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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 7, 2018

Ynet News

Trump: If Palestinians Don't Make a Deal, They'll Get No Money

President Donald Trump said on Thursday that the US would not renew its transfer of funds to the Palestinians until they agreed to come to the negotiating table with Israel to end the decades-long conflict. The Trump administration recently announced it would cease to provide any financial aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which the US and Israel have accused of deliberately bloating the number of bona fide Palestinian refugees. "What I will tell you is I stopped massive amounts of money that we were paying to the Palestinians and the Palestinian leaders," Trump said in a conference call with rabbis and Jewish leaders ahead of the festival of Rosh Hashanah. See also, [Trump: U.S. Cut Financial Aid to Palestinians as Means of Pressuring Them Back Into Negotiations](#) (Ha'aretz)

Jerusalem Post

Dermer 'Confident' Trump's Plan will Incorporate Arab States

Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to Washington, expressed "confidence" on Wednesday that US President Donald Trump's Mideast peace plan will capitalize on thawing ties between the Jewish state and the Arab world. Addressing guests at a reception, including members of the peace team, Dermer said that Israel is ready for the release of Trump's peace proposal and believes it will "try to use the new realities taking shape in our region to help us forge a new path to peace and reconciliation." The administration has repeatedly denied or dodged rumors that the plan –would offer Palestinians a confederation with their Arab neighbors, diminish the identifying status of Palestinians as refugees. See also, ['Israel's ambassador: Arab states no longer dance to 'Palestinian tune' \(i24 News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

U.S. Pressuring Paraguay Not to Move Embassy from Jerusalem

The Trump administration is putting pressure on Paraguay not to cancel its decision to move the Paraguayan embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. A statement by the White House on Thursday said that the administration has contacted Paraguay's new President Mario Abdo Benitez, and asked him not to reverse his predecessor's decision on this matter. According to the statement, the administration "strongly encouraged President Abdo Benitez to follow through with Paraguay's previous commitment to move the embassy as a sign of the historic relationship the country has maintained with both Israel and the United States."

Times of Israel

Paraguay Urges Israel to Reverse Asuncion Embassy Closure

Paraguayan President Mario Abdo Benitez on Thursday urged Israel to reconsider the closing of its embassy in Asuncion, calling it an "exaggerated" response to the South American country's decision to move its embassy back to Tel Aviv. The diplomatic dispute began in May when outgoing President Horacio Cartes authorized moving the Paraguayan Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, as the United States and Guatemala had already done. The move pleased Israel and Washington but infuriated the Palestinians and their supporters. Abdo Benitez, who won Paraguay's election in April but had yet to take office when Cartes announced the move in one of his final acts as president, had said he would review the decision.

Report: Israel Funded, Armed Syrian Rebel Groups

Israel secretly armed and funded 12 rebel organizations in south Syria, which in recent years have helped prevent pro-Iranian and ISIS fighters from establishing themselves near the Golan Heights, according to an article published Thursday in Foreign Policy magazine. According to the report, more than twenty-four commanders and rank-and-file members of the rebel groups confirmed the claim. The report claims that the transfer of weapons to the groups, which ended this July, included assault rifles, machine guns, mortar shells and transport vehicles which were delivered by Israeli security forces through three gates on the Golan Heights. See also, ["Israel supplied Syrian rebels with weapons, funding to combat Iran: report \(i24 News\)](#)

Reuters

U.S. Envoy Sees Israel Keeping Golan Heights Forever

The U.S. ambassador to Israel said in remarks published on Thursday he expected Israel to keep the Golan Heights in perpetuity, in an apparent nod towards its claim of sovereignty over the strategic plateau captured from Syria in a 1967 war. Foreign governments, including the United States, do not recognize Israel's claim and President Donald Trump's national security adviser has said Washington's policy is unchanged. However, U.S. ambassador David Friedman suggested Israel was there to stay and said it was possible the United States would consider recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights in the future. "I personally cannot imagine a situation in which the Golan Heights will be returned to Syria. I frankly cannot imagine a situation in which the Golan Heights is not part of Israel forever," he told the right-wing Israel Hayom newspaper.

Times of Israel

Jordan Steps Up Support of East Jerusalem Palestinians

The Jordanian government has taken steps to aid Arabs living in Jerusalem and to bolster the civil defense guards at Al-Aqsa Mosque. Wasfi Kilani, director of the Hashemite Fund for Al-Aqsa Mosque, told Arab News that the actions come as part of a combined effort to support Palestinian Jerusalemites. "With instructions from His Majesty, we have endeavored to provide administrative support to Jerusalemites by reducing passport fees by a third, and by increasing the number of guards and administrators of the Jordanian waqf in Al-Aqsa Mosque to 1,000," Kilani said. Fawaz Shahwan, head of Jordan's Passport Department, told Arab News that the Cabinet has accepted recommendations to reduce passport fees and allow Jerusalem's Palestinians, a majority of whom have Jordanian passports and documents, to renew their passports without the burden of travel to Amman.

