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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, May 29*

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# News Excerpts

May 29, 2019

## Jerusalem Post

### **Coalition or Repeat Election: Verdict Due by Midnight**

The people of Israel and the world will only find out close to midnight's deadline for building a coalition whether the country is headed to the formation of a new government or an unprecedented repeat election on September 17. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's spokesman said no meeting was set Tuesday with Yisrael Beytenu Avigdor Liberman, who holds the key to the coalition's formation, and there was no progress toward reaching a compromise with Liberman, who the spokesman said "rejects every offer and continues stalling." Netanyahu continued preparing for an election on Tuesday. The Likud's secretariat approved a deal to run with Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon's socioeconomic Kulanu Party. See also, ["Netanyahu still struggling to sway Liberman as coalition deadline looms" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Likud Okays Merger with Kulanu, Confirms Netanyahu as PM**

The Likud secretariat on Tuesday approved a merger deal between the party and Moshe Kahlon's center-right Kulanu and confirmed that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be its prime ministerial candidate in the next election, preventing any of the premier's rivals within the party from leading the faction if snap elections are called. The motion backed by the party will see four slots on the Likud slate reserved for Kulanu members: 5, 15, 29, 35, with Kahlon placed fifth. The party also authorized Netanyahu to remain at the helm of the Likud leadership if new elections are held in the fall and said the Likud list — apart from adjustments due to the Kulanu additions — would remain unchanged, waiving a requirement to hold party primaries before each general election.

## Ynet News

### **Rivlin: Will Not Interfere if Government Decides to Call for Elections**

President Reuven Rivlin's chambers made a statement Tuesday saying that, despite recurring pleas to Rivlin to intervene and allow another MK to assemble a government, the president plans to allow Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to use the rest of the time he was allocated in order to present a new government. "Until tomorrow at midnight, Netanyahu has the mandate to assemble a government," said the statement. "The president will allow Netanyahu to use the remaining time, in hopes we won't have to hold another elections." See also, ["RIVLIN INUNDATED WITH REQUESTS TO PREVENT ANOTHER ELECTION" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Trump Team to Meet Leaders of Israel, Jordan as it Sells Peace Plan**

President Donald Trump's top Mideast advisers face skeptical audiences as they visit several locations in the region and in Europe starting Tuesday to rally support for what they have billed as a workshop on the economic foundations of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The White House is promoting the June 25-26 meeting in the Gulf state of Bahrain as the first phase of its long-awaited Mideast peace plan, which envisions large-scale investment and infrastructure work, much of it funded by wealthy Arab countries, in the Palestinian territories. But American officials say the Bahrain conference will not include the core political issues of the conflict: See also, ["Kushner visits Middle East and Morocco ahead of White House's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan release" \(CNN\)](#)

## **Russia Slams US Economic 'Peace Workshop' in Bahrain**

Russia's embassy in Tel Aviv on Tuesday harshly criticized the upcoming "peace conference" in Bahrain, saying the US-led initiative represents the "persistent desire to replace a comprehensive political solution with economic 'bonuses.'" Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said on Monday that Russia and China will boycott the June 25-26 conference in Manama, Channel 13 reported. According to the report, Erekat was briefed by China's ambassador to Palestine who informed him and other Palestinian officials about the boycott. Last week, the Palestinian leadership officially confirmed they would not attend the US-led peace conference, which will aim to achieve prosperity in an attempt to persuade the Palestinians to make larger political compromises in the future. See also, ["China, Russia Will Not Attend Trump's Bahrain Conference, Top Palestinian Official Says" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Strikes Syrian Anti-aircraft Targets in Lebanon**

Israel struck a Syrian military target in Quneitra on Monday after an anti-aircraft missile was launched earlier at an Israeli fighter jet, the Israeli army said. Also Monday, a report in the Lebanese media outlet Al Mayadeen said an Israeli drone struck a surveillance system in southern Lebanon. An additional report said the Lebanese army was at the scene investigating the device, which is said to be Israeli. According to Syrian state media, one officer was killed and two others were wounded in the strike, which took place Monday afternoon. The report added that Syrian air defense attacked an unmanned aerial vehicle that entered Syrian airspace near the southern suburb. Residents in the Golan Heights told Haaretz that they heard military jets and blasts from the nearby border with Syria. See also, ["Israel reportedly strikes its own spy-device in Lebanon" \(TV7\)](#)

Israel Hayom

## **Israel, Lebanon Close to Framework for Land-Sea Border Talks**

The Lebanese Foreign Ministry says Lebanon and Israel are close to establishing a framework for negotiations on demarcating the Lebanese-Israeli land and maritime borders. In a statement, it said the form of negotiations to be held under U.N. auspices and the role of each of the concerned parties is still being worked out. The purported negotiations are to be overseen by Washington, which has been mediating between the Middle East nations. The statement came after a meeting Tuesday between Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil and U.S. Acting Secretary of State David Satterfield, who has been shuttling between the two countries to mediate in the border dispute. See also, ["Israel agrees to talks with Lebanon on sea border" \(Globes\)](#)

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## **Gaza Fishing Zone Reduced Again in Response to Fire Balloons**

Israel's military liaison to the Palestinians announced Wednesday that Israel was reducing the the fishing zone off the coast of the Gaza Strip by a third, to just 10 nautical miles, in response to a rash of balloons carrying incendiaries from the Palestinian enclave that have caused fires in border areas. Israel has adjusted the size of the fishing zone several times recently, rewarding calm along the border by expanding the fishing zone, then reducing it following balloon attacks — apparently under the terms of an unacknowledged ceasefire agreement with the Gaza-ruling Hamas terror group. Wednesday's announcement by the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories said the restriction would remain in place until further notice.

