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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, September 5*

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# News Excerpts

September 5, 2018

## Times of Israel

### **Abbas Said to Rebuff Trump Meet; Wants Kushner Fired**

President Trump reportedly offered to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas later this month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in an attempt to rectify their troubled ties. According to Hadashot TV news, Abbas responded through a third party that he would only accept such a meeting if Trump fired his Middle East negotiating team, including his son-in-law Jared Kushner. The report also said the administration will not unveil its peace plan until at least after the November midterm elections.

## Ha'aretz

### **Prosecutor: PM Corruption Probes Will Take 'Months'**

A Tel Aviv district attorney said Tuesday that it will take “months” before investigations are completed on corruption cases involving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Liat Ben Ari Shwekey said the investigations could not be sped up at the expense of the truth. She said, “There are additional inquiries being made in both 1000 and 2000, some of them because of changes in Case 4000 [the Bezeq bribery case] and some not. We are sitting and writing opinions in these cases. It will take months.” Deputy Attorney General Raz Nizri noted that witness Nir Hefetz had given “dozens or hundreds of recordings containing hundreds if not thousands of hours of audio.”

## Associated Press

### **Supreme Court Says Israel Can Demolish Khan al-Ahmar**

Israel's Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected an appeal against the demolition of a Bedouin village in the West Bank, ruling that its stay would expire in a week and the encampment could then legally be torn down. The fate of Khan al-Ahmar has drawn heavy international attention and become a rallying cry for the Palestinians. Israel claims the village was illegally built and has offered to resettle residents about 7 miles away. But critics say it's impossible for Palestinians to get building permits and that the demolition is meant to make room for an Israeli settlement.

## Associated Press

### **Gaza Crossing Shut After Palestinian Violence**

The Israeli military says it has shut down the main personnel crossing into Gaza after hundreds of Palestinian rioters hurled rocks and damaged the terminal. The military says Wednesday the Erez Crossing will be closed until the damage caused by the rioters is repaired. In the meantime, crossing will only be permitted for individually approved humanitarian cases. Israeli troops responded with tear gas and live fire to the violence late Tuesday and several Palestinians were wounded. Such violence is rare at Erez, which is the only terminal for travel into Israel or the West Bank from Gaza.

## **Lapid Vows to Win War for Israel's Soul**

Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid promised to prevent Netanyahu from forming the next government in a speech to his party's activists at a pre-Rosh Hashana toast Tuesday night. "Netanyahu is destroying the Israeli family," Lapid said. "There is nothing he will not do in order to maintain power. He attacks the police, the courts, IDF officers, Yesh Atid, and everything that is good, fair and honest. This is the time to fight back. This is not just a struggle for the state of the country. It is a war for the soul. We will not let our family be harmed."

Associated Press

## **Donors Step Up UNRWA Funding After US Cuts**

The top official with the U.N.'s Palestinian aid agency says countries including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and India have stepped up in recent months with a "very high amount" of \$238 million in extra funding amid U.S. cuts. UNRWA Commissioner Pierre Kraehenbuehl reiterated his disappointment with the Trump administration's announcement last week that it's cutting all funding for the agency, after partial cuts announced earlier this year. Despite the new contributions, Kraehenbuehl said that the funding situation remains "critical," and over \$200 million is needed this year to "sustain our operations."

Ha'aretz

## **Hamas Chief Lowers Tensions, Says Still No Draft Deal**

Hamas' leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, said Tuesday that "at present there's no agreement or draft agreement with Israel" on a cease-fire but added that Hamas had relaxed protests near the border to allow for further contacts between the sides and the lifting of the Gaza blockade. Last week Sinwar said a cease-fire agreement with Israel was possible even without a reconciliation between Hamas and the Fatah-led PA; he said Egypt had expressed a willingness for such a scenario. On Tuesday, he touted the Gazans' ability to put on pressure when necessary. He said the demonstrations near the fence were a strategic decision by Hamas and the other factions, and that the pressure created by the marches and the airborne firebombs had forced Israel to seek solutions for Gaza.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel's Population Hits 8.9 Million**

