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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, August 31

Headlines:

- **Police: Sara and Yair Netanyahu Suspected of Bribery**
- **At Dimona, Netanyahu Warns Israel's Foes they Risk Destruction**
- **Trump Administration to End U.S. Funding to UNRWA**
- **UN: Ceasefire Violations May Spark Lebanon-Israel Conflict**
- **Iran, Russia Prepare to Battle Over Control of Post-War Syria**
- **Satellite Photos Said to Show New Iranian Missile Factory in Syria**
- **Young Professionals: Not Too late for Two-States Solution**
- **Steinitz: Replenishment of Kinneret a Priority**

Commentary:

- **AI Monitor: “Israel, US Seek to Redefine Palestinian Refugees”**
 - By Ben Caspit, contributor to AI Monitor
- **AI Monitor: “Jordan Can't Afford to Lose UNRWA Battle”**
 - By Osama Al Sharif, political commentator based in Amman

News Excerpts

August 31, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Police: Sara and Yair Netanyahu Suspected of Bribery

A senior police official told the Tel Aviv Magistrate's Court on Thursday that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's wife, Sara, is suspected of bribery in Case 4000. Police later leaked that their son Yair is also a suspect. Also known as the Bezeq-Walla Affair, Case 4000 involves allegations that Netanyahu ordered preferential treatment for Bezeq in exchange for positive media coverage by the Walla media outlet. Tycoon Shaul Elovitch owns both companies. Police are investigating whether Sara and Yair acted as Netanyahu's emissaries to Elovitch, his wife, Iris, and Walla's then-director-general Ilan Yehoshua to persuade them to have Walla favor the prime minister. Netanyahu's associates mocked the new allegations, saying that the Netanyahu family's recently deceased dog Kaya also received positive coverage on the News site. See also, "[Sara Netanyahu now officially suspected of taking bribes](#)" (*Ha'aretz*)

Reuters

At Dimona, Netanyahu Warns Israel's Foes they Risk Destruction

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu used a visit to a secretive Israeli atomic reactor on Wednesday to warn the country's enemies that it has the means to destroy them, in what appeared to be a veiled reference to its assumed nuclear arsenal. "Those who threaten to wipe us out put themselves in a similar danger, and in any event will not achieve their goal," he said during a ceremony to rename the complex, near the desert town of Dimona, after the late Israeli statesman Shimon Peres. Netanyahu's remarks, issued by his office in a transcript, came as Israel lobbies world powers to follow the United States in exiting their 2015 deal with Iran that capped the Islamic Republic's nuclear capabilities.

Washington Post

Trump Administration to End U.S. Funding to UNRWA

The Trump administration has decided to cancel all U.S. funding of the United Nations aid program for Palestinian refugees, part of its determination to put its money where its policy is as it seeks a recalculation of U.S. foreign aid spending and prepares its own Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. In an announcement to be made within the next several weeks, the administration plans to voice its disapproval of the way the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, spends the funds and to call for a sharp reduction in the number of Palestinians recognized as refugees, dropping it from more than 5 million, including descendants, to fewer than a tenth of that number, or those still alive from when the agency was created seven decades ago, according to officials familiar with the decision.

Ynet News

UN: Ceasefire Violations May Spark Lebanon-Israel Conflict

The UN Security Council warned Thursday that violations of the ceasefire agreement between Lebanon and Israel could lead to a new conflict and urged international support for Lebanon's armed forces and their stepped-up deployment in the south and at sea. The council's warning against "a new conflict that none of the parties or the region can afford" came in a resolution adopted unanimously extending the mandate of the UN peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon known as UNIFIL until August 31, 2019. See also, "[EISENKOT TELLS NEW UNIFIL HEAD TO INCREASE PRESENCE](#)" (*Jerusalem Post*)

Iran, Russia Prepare to Battle Over Control of Post-War Syria

The events of the past days in Syria have one thing in common: as the war in Syria is entering its final stages, a new battle is emerging. Both Russia and Iran, who supported the Assad regime throughout the civil war, are expecting to reap the benefits of Assad's victory. While the two countries have long been allies in the Syrian arena, their interests sometimes diverge, especially as both are eyeing the financial rewards of Syria's upcoming reconstruction process. The tensions in Syria escalated on Tuesday when Russia moved naval forces towards the Syrian coast and NATO criticized Moscow for its aggressive moves. Russian media called the deployment Moscow's largest naval buildup since it entered the Syrian conflict in 2015. See also, ["WILL IRAN AND RUSSIA BATTLE IT OUT OVER SYRIA?" \(Trunews\)](#)

