



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, September 12

Headlines:

- **Trump Told Arab States of Plan for Palestinian Refugees**
- **Erekat: PA May Sever All US Ties**
- **Palestinians Take Village Eviction to The Hague**
- **Arab MKs Discuss Nation-State Law with Arab League**
- **US-PLO Row Jeopardizes Consular Services for Palestinians**
- **Border Police Accused of Stealing From Palestinians**
- **US Candidate Accuses PM Spokesman of Sexual Assault**
- **Destroyed Gaza Airport Embodies Grounded Peace Hopes**

Commentary:

- **Los Angeles Times: “Trump’s Latest Step Backward in the Middle East”**
 - By the LA Times Editorial Board
- **Washington Post: “Trump’s Bear Hug Risks Crushing Israel”**
 - By Max Boot, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

News Excerpts

September 12, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Trump Told Arab States of Plan for Palestinian Refugees

President Donald Trump announced to Arab countries that he will disclose a citizenship plan for Palestinian refugees living in those countries, the London-based website Al-Khaled reported on Tuesday. Fatah sources said that “Trump informed several Arab countries that the plan will include Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.” The source said that “the big surprise will be that these countries have already agreed to naturalize Palestinian refugees.” Palestinian sources reported that a US delegation led by Jared Kushner is expected to arrive in the coming weeks to discuss the initiative, including the number of refugees, required expenses, and the logistics of “naturalization of refugees.”

Bloomberg

Erekat: PA May Sever All US Ties

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said Tuesday that the full range of political, economic and security ties would be reassessed in the wake of the Trump administration’s decision on Monday to shut the Palestinian mission in Washington. US National Security Adviser John Bolton said the move was triggered by the Palestinian refusal to participate in talks with Israel. But Erekat denounced it as an act of blackmail. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the move showed that “a refusal to negotiate and attempts to attack Israel in international forums won’t advance peace.” Bolton spent most of his speech criticizing the International Criminal Court, which he said is too harsh on Israel.

Ha’aretz

Palestinians Take Village Eviction to The Hague

The Palestinian leadership has petitioned the International Criminal Court in The Hague, calling on the court to start legal procedures against Israel over the planned demolition of the West Bank Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar, Erekat said Tuesday. The village was built without construction permits and the state is forcing its residents to move to a nearby village. The residents refused, and a legal battle ensued, with the High Court of Justice ruling that the residents had to leave.

Ynet

Arab MKs Discuss Nation-State Law with Arab League

After their controversial meeting with the foreign ministers of the EU and Luxembourg, the Joint List MKs Ahmad Tibi and Jamal Zahalka met Tuesday with the Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit in Cairo to discuss the much disputed Nation-State Law. The law, approved by the Knesset last July, defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and strips the Arabic language of its status as an official language alongside Hebrew. According to sources present at the meeting, Gheit identified with the messages delivered by the Arab MKs and labeled the law is racist.

US-PLO Row Jeopardizes Consular Services for Palestinians

Palestinian-Americans are at risk of being collateral damage in the escalating diplomatic row between Washington and Ramallah. A PA source said, “People don’t apply for visas to get back into their homeland if we don’t have a consulate,” said the source. “We are talking about thousands of people who are regularly in need of these consular services, be it things related to marriage and divorce, doing any kind of business, adding a phone line to a business they already have existing in the Palestinian territories or any of that stuff,” said Omar Baddar, the deputy director of the pro-Palestinian Arab American Institute. The Institute for Palestine Studies estimated two decades ago that there were anywhere from 150,000 to 250,000 members of the Palestinian community throughout the United States, although precise statistics are lacking.

Border Police Accused of Stealing From Palestinians

Jerusalem District Court has charged two border policemen with stealing thousands of shekels from West Bank Palestinians in traffic stops carried out on the pretext of a vehicle search. The policemen were charged with armed robbery, though they are not accused of using their weapons. Suspects Amjad Ashkar, 22, and Stefan Rashad, 20, admitted to the allegations against them. The indictment alleges that the police carried out the thefts in recent months while in uniform and using police vehicles. They are accused of stopping vehicles in the Ramallah area without any justification and then informing the motorists that their vehicles were being search. Cash was then stolen from the cars, the charge sheet says.