Ha'aretz

Probe into PM's '4000 Affair' Raises Suspicions Against Wife

The evidence gathered in the Bezeq-Walla case is liable to embroil Sara Netanyahu in additional fraud charges. She already faces such charges over financial irregularities at the prime minister's residences. The fraud of which she is suspected in the Bezeq-Walla case relates to the employment of the Netanyahu family's former media advisor, Nir Hefetz. Last week, a police representative announced what had hitherto only been hinted at: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife are both suspected of taking bribes from Bezeq owner Shaul Elovitch and his wife Iris, in the form of flattering coverage by Bezeq's internet news site, Walla. But it seems unlikely that Sara Netanyahu will actually be charged with taking bribes in this case.

Crazy Poor Middle Easterners

By Thomas L. Friedman, New York Times, foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist

- I greatly enjoyed the movie “Crazy Rich Asians” because, beyond the many laugh lines, it reminded me of an important point: Rich Asia has gotten really rich — not because it doesn’t have political, tribal, ethnic and religious differences like other regions, but because in more places on more days it learned to set those differences aside and focus on building the real foundations of sustainable wealth: education, trade, infrastructure, human capital and, in the most successful places, the rule of law. Most of Asia became prosperous not by discovering natural resources but by tapping its human resources — men and women — and giving them the tools to realize their potential.
- It got me thinking that if someone were to do a similar movie about the Middle East it could be called “Crazy Poor Middle Easterners.” Because, with a few exceptions, this region has never been a bigger mess, had more people fighting over who owns which olive tree, had more cities turned to rubble by rival sects and missed its potential so vastly. The region of the world that should be naturally rich has made itself poor by repeatedly letting the past bury the future and the region that is naturally poor has made itself rich by letting the future bury the past.
- Now President Trump says he wants to get out of the Middle East. But America’s real choices there are not stay or go, but be smart or dumb. And Trump has been dumb. He’s subcontracted order-making there to our allies Israel and Saudi Arabia and his pal Vladimir Putin. So now Trump is getting a lesson, as we speak, in what happens when America writes blank checks to allies and pals — who share some of our interests but also have extreme impulses of their own — and abdicates real diplomatic leadership.
- Let’s go to the videotape. Iran has far overstretched itself, extending its malign military and religious influence into Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, where it has reportedly partnered with the Alawite/Shiite regime of Bashar al-Assad to engage in the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis from regions of Syria to be replaced by Shiites. It’s an ugly, ugly business.
- Israel’s prime minister has smartly built a relationship with Putin over the last three years — with tens of meetings and phone calls — to ensure that Israel’s Air Force can operate against Iran in Syria and that Russia keeps the Iranians away from the Israeli border. But even with that, and even though the Israelis have so penetrated Iranian units that Iran’s Revolutionary Guards land supply planes full of missiles in Damascus at 6 p.m. and Israel blows them up by 8 p.m. — the Iranians keep trying to turn Syria into a forward missile base against Israel.
- And on Tuesday, Russia’s Air Force bombed Idlib Province — the last major gathering center for Islamist anti-regime rebels in Syria and the hundreds of thousands of Sunni refugees who have fled the regime’s poison gas and other attacks.
- Trump tweeted: “President Bashar al-Assad of Syria must not recklessly attack Idlib Province. The Russians and Iranians would be making a grave humanitarian mistake to take part in this potential human tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of people could be killed. Don’t let that happen!” Trump seems to have drawn a red line with his tweet, but Russia and Iran are telling

the U.S. and Israel: Without troops on the ground, you don't have a vote. We're going for broke. What is Trump going to do if Iran, Assad and Russia ignore him?