Satellite Photos Said to Show New Iranian Missile Factory in Syria

Satellite photos published Thursday purported to show the establishment of an Iranian surface-to-surface missile factory in Syria, raising fresh concerns over the extent of the two countries' military cooperation on Israel's northern border. The photos, which were taken by "ImageSat International" and published by Channel 10 news, were said to show a facility outside Wadi Jahannam in northwest Syria resembling Iran's Parchin facility, which has been linked to the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile and nuclear programs. Beyond noting an apparent surge in construction work at the site and the building's seeming similarity to Parchin, Channel 10 did not say how it was identified as a missile factory. See also, ["New Photos Show Iran Building Missile Factory in Syria" \(The Jewish journal\)](#)

Young Professionals: Not Too late for Two-States Solution

Last year, Israel Policy Forum launched IPF Atid, holding happy hours, conversations and events with experts for "rising Jewish and foreign policy young professionals." It now has networks in New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago and Los Angeles. "We recognized a vacuum existed in the Jewish communal landscape for young professionals when it came to meaningfully addressing the core challenges facing Israel and its future," David Halperin, IPF's executive director, told JTA. "There is a hunger among millennials for honest and serious geopolitical, security and other policy conversations related to Israel and the two-state solution." Adena Philips, IPF Atid's national chair, echoed Halperin's comments about a "vacuum." People on the left and right are disillusioned – and for good reason. It's easy to get sucked into the communal cyclone of arguments and outdated platitudes," he said.

Steinitz: Replenishment of Kinneret a Priority

Israel intends to prepare for additional drought years by doubling the quantity of desalinated water and the upgrading the national water carrier so that it can carry water from the desalination plants to the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret), according to Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz. "Next year we will start pumping water into the Kinneret and within two or three years we will complete a system that will allow us to desalinate a surplus amount of water in order to pump water into the Sea of Galilee and save our national lake," Steinitz said in an interview with Ynet. "The danger is clear and palpable, the hydrological drought is the worst in the history of the State of Israel, the water level in the Sea of Galilee is closer than ever since the establishment of the State of Israel to the black line" he added.

Israel, US Seek to Redefine Palestinian Refugees

By Ben Caspit

- In the words of President Donald Trump, the (symbolic) transfer of the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem served to take the Jerusalem problem “off the table.” Trump put a checkmark next to the Jerusalem issue, a conundrum that has cast a shadow on anyone who tried to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians ever since the 1993 Oslo Accord. Now, it seems, Trump is also removing the Palestinian refugee problem from the agenda. This is an issue that the Palestinian narrative views as central and imperative, even more than Jerusalem.
- How is Trump accomplishing this? In his own way: The American administration stops recognizing the approximately 5 million Palestinian refugees listed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which is charged with aiding them. From now on, only those who were de facto refugees in 1948 will be considered refugees today. It was in 1948 that the Arab countries attacked Israel immediately after the State of Israel was declared, which resulted in the “Nakba” (“catastrophe” in Arabic) — the great Palestinian defeat. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled from the territories of the Jewish state in the making to cities of refuge across the entire area. Simultaneously with this dramatic change of policy, the United States is making a sharp cutback of about \$200 million in the monetary aid it gives the Palestinians. This constitutes a declaration of war on the way the UN has functioned over the last 70 years to empower and perpetuate the problem of the Palestinian refugees instead of acting to resolve it
- AI-Monitor reviewed in an earlier article the issue of cutbacks in the UNRWA budget. Meanwhile, it turns out that the American course of action will be sharper and more aggressive than was originally assessed in Israel. The watershed will be breached on Sept. 1, exactly when hundreds of schools in Gaza and the West Bank operated by the UNRWA are due to open. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Shin Bet warn that UNRWA cutbacks are likely to cause the security situation to deteriorate unless an alternate program is presented.
- “When Sept. 1 rolls around and hundreds of thousands of young pupils remain on the streets without a solution, this will create negative energies and greatly undermine stability,” a high-level Israeli security source told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity about two weeks ago. Now the assessment is that the sharp cutback in aid will also negatively affect current efforts to reach an arrangement between Hamas and Israel in the Strip. “In Gaza,” explains an Israeli security source to AI-Monitor (speaking on condition of anonymity), “UNRWA not only takes care of education, health and welfare, but also feeds tens of thousands of families of refugees who have no independent economic existence apart from this assistance. If all this will be rolled back, we are likely to find ourselves in a real crisis.”
- From Israel’s point of view, the new American policy is a dream come true. The Trump administration has fully adopted the Israeli stance, which is not devoid of logic and is backed up by facts. The person who led the public campaign against the UNRWA was Ron Prosor, the much-esteemed former Israeli ambassador to London and the UN.
- “UNRWA is an organization that — instead of solving the refugee problem — perpetuates it,” Prosor told AI-Monitor. “The UN already has an organization dealing with refugees around the

world [UNHCR] but the Palestinian refugees are excluded from it, and they have their own agency. The numbers that UNRWA disseminates have no connection to reality. In Lebanon, 200,000 refugees 'disappeared' from the number that UNRWA reports. The refugee status has become hereditary and transferred from parents to children for four generations — from father to son to grandson to great-grandson. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are scattered around the world who have not been relevant already for a long time, but their refugee status is written in stone. All this is designed to perpetuate the problem, not solve it," the ambassador said.