US Candidate Accuses PM Spokesman of Sexual Assault

Julia Salazar, a controversial candidate for the New York State Senate, accused Netanyahu’s spokesman David Keyes of sexual assault in a tweet on Tuesday. In a tweet on Tuesday, Salazar said she was going to be “outed as a survivor of sexual assault” in an upcoming article in an unnamed publication and decided to preempt the disclosure. Keyes immediately denied the allegations. “This false accusation is made by someone who has proven to be repeatedly dishonest about her own life. This is yet another example of her dishonesty,” he said in a statement.

Destroyed Gaza Airport Embodies Grounded Peace Hopes

The opening of the Palestinians’ first airport, in the presence of President Bill Clinton, was a symbol of the hopes for independence and peace kindled by the Oslo accords. But 25 years after Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the first of the historic agreements on September 13, 1993, the airport in Gaza lies in tatters, along with Palestinian hopes for an independent state. Today the concrete arrival halls remain in place, but much of the rest of the site is covered in piles of rubbish and rubble — the remnants of years of war and neglect.

Trump's Latest Step Backward in the Middle East

By the LA Times Editorial Board

- There was a time when the United States and much of the rest of the world saw the Palestinians as a non-people, or as a subset of the people of Jordan, or as a backward collection of whiners and terrorists who could easily be “absorbed” into the countries of their fellow Arabs. But over the decades, that began to change. Eventually a consensus emerged that a negotiated two-state solution was the most equitable and the most practical way to address the legitimate territorial claims of both Israelis and Palestinians. Today, however, the Trump administration is moving that cause steadily backward in a bogus search for what the president has boasted will be the “ultimate” peace deal, but which seems increasingly likely to result in a one-sided proposal that will be both unfair and unacceptable to Palestinians when and if it is unveiled. Just consider Trump’s actions in recent months. First, he declared that, in a reversal of long-standing policy, the United States would formally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel — a needlessly provocative concession to right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that complicates future negotiations.
- Then the State Department announced that the U.S. would no longer provide any funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which runs hundreds of schools for Palestinian refugees, dozens of medical clinics and food assistance for half the population in the Gaza Strip alone. The Trump administration called the agency “irredeemably flawed,” but left it unclear how fewer schools, less healthcare and more hunger would aid the cause of peace. On Monday, the administration ordered the closure of the de facto embassy of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Washington, D.C. The reason? The PLO “has not taken steps to advance the start of direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel.” This is a symbolic act, but symbols are symbols for a reason. The U.S. government did not allow the office to open at all until 1994; it was only in 2011 that the Obama administration permitted the Palestinian flag to fly over the office, which was seen as a historic moment by many Palestinians.
- Slowly, the administration is turning the screws, sending the unmistakable message to Palestinians that the U.S. no longer sees itself as an evenhanded broker in the effort to find a workable solution to the conflict. An early draft of its peace proposal, put together by presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, a former Trump Organization lawyer, has been flatly rejected by Arab countries as “radical, pro-Israel and out of line with traditional U.S. policy and international law,” according to a Times report last week. The search for Middle East peace has been characterized by missed opportunities, stubbornness and willful misunderstanding. Undoubtedly, Palestinian leaders have too often failed to rein in militants or to reject violence by embracing tolerance and co-existence. But the hard-line Netanyahu government bears a big share of responsibility as well for years of stalemate. In the end, the continuation of the 50-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is a tragedy for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Trump's Bear Hug Risks Crushing Israel