## **Netanyahu and Lieberman's Political Fight Just Got Out of Hand**

By Ravit Hecht, Ha'aretz contributor

- There is no point trying to predict what will happen before the deadline for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to present his government on Wednesday because it is impossible to divine the thoughts of Yisrael Beiteinu chairman MK Avigdor Lieberman. Yet one thing can be said even now with some degree of confidence; the military conscription law and the crisis with the ultra-Orthodox is not the main story, but rather a cover for much deeper and driven motivations.
- If it's about hunger for power, vengeance or just plain sadism in dragging Netanyahu's frayed nerves publicly through the streets, Lieberman has achieved his goal, so a narrow (and terrible) right-wing government can be declared. It is possible that, as former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said in a Haaretz podcast, Lieberman, who broke the glass ceiling when he became defense minister, finds himself in a position of power greater than anything he ever held before, able to mold Israel's political and civil agenda. Given the magnitude of the crisis, some in the political world imagine in their distress even some sort of coordination with Netanyahu to do God knows what.
- With all due respect to the pundits, things now seem more than a miscalculation leading to a cockfight. They both lost control head-butting each other – Lieberman in his strange obstinacy and Netanyahu in his unbridled counterattacks – and found themselves in the danger zone. It is important to remember that the early election came about in the wake of the indictments against Netanyahu, and the coalition negotiations are stuck now because of that same problem – Netanyahu would have preferred Kahol Lavan over Smotrich and the Kahanists, thus skipping easily over Lieberman and the ultra-Orthodox parties. But there's that matter of evading legal action. Netanyahu is already considering crushing the authority of President Reuven Rivlin, to whom he will have to return his mandate to form a government in dissolving the Knesset.
- Netanyahu's conduct ignores an arrangement that should prevail in normal democratic countries. He shows disregard for the people, who are like subjects in thrall to the leader's private interests, sent to the ballot box any time his stars are misaligned. The truth is that some in Netanyahu's inner orbit perfectly illustrate the obedient lackey. These are the Likud ministers and MKs, who are being humiliated right and left and whose leader considers them (at best) extras in his private show. Except for Gideon Sa'ar, who came out in a limited way against the immunity bill, everyone has fallen silent in light of the crazed rescue campaign of the boss (or they attack Lieberman after they were given permission to bark in his name).
- It's hard to believe that Likud will renounce Netanyahu, without whom the party can establish a unity government with Kahol Lavan in seconds. That's not in the DNA of the movement that commands unity behind a leader as popular as Netanyahu (even if others equally despise him). That's how deplorably weak they have become.

## **US Bahrain Conference Premature**

By Yossi Beilin, columnist at AI Monitor

- **Washington announced in late May that it will hold a regional economic conference in Manama, Bahrain, at the end of June. The Trump team invited most Gulf states and other Arab countries, as well as Israel and the Palestinians.**
- **If it was just a beginner's mistake, without the possibility of causing any harm — if it was simply gratuitous — I would have nothing to say about the “workshop” for finance ministers, scheduled to take place in Bahrain. There have been plenty of gratuitous conferences in our lifetime, and it looks like the one the Trump team is planning for Bahrain could be added to the list. The problem is that this conference could actually be disruptive, especially after all the serious mistakes made by the Trump administration in its efforts to finally resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.**
- **US President Donald Trump's experience is limited to the business world. Perhaps that's why he believes that if he suffocates the Palestinians economically and then tosses them some sweets, they will come running to accept whatever he offers — in coordination with Israel of course. He and his pair of peacemakers — White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt — are making a regrettable mistake. The lion's share of the Palestinian narrative is a story of rage over ongoing humiliation at the hands of Israel and the Arab states. This effort to separate the diplomatic solution from an economic solution will be perceived by the Palestinians as akin to being told, “We're giving you money, so give up your principles.” This would not help in advancing any comprehensive solution to the conflict. If anything, it would convince the Palestinians to adopt a harder line. It would intensify their anger and cause the pragmatic forces — who want to reach an arrangement — to find common ground with the extremists, who oppose any arrangement whatsoever.**
- **Immediately after the signing of the Oslo Accord in the 1990s, efforts were made to expedite the diplomatic breakthrough with a series of economic conferences involving multiple participants, including Arab states with no diplomatic relations with Israel. The first such conference took place in Casablanca, Morocco, in October 1994, with senior leaders from Israel and the Arab world participating. Israel sent a large delegation, including many business leaders, but this scared the Palestinians and many of the other participants, too. I refused to attend, thinking that the event would be perceived as an Israeli invasion of the heart of the Arab world's economy. The conference did, in fact, come under considerable criticism in the media, but not only that — it was a multidimensional media event. The world was thrilled by the sight of Arab representatives in their flowing robes and headdresses, meeting with the Israeli representatives decked out in business suits and chatting with them as if they were old friends. The euphoria surrounding the diplomatic breakthrough may have contributed to the conference's mood, but in the end, the result was disappointing. No major business deals emerged from the event, but it did evoke a sense of panic among those who were concerned about our imperialistic tendencies.**
- **We learned our lesson. In preparation for the second economic conference, which was held in the Jordanian capital of Amman one year later, I headed the preparatory team, which worked together with the Jordanian minister of economy. A concerted effort was made to lower our**