- **Prosor does not blink at the warnings of the Israeli security system regarding the dangers of this change. "The security system has automatically supported UNRWA for all these years out of short-range vision. No one wants the change to take place on his watch. Everyone is afraid of the ramifications, and no one considers the strategic angle. If I was Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, I also wouldn't want to rock an already leaking boat. I'd be happy that someone else would continue to feed and take care of this enormous elephant sitting in the middle of our living room. The time has come to state the truth. The refugees should be rehabilitated. There are no more than half a million refugees from 1948. All the rest are hitchhikers getting a free ride; it is about time that they rehabilitate themselves in the places they live."**
- **Prosor's criticism of the security system multiplies when we talk to right-wing ministers. These ministers reject the automatic stance of the IDF and the Shin Bet, which are against bringing down the UNRWA without an alternative means of support for the Palestinians**
- **The one person who has not opened his mouth on this issue is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Usually, Netanyahu adopts positions identified with the right in the speed of light, and these positions become part of his continuous campaign for the right-wing vote. But this time, Netanyahu is keeping silent. He knows that the army's warnings can materialize and then he would be viewed as the one who fanned the fires and encouraged the Americans to take that gamble. Therefore, before he jumps on the victory bandwagon, he wants to make sure that the bandwagon won't go up in flames.**
- **Prosor explains that examination of the refugee issue began a while back, during the Obama administration. "There was a classified report in the State Department on the real number of refugees; it was discovered that we are talking about 10% of the number reported by UNRWA," Prosor told Al-Monitor. "When the administration changed, the classified status of the report was revoked and parts of it were publicized. At the end of the day, we are talking about something that, instead of disappearing over time, continues to swell up in front of our eyes. UNRWA has become a monster employing tens of thousands of people in order to perpetuate a whole industry. This makes any attempt to discuss a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict impossible."**
- **According to Prosor, treatment of the Palestinian refugees must be transferred to the UN's professional agency that deals with all of the world's refugees. Prosor says that the world should stop recognizing generations of Palestinian refugees but only recognize the original ones. There is no reason to take care of refugees who, for example, became citizens of Jordan, or those living under the Palestinian Authority, which should take care of their own people. In this way, says Prosor, the "refugee problem" will return to its real dimensions and thus be open to a doable, logical solution.**

- Until that happens, Israel continues to cultivate hopes regarding Trump. When the president announced Aug. 23 that now it's the Palestinians' turn to "get something very good" in return for the embassy move, it did not generate much worry in Jerusalem. If Trump resolved the refugee issue and the Jerusalem issue so elegantly, jokes a high-placed Likud minister, then all that remains is for Israelis to hope that he will revoke his recognition of the Palestinian people. This would surely resolve the Palestinian problem itself.

SUMMARY: "UNRWA is an organization that — instead of solving the refugee problem — perpetuates it," Prosor told Al-Monitor. "The UN already has an organization dealing with refugees around the world [UNHCR] but the Palestinian refugees are excluded from it, and they have their own agency. The numbers that UNRWA disseminates have no connection to reality. In Lebanon, 200,000 refugees 'disappeared' from the number that UNRWA reports. The refugee status has become hereditary and transferred from parents to children for four generations — from father to son to grandson to great-grandson. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are scattered around the world who have not been relevant already for a long time, but their refugee status is written in stone. All this is designed to perpetuate the problem, not solve it," the ambassador said.