- **And what is Trump's team doing in Israel? First it moved the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem — giving the right-wing Israeli government of Bibi Netanyahu a long-coveted prize — and asked for nothing in return.**
- **Trump could have told Bibi that he would move the embassy but only in return for Israel halting all settlement-building beyond the West Bank blocks in the densely populated Arab areas that would likely be put under Palestinian control in any peace deal. That might have actually advanced the peace process. Instead, the U.S. gave up one of its most valuable diplomatic assets free. How foolish was that?**
- **Now Trump's team is punishing the Palestinians for not negotiating with Netanyahu — who has not put any deal on the table — by cutting off aid to the Palestinian Authority — aid that went to projects like water and sewage treatment — and contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, a major employer in the West Bank and Gaza and the primary source of secular — i.e. non-Islamist — education for Palestinians.**
- **Trump thinks he can just keep bludgeoning the Palestinians and never ask Israel to do anything hard and prevent things from getting any worse. Well, yes, they can get worse. The Palestinian Authority can collapse — and as feckless and corrupt as it may be, if it goes, it will be hard to rebuild; Israel would have to provide all the governance in the West Bank at a huge cost.**
- **And then there's Saudi Arabia. I have little doubt that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was the only one in his family who would have initiated the vital social, religious and economic reforms that he's dared to do all at once — and that he is also the only one in that family who'd have undertaken the bullying foreign policy initiatives, domestic power plays and excessive personal buying sprees he's dared to do all at once. These are two halves of the same M.B.S. package, and, as I've argued, our job is to help curb his bad impulses and nurture his good ones. But Trump — who still doesn't even have an ambassador in Saudi Arabia — is AWOL.**
- **To repeat: Democracy is not on the agenda in Saudi Arabia, but social, economic and religious reform is. M.B.S.'s government for the first time just appointed women to several key municipality leadership jobs. Considering the hugely damaging role that Saudi Arabia played in the Arab Muslim world, when, post-1979, it began to aggressively spread its puritanical form of Islam — which helped to seed 9/11 — the idea that the kingdom has a leader today who might begin to shift Sunni Islam onto a more open and moderate path, one that would isolate radical Islamists and strengthen moderates everywhere, is a huge U.S. interest to nurture.**
- **Lately, though, M.B.S. has undertaken a series of ill-considered steps that are hurting him, Saudi Arabia and us. M.B.S. has a few very extreme advisers who keep telling him to follow the "China model" — China asserted itself in the South China Sea, the world complained, China responded to get lost, and eventually the world backed down. So when Canada mildly criticized a Saudi Arabian human rights abuse, M.B.S. went nuclear on Canada and virtually broke off relations. It was an absurd overreaction. Saudi Arabia is not China. It needs friends. It needs to be more Dubai than Shanghai — more soft power, less bullying.**
- **Interestingly, last August, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai — one of the wisest men in the region — put out a series of tweets that caught many eyes in Saudi. One said the Arab world had "a management crisis, not a crisis of resources. Look at China and**

Japan ... where they are now, even without natural resources. There are countries that possess oil, gas, water and human capital but lack development and even cannot provide basic services, such as roads and electricity, to their people.”

- Whatever good publicity M.B.S. got for letting women drive was undermined by his arresting Saudi women driving activists on charges of being related to some anti-Saudi groups in London. Seriously, is Saudi Arabia really threatened by women driving activists? And the Saudi-U.A.E. war in Yemen has been so badly botched by incompetents in the Saudi Air Force that they are now being accused of possible war crimes.
- The future stability of the whole Arab Gulf depends on the reform process in Saudi succeeding; it's that important. But it can't succeed without significant investments by foreigners and Saudis to create a more vibrant and diverse private sector that can offer decent jobs to all the young Saudis, men and women, coming out of universities at home and abroad. M.B.S. remains popular with many of them, but if they can't find jobs, the religious extremists in Saudi Arabia will find many recruits among them.
- With so many things that M.B.S. has done in recent months, on the advice of old guard security types around him, he has put politics and security issues ahead of the need to attract investors and talent and ministers ready to take chances and tell him the truth. Each action may have been individually justifiable, but taken together they suggest that he's lost the plot; he's creating more uncertainty than respect.
- And it shows. Bloomberg reported on Aug. 17: According to research by Standard Chartered, in the first quarter of 2018 Saudi Arabia “saw \$14.4 billion in outward portfolio investment into foreign equities, the largest surge since 2008.” Bad sign.
- Trump and his team don't understand: The U.S. can't just subcontract order-making in the Middle East to Israel, Russia and Saudi Arabia and write them blank checks. Their leaders actually need us to draw redlines for them, too, so they can tell their own hotheads and extremists, “Hey, I am with you — but the Americans won't let me do that.” Being the reality principle, balancer and honest broker has been a U.S. role since the 1970s. If we abdicate it, we'll just end up creating more crazy poor Middle Easterners.

SUMMARY: I greatly enjoyed the movie “Crazy Rich Asians” because, beyond the many laugh lines, it reminded me of an important point: Rich Asia has gotten really rich — not because it doesn't have political, tribal, ethnic and religious differences like other regions, but because in more places on more days it learned to set those differences aside and focus on building the real foundations of sustainable wealth: education, trade, infrastructure, human capital and, in the most successful places, the rule of law. It got me thinking that if someone were to do a similar movie about the Middle East it could be called “Crazy Poor Middle Easterners.” Because, with a few exceptions, this region has never been a bigger mess, had more people fighting over who owns which olive tree, had more cities turned to rubble by rival sects and missed its potential so vastly. The region of the world that should be naturally rich has made itself poor by repeatedly letting the past bury the future and the region that is naturally poor has made itself rich by letting the future bury the past.

Israeli Women Can Now Command IAF Squadrons, But are They Equal?

