afford to repeat the same mistake,” Liberman said in 2017, referring to the Shalit deal.
- The Israeli position calls for returning the remains of terrorists it is holding and the Hamas militants it captured in the 2014 war with Gaza in exchange for the bodies of Israel Defense Forces soldiers, and returning sick Palestinian inmates or Palestinians who crossed the border in return for the Israelis being held by Hamas, reportedly people with mental disabilities. Sinwar probably knows the Israeli leadership will not compromise on the prisoner issue, definitely not when such a deal could be perceived as a despicable trade in bodies. Mladenov and other intermediaries told Hamas as much when they conveyed Israeli messages to Gaza. Sinwar, however, is adamant. He has staked out a stubborn position and refuses to give in, although he probably realizes he doesn’t stand a chance of getting what he wants. Sinwar amassed political power when he placed the prisoner issue as his top priority. He probably fears losing this political base, as well as the admiration of the prisoners in Israeli jails who are trusting him to get them out and the support of their families in Gaza and the West Bank. With this political consideration in mind, he is willing to sacrifice 2 million Gaza Palestinians yearning for a better life.