Israel's population on the eve of next week's Rosh Hashanah holiday reached 8.9 million, the Central Bureau of Statistics announced on Tuesday. It predicted that the population will reach 10 million by 2024, 15 million by 2048 and 20 million by 2065. The data include Israeli settlers in the West Bank. The Jewish population is 6.6 million, or 74 percent of the total. The Arab population is 1.9 million, or 21 percent of the total. The remaining five percent consists of non-Arab Christians; members of faiths other than Judaism, Islam and Christianity; and people with no religion. The population rose by 2 percent since last year.

## Trump's Anti-Palestinian Agenda Will Ultimately Hurt Israel

By Ishaan Tharoor, Analyst

- The U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, has tended to the needs of Palestinian refugees for nearly seven decades. But if President Trump has his way, it will soon be out of business. On Friday, his administration said it would cease funding the U.N. agency, which was launched in 1949 to provide for more than 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were forced from their homes in what is now Israel. Relying on volunteer donors — of which Washington has been the largest — UNRWA has had its mandate renewed repeatedly by the U.N. General Assembly as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has dragged on. Over the decades, the population of Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories and now-semi-permanent camps in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon has ballooned to around 5 million, encompassing the descendants of the original exiles.
- The White House, along with Israel's right wing, argues that the rolls of recognized refugees should be limited to those alive in 1949 — a move at odds with other U.N. operations that also confer refugee status upon the descendants of the displaced. At a conference in Washington last week, Nikki Haley, Trump's envoy to the United Nations, bemoaned the “endless number of refugees that continue to get assistance” and how “the Palestinians continue to bash America.” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and many other leading Israeli politicians cheered Trump's decision. Meanwhile, UNRWA officials are scrambling to raise funds from the European Union and Arab countries, adamant that their mission is necessary until a meaningful peace is achieved. “There is only one thing that perpetuates the situation of refugees, including Palestinian refugees, and that is the extraordinary failure of the international community to bring about a just and fair and inclusive solution to the conflict,” Pierre Krähenbühl, UNRWA's commissioner general, said to The Washington Post's Ruth Eglash.
- The move against UNRWA is only the latest blow to Palestinians delivered by Trump. It follows cuts in U.S. development aid to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza as well the administration's decision last year to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, widely seen as a dismissal of Palestinians' claims to East Jerusalem as their future seat of government. The Trump administration's approach has alienated the already enfeebled Palestinian Authority, led by Mahmoud Abbas, who is the key interlocutor in any peace deal with Israel. While Trump's lieutenants insist they are blazing a path toward a new grand bargain, it has become abundantly clear that the White House is in ideological lockstep with Netanyahu and his government, which includes ministers who openly claim the Palestinians will never have their own state.
- According to reports, Abbas claimed that Trump envoys have even floated the prospect of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian confederation rather than Palestinian independence. “His negotiations have put me in a position where I have nothing to lose. Why should I talk to them?” Saeb Erekat, secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said to The Post. “They

have disqualified themselves from any role in the peace process and destroyed all prospects of peace.” Khaled Elgindy, a fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy, told the Intercept: “Past U.S. administrations were also slanted toward the Israelis, but what’s different today is that the usual mitigating factors in decision-making, such as American national security interests and the desire to at least appear evenhanded, no longer seem to be present. Instead we have domestic politics and ideology in their purest form dictating U.S. policy on this issue.” This may have disastrous short-term consequences for Palestinians dependent on UNRWA assistance. Trump's move surprised Israel’s security establishment, which fears a humanitarian crisis. Those concerns are shared by many in Washington.