profile, reduce expectations and allow only limited meetings between businessmen (coordinated in advance). While we also presented some government projects, these were very focused and limited in number.

- The Cairo Conference took place in November 1996, at the start of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's first term in office. The next regional conference, which took place in Doha, Qatar, in November 1997, turned out to be the last of these annual events. At the time, it was becoming clear that Netanyahu had no interest in reaching any diplomatic arrangement. Israel's delegates were isolated, and no moves were made to advance joint business ventures. Just as other economic initiatives — such as the Regional Bank in Cairo and the Economic Secretariat in Morocco — fell apart without a diplomatic process, this was the end of the glory days of these regional economic conferences.
- The Trump team doesn't seem to understand the Palestinians, but it also fails to understand the other Arab leaders with whom it supposedly shares a common (diplomatic/business) language. Harsh words can be heard about the Palestinians in closed-door conversations with most Arab leaders, including leaders of the Gulf states. The Palestinian leadership is criticized sharply for missing countless opportunities and for making a long series of mistakes. They are discussed with anger and derision, giving the sense that they are some wart-like protuberance, and that the other Arab leaders would do anything to be rid of them. An inexperienced listener might mistakenly think that these remarks signify a split between the Arab states and the Palestinian leadership, or at the very least, a refusal to stand by their side. The truth, however, is that there is hardly any connection between what they say openly and what they actually do. Arab leaders know that their people in the town square are ardent supporters of the Palestinian cause, so they cannot ignore it.
- We can suppose that anyone meeting with the leaders of the Arab states in early spring 1948 would have walked away with the impression that they had no interest in going to war against the Jews living in the Land of Israel. If the Palestinians wanted to fight them, that was their business. Then, just a short time later, those same leaders responded to the mood in the street by sending their troops to war against the newly formed State of Israel.
- The idea of separating “economic peace” from some resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is nothing but a pipe dream. What will happen in Manama? The Palestinians, who personify the strength of the weak, will not attend the workshop. It is safe to assume that Qatar, which is boycotted by most of the other Gulf states, will not even be invited. The problem isn't just that the conference is putting the cart before the horse — in other words, the economy before peace — but also that the party, which should benefit from aid before all the others, and the main provider of that aid, will not even be in attendance. Arab finance ministers who do attend the event will be very wary of showing the slightest sign of intimacy with the Israeli foreign minister or the Israeli business leaders in attendance. Meanwhile, Fatah and Hamas, which said that they will remain at home, will be able to finally rediscover the common ground that they lost: “The people shall dwell alone” (Numbers 23:9) This phrase, which is usually used referring to the Jewish people, can now be implemented in regard to the Palestinians — alone but united against everybody else.
- This farce can still be avoided. The Trump team's diplomatic plan could be released on June 24, along with ideas to fund the economic initiatives that are either part of the plan or that would result from it, rather than presenting the economy and peace them as two distinct and separate

issues. It is also possible to abandon the idea of the workshop entirely and postpone this pathetic meeting until the diplomatic plan, now a long two years in the making, is finally released. Scheduling an economic summit such as this before the diplomatic plan is presented and without the participation of the main players would be a very harmful mistake.

**SUMMARY** Immediately after the signing of the Oslo Accord in the 1990s, efforts were made to expedite the diplomatic breakthrough with a series of economic conferences involving multiple participants, including Arab states with no diplomatic relations with Israel. The first such conference took place in Casablanca, Morocco, in October 1994, with senior leaders from Israel and the Arab world participating. Israel sent a large delegation, including many business leaders, but this scared the Palestinians and many of the other participants, too. I refused to attend, thinking that the event would be perceived as an Israeli invasion of the heart of the Arab world's economy. The conference did, in fact, come under considerable criticism in the media, but not only that — it was a multidimensional media event. The world was thrilled by the sight of Arab representatives in their flowing robes and headdresses, meeting with the Israeli representatives decked out in business suits and chatting with them as if they were old friends. The euphoria surrounding the diplomatic breakthrough may have contributed to the conference's mood, but in the end, the result was disappointing. No major business deals emerged from the event, but it did evoke a sense of panic among those who were concerned about our imperialistic tendencies. We learned our lesson.