By Debra Kamin, international journalist

- **When retired Col. Miri Eisin graduated from high school in Israel in 1980, she was drafted like every 18-year-old boy and girl in the Jewish State to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It was both a totally ordinary and extraordinary event: At home in Israel, military service is as much a part of quotidian life as taxes and public transport. But zooming out of that postage-stamp-sized nation and taking in the state of the world as a whole, Israel's military — which is among only a handful on earth to require conscription of its female citizens — is radically unique.**
- **Eisin, who was born in Northern California but raised in Israel, speaks fluent English and also impressive French. It was mostly for her language skills, she says, that she was placed into military intelligence, a role that jived well with her personality. Eisin is quick-thinking, intelligent and has fierce work ethics, which might have been why — while still in her compulsory training — she pushed very hard to get accepted into an officers' training course. Eisin would go on to spend 20 years in the military, far beyond the mandatory two years that are required of Israeli women (men must serve for three years). She rose all the way up to the rank of colonel — a position whose stripes are so elusive that only 2% of the officers wearing them in Israel have ever been women.**
- **At the time, she was extraordinary. While equality for women in the IDF looks much different today than it did when Eisin first joined up as a teenager, the reality, she says, is that equality has never been the goal. "Everything that has to do with women in the [Israeli] military has evolved, developed and changed in the last 25 years," she says. "Most women used to go to clerical positions, but I was lucky, and I pushed very hard to go to an officers' course."**
- **Today, the Israeli military looks quite different. Fifty-one percent of all officers in the military are women, among them the first-ever female Israel air force squadron commander — known only by her first initial, Maj. G — who was tapped for her boundary-breaking position early last month. In 2017, the country launched its first program to train female tank commanders. A few months earlier, it announced with great pride that the numbers of women serving in combat positions were up by 38%. Progress, it seems, has been steady and swift. It was only in 2001 that a woman — Roni Zuckerman — reached the pilot's seat itself in the Israel air force, meaning it took less than two decades to leapfrog from that achievement to the position of squadron commander.**
- **But forward momentum, much like war itself, is always more complicated on the ground. Eisin, today a mother of three who is retired from the army and serves as a geopolitical expert, looks at her experience as a woman fighter with the cut-and-dry steadiness one might expect from a career soldier. "It isn't about equality 50/50, it's about equal opportunity," she says. "In general I feel that the military has given back to me as much as I have given it," she says bluntly. "I [served in] a lot of diverse and amazing positions, and I think that's a dimension of the modern world and what the last 100 years have given women."**

- Retired Brig. Gen. Gila Klifa-Amir, who during her distinguished service served as the IDF chief of staff's adviser on women's affairs, says she is immensely proud of the gains made toward embracing women as soldiers within Israeli society. "It must be understood that gender equality is an evolutionary process within a developing society," she says. "The IDF has gone a significant distance and has adjusted and changed a great deal over the years in this arena.
- But a key point often left out of the conversation about women fighters and Israeli society, she says, is actually the most important: Women have not excelled within the ranks of the IDF because of the firm lobbying hand of the women's rights movement. On the contrary, Klifa-Amir says. They have excelled because their advancement has gone hand-in-hand with the primary aim of the IDF itself, which is protecting the State of Israel above all. "Equal opportunity for women in the IDF is not a discussion of balancing state security and women's rights. Rather, preserving the rights of women in the IDF in itself promotes the basic interests of both the IDF and Israel as a whole," she says.
- Today, when young women arrive for their first day of mandatory service on military bases across Israel, there are more positions open to them than were open to Eisin on her first day those decades ago. But much of the reasoning for the opening of those positions has simply been a matter of good sense: Those young women, it has been determined, are as capable as the young men alongside them to fill those ranks, so the doors have been unlocked.
- Eisin, who retired from military service after the birth of her third child, says with a hint of irony in her voice that working mothers in every field will always shoulder a burden that their male colleagues do not. "I wasn't forced out," she says, "but life is always about timing." She wanted to take a year-long maternity leave after the birth of her third child, an option many women in Israel choose to take — their right to a full year away from work is protected by the law — and her superiors offered her an early retirement and collection of her pension instead. "This aspect of how you balance your professional life and your married life and your life with children — that balance doesn't have to do with the military, really," she says. "It has to do with every working mother I can think of."

SUMMARY: A key point often left out of the conversation about women fighters and Israeli society, she says, is actually the most important: Women have not excelled within the ranks of the IDF because of the firm lobbying hand of the women's rights movement. On the contrary, Klifa-Amir says. They have excelled because their advancement has gone hand-in-hand with the primary aim of the IDF itself, which is protecting the State of Israel above all. "Equal opportunity for women in the IDF is not a discussion of balancing state security and women's rights. Rather, preserving the rights of women in the IDF in itself promotes the basic interests of both the IDF and Israel as a whole," she says.