By Max Boot, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

- National security adviser John Bolton made headlines on Monday with his blistering attack against the International Criminal Court. But “Bolton attacks ICC” is a dog-bites-man story if there ever was one. Bolton has been on a tear against the ICC since its inception, and his blood-curdling threats against nations that cooperate in investigations of U.S. troops are more of the same. In substantive terms, though, his objections were already codified in the 2002 American Service-Members’ Protection Act, which went so far as to authorize military force to free any U.S. personnel held by the court. Sadly, this only confirms what we already knew: The Trump administration, which has already pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal, has jettisoned U.S. commitment to international law. The United States, once the linchpin of the international system, is turning into a rogue state. Of greater immediate consequence is the fact that Bolton announced the closing of the Palestine Liberation Office mission in Washington, ostensibly in retaliation for “Palestinian attempts to prompt an ICC investigation of Israel.” The Trump administration thereby takes a giant step back from the Oslo Accords, which resulted in formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Palestinian Authority.
- This is simply the latest Trump assault against Palestinians. On Aug. 31, the administration cut all funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which operates 677 schools educating 515,260 Palestinian students, 143 health facilities with 8.8 million annual outpatient visits, and a Social Safety Net program, composed of food and modest cash stipends, that serves 292,000 people. The United States was UNRWA’s biggest donor last year, contributing \$368 million, more than a quarter of the agency’s budget. The end of support for UNRWA was followed by a cut-off of \$200 million that the U.S. Agency for International Development had provided for infrastructure projects — such as roads, sewers, and electrical lines — that employ thousands of people in the West Bank. This week, the administration even cut off \$25 million for hospitals in East Jerusalem that provide the most advanced medical care to Palestinians in the West Bank. The only funding President Trump hasn’t eliminated is \$60 million for the Palestinian security forces.
- These are far more meaningful — and destructive — moves than the relocation of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which I supported. Top Trump aides such as Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt — veterans of the real estate industry whose ignorance of the Middle East is vast and invincible — will no doubt cite this as evidence of how pro-Israel they are. And in a certain respect, it is true: The governments of Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, tied together by major donors such as Sheldon Adelson, are more closely linked than any previous Israeli and American governments in history. But Trump’s bear hug risks crushing Israel.

- Israeli security officials are worried that, if the Palestinian Authority doesn't provide basic social services to the population, then the far more radical Hamas could fill the gap. Or, maybe, no one will fill the gap and young Palestinians, utterly devoid of hope and opportunity, will launch a third intifada. Retired Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad, a former chief of staff for the Israeli Defense Forces, calls UNRWA "a despicable organization perpetuating the right of return and engaging in anti-Israeli propaganda" but also says that simply cutting it off will "lead to a vacuum Hamas will exploit in its favor." A former spokesman for the IDF, retired Lt. Col. Peter Lerner, tweeted: "There are many problems with @UNRWA, but cutting financial support to the organization hurts the weakest members of Palestinian society and is unlikely to bring the Palestinian Authority to the table." And retired Col. Grisha Yakubovich, who once worked in the unit overseeing the Palestinian territories, told Foreign Policy: "It's clear to me that there will be a storm and [these steps] may lead to a wave of terror."
- What these Israeli military leaders realize is that security cannot be guaranteed by security forces alone — unless, perhaps, you are willing to turn the entire country into a North Korea-like police state, which isn't an option for a liberal democracy such as Israel. To avoid unrest, you have to provide jobs and basic services to the population. You have to offer some hope of a better life. That is, in fact, a central tenet of the counterinsurgency strategies that U.S. commanders implemented in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran realizes the same thing, which is why it has poured money into social services in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon to extend its influence. Trump and his Middle East team don't get it.
- They also don't understand that the Palestinian Authority, for all its problems, is vastly preferable to any conceivable alternative. Yes, it is corrupt and undemocratic and, yes, it engages in anti-Israel propaganda. But, far from sponsoring terrorism against Israel, the Palestinian Authority is working closely with Israel to squelch terror. In May, after the U.S. Embassy relocation, thousands of Gaza residents tried to storm the Israeli border fence, resulting in 62 fatalities. There were no such attacks in the West Bank, because the Palestinian Authority worked there to prevent them. By gratuitously insulting and defunding the most moderate Palestinian faction, Trump is opening the door to the radicals. That's a Rosh Hashanah present Israel could do without.