Jordan Can't Afford to Lose UNRWA Battle

By Osama Al Sharif, political commentator based in Amman

- **Jordan and the United States could be on a collision course over the fate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which is responsible for more than 5 million Palestinian refugees. Amman and Washington have completely divergent views on the agency's future. The United States is taking steps to defund it, while on the other hand, Jordan leads an international effort to raise money to keep it in business. This is one battle Amman cannot afford to lose.**
- **UNRWA provides essential services to more than 370,000 Palestinian refugees residing in 10 camps in the Hashemite kingdom. Over 2 million registered Palestinian refugees live in Jordan, making it the largest host country.**
- **It was reported on Aug. 28 that the Donald Trump administration had decided to end all funding to UNRWA, eight months after it cut more than half of its planned contribution to the agency. In January, the US State Department had announced that it would withhold \$65 million of a \$125 million aid package to the 70-year-old UN agency. The department said in a statement that additional US contributions would be contingent on UNRWA making some major changes.**
- **Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi met on Aug. 30 in Amman with UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Kraehenbuehl and announced that the kingdom is organizing a conference to be held on the sidelines of the Sept. 27 meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York, to raise funds and generate support for UNRWA. Sweden, the European Union, Japan and Turkey will co-sponsor the event along with Jordan.**
- **Safadi said that the goal is to compensate for a \$217 million budget deficit and find ways to facilitate continued financial support for UNRWA. Jordan will also call an emergency meeting of Arab foreign ministers to discuss ways to support the agency. UNRWA is active in Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza, as well as Jordan.**
- **Reuters quoted Safadi as saying, "Any shortage in funding will drive hundreds of thousands towards deprivation and despair." Meanwhile, Kraehenbuehl remarked, "One cannot wish 5.3 million Palestine refugees away. These are people who have rights, and for many years now, for decades, have faced a plight and injustice that is simply immense."**
- **Neither the Palestinians nor the Jordanians believe that the US position is solely aimed at producing structural changes within UNRWA. On Aug. 28, and in the wake of Foreign Policy report, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley was reported to have questioned the credibility of Palestinian claims to a "right of return" to what is today Israel. The right of return is one of the major so-called final-status issues to be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians under the Oslo Accords.**
- **There have been recent media reports that the United States is about to roll out a new position on the right of return while debunking UN criteria for determining the current number of Palestinian refugees. On Aug. 25, one Israeli media outlet asserted that the United States will soon issue a report claiming that there are only about half a million Palestinians who should be legitimately considered refugees.**

- Last July, a number of US senators introduced a bill to recognize only 40,000 Palestinian refugees, instead of 5.3 million. Republican congressman Doug Lamborn of Colorado said in a statement, “Refugee status is not something that can be handed down from generation to generation,” referring to the descendants of Palestinian refugees who were born and are living in other countries. This is why Jordan is risking its ties with the White House to lead the effort to save UNRWA.
- If only half a million Palestinians are considered to be refugees, what happens to the rest? Under the new US criteria, of Jordan’s more than 2 million registered Palestinian refugees only a few thousand would retain refugee status. The rest would be settled permanently in the kingdom, a prospect that raises internal problems and existential fears involving issues of demographic balance and political rights. This would comport with claims by Israeli far-right politicians that Jordan is a Palestinian state.
- Amman has opposed all of the Trump administration’s recent decisions pertaining to the Palestinian issue, from Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December to the relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May. King Abdullah II is a staunch advocate of the two-state solution as set out by the Oslo Accords and UN resolutions. The Trump administration, which has been working on a plan to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, has not endorsed the two-state solution. Instead, Trump himself has said that he is open to alternatives.
- Despite Jordan’s opposition to US policies on this particular issue, Amman and Washington remain close allies, with the kingdom receiving an aid package of about \$1.5 billion annually. Jordan is increasingly wary, however, of the so-called ultimate deal that the Trump White House is finalizing. Abdullah met with Trump in June in what was seen as a last-ditch effort to influence the proposed peace plan.
- The row over UNRWA may strain bilateral relations, as Jordan rallies international partners to step in and compensate for the suspension of US funding. In the view of Jordanian analysts, the attempt to defund UNRWA is as crucial as the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. It is one more step toward dismantling, and eventually liquidating, the Palestinian issue, enacting it from existence. For Amman, the stakes have never been higher. Its only choice now is to confront US moves through diplomacy, even at the risk of annoying its closest ally.

SUMMARY: Last July, a number of US senators introduced a bill to recognize only 40,000 Palestinian refugees, instead of 5.3 million. Republican congressman Doug Lamborn of Colorado said in a statement, “Refugee status is not something that can be handed down from generation to generation,” referring to the descendants of Palestinian refugees who were born and are living in other countries. This is why Jordan is risking its ties with the White House to lead the effort to save UNRWA. If only half a million Palestinians are considered to be refugees, what happens to the rest? Under the new US criteria, of Jordan’s more than 2 million registered Palestinian refugees only a few thousand would retain refugee status. The rest would be settled permanently in the kingdom, a prospect that raises internal problems and existential fears involving issues of demographic balance and political rights. This would comport with claims by Israeli far-right politicians that Jordan is a Palestinian state.