- But there are long-term dangers for Israel as well. Netanyahu has embraced an ever more strident nationalism, pushing through a controversial national-identity law that undercuts minority rights. Abroad, he flirts with authoritarian leaders willing to back Israel in international forums — even if they have track records of anti-Semitism. He has, moreover, assiduously sought to shift focus away from peace with the Palestinians to the threat of Iran. In that project, he has presided over a warming in relations with Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. “Publicly, Arab dictators say full peace with Israel will only be possible when the Palestinian issue is solved, but in private, they are continuously drawing closer to Israel,” wrote Haaretz’s Anshel Pfeffer. “Indeed, their joint interests in confronting Iran and the Islamic State easily trump any true Arab solidarity with the Palestinians.”
- All of this has made Netanyahu dominant in Israeli politics, but it has fueled growing anger abroad. As Trump and Netanyahu seemingly pile more dirt on the coffin of the two-state solution, comparisons to apartheid-era South Africa have become more common. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which urges foreign governments and corporations to boycott Israel as long as it maintains its occupation over Palestinians, has become an increasingly important factor in the politics of peace. And as bipartisan support for Israel fades in the United States, Netanyahu's right-wing stances leave Israel more vulnerable to censure. “The alliance between Israel’s allies and ultra-nationalists in Europe and the US has become a central theme of the BDS campaign’s messages. In this respect, the Trump era has been good for the movement,” Nathan Thrall, an expert on Israeli-Palestinian politics, wrote in the Guardian. “So has the Netanyahu government, whose attacks on BDS have been among the greatest drivers of publicity and recruitment for the campaign.”
- If this worries the Israeli prime minister, he isn't showing it. In a speech last week, Netanyahu eschewed his country’s ostensibly liberal values and offered a chilling argument that might makes right. In the Middle East, he said, “there is no place for the weak.” And the Palestinians, it can be inferred, ought to know their place.

## **The Right Decision at the Wrong Time**

By Yossi Beilin, former Israeli Minister and Knesset Member

- The Trump administration's decision to completely cut funding to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees, is both a just and rash decision. It is just because instead of emancipating Palestinians from their refugee-dom, this agency sustains their refugee status. UNRWA is the only U.N. organization that cares exclusively for one group of refugees. Alongside the genuine assistance it provides in terms of education, health and food, UNRWA also works to ensure it will always remain in existence and helps foster the illusion that a majority of refugees will return to their villages and cities inside Israel proper.
- For many years, we have tried to convince our friends around the world to bring about UNRWA's closure, and relinquish the agency's important functions to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. I spoke with U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres about this on numerous occasions, both in his previous role as High Commissioner for Refugees as well as in his current position. I understood from his response that this would not happen as long as the 134 member-states of the Non-Aligned Movement continue to support UNRWA's existence, as a gesture to the Palestinians. For the Palestinian leadership, the leaders of the Arab world and many of our friends around the world, there is nothing more unifying than paying lip service to the right of return, a right they know full well will never be realized. The other accusations against UNRWA are partially true. It is not a terrorist organization and it does not support terrorism, even if Hamas' military wing has taken advantage of the proximity of UNRWA's hospitals and schools to stockpile its weapons and even if quite a few of UNRWA's teaching and medical staff, in particular in the Gaza Strip, support the terrorist organization.
- There is constant tension between the U.N. aid agency and the Hamas leadership, which is reflected in the dismissal of employees actively identified with Hamas targets as well as educational activities organized by UNRWA that the Islamist organization deems unacceptable, like the organization's "overly liberal" summer camps. Ever since 1967, Israel has benefited from the existence of this organization, which provides for the needs of some 70% of Gazans and some 30% of the West Bank's residents. There has been friction with UNRWA's representatives, but there has also been collaboration.
- In the 2003 Geneva Initiative, it was agreed upon with our Palestinian partners that within five years of signing an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, which would include reparations to be provided by an international fund for the Palestinians, an Israeli reference to their suffering and a willingness to take in a symbolic number of refugees, UNRWA would be shut down and the Palestinians would lose their refugee status. Instead of immediately pulling the plug on its funding to the organization, the U.S. would be wise to announce the implementation of such a move in June 2020, when the UNRWA's current mandate comes to an end, and that until that

time, efforts would be made to find other organizations to take on UNRWA's responsibilities. If not, it will be Israel, along with the Palestinians, that will be made to pay the price.