



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, June 11

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News Excerpts

June 11, 2019

New York Times

U.S. Ambassador Says Israel Has Right to Annex Parts of West Bank

Israel has a right to annex at least some, but “unlikely all,” of the West Bank, the United States ambassador, David M. Friedman, said in an interview, opening the door to American acceptance of what would be an enormously provocative act. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has promised to begin annexing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, a move that would violate international law and could be a fatal blow to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “Under certain circumstances,” Mr. Friedman said, “I think Israel has the right to retain some, but unlikely all, of the West Bank.” See also, [“Palestinians say U.S. ambassador helps Israel to annex part of West Bank” \(Reuters\)](#)

Times of Israel

Firefight Said to Break out Between IDF and PA Security Personnel

Palestinian media reported that Israeli forces surrounded the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority’s Preventive Security Service in Nablus early Tuesday morning. A firefight broke out, reportedly injuring one Palestinian. The circumstances of the incident were still unclear, and the Israel Defense Forces didn’t immediately comment on it. The governor of the West Bank city, Ibrahim Ramadan, said that Israeli forces opened fire on the building and injured a member of the PA’s security forces. He said that fighting took place inside the headquarters, and that Israel had not notified the PA before entering the city, contrary to normal procedures, the Ynet news site reported. See also, [“GUNFIRE EXCHANGE BETWEEN IDF AND PALESTINIAN FORCES IN NABLUS” \(JPost\)](#)

i24 News

Iran has Accelerated Production of Enriched Uranium: IAEA

The UN nuclear watchdog believes Iran has followed through with threats to increase enriched uranium production, IAEA chief Yukiya Amano told a press conference on Monday. The revelation comes as the International Atomic Energy Association said earlier on Monday it was worried about increasing tensions over Iran’s nuclear drive following Tehran’s announcement it would be disengaging in part from the 2015 nuclear deal with major powers. Iran recently announced it would be suspending some of its commitments in the Joint Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Amano declined to elaborate on the rate of Iran’s current uranium enrichment, a key aspect of Iran’s nuclear program. See also, [“Iran’s foreign minister: Netanyahu wants to destroy us, and we will respond” \(TOI\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu: Zarif is Lying, Iran Will Never Develop Nuclear Weapons

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu slammed Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif in a video released on Monday, calling him a repeat liar. Netanyahu said it is “Iran who is openly threatening to destroy [Israel].” He also called out against Iran attempting to establish a military presence in Syria and pointed to a Monday release that the Islamic Republic is speeding up its nuclear program. Netanyahu said that Iranian nuclear capacities “will endanger us and the whole world” and Israel will not allow it to happen. Iran has followed through on a threat to accelerate its production of enriched uranium, IAEA chief Yukiya Amano said on Monday. See also, [“Bibi, Iranian Foreign Minister Trade Threats” \(Jewish Journal\)](#)

Mossad Tipped off UK on Hezbollah Bomb Plot in London– Report

Israel's Mossad spy agency was responsible for providing British authorities with information that helped foil Hezbollah's efforts to stockpile explosives in London in 2015, a senior Israeli official told the Kan public broadcaster Monday. The report said Hezbollah later attempted to move its operations to other countries, which were also notified by Mossad, and that the two organizations were for some time engaged in a game of cat and mouse, as the Iran-backed group sought to realize its plans. According to a report Sunday by The Daily Telegraph, the Hezbollah plot was part of a wider plan to lay the groundwork for future attacks. It noted foiled Hezbollah operations in Thailand, Cyprus, and New York. All those plots were believed to have targeted Israeli interests around the world.

Ynet News

Netanyahu Reluctant But will Attend October Hearing

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu notified Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit on Monday evening that he will attend the hearing related to corruption investigations set for October second, according to the prime minister's attorney Amit Hadad. Hadad said that he asked the attorney general for an extension last week, but he refused. "We believe that there are considerable factors justifying delaying the hearing. We received the investigation material and have begun to read it. But dozens of forms are missing and if we don't have a copy of them, we have no way to read them." "A second thing, in contrast to all other public figures, the committee refuses to allow the prime minister to receive assistance from friends to fund his legal defense," the attorney said. See also, ["NETANYAHU'S LAWYER ASKS AG TO RECONSIDER PM'S HEARING POSTPONEMENT" \(JPost\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israeli Prosecutors Say Sara Netanyahu Hasn't Signed Plea Deal

The state prosecution told the High Court of Justice on Monday that the plea agreement reached with the prime minister's wife, Sara Netanyahu, in the case of alleged misuse of public funds in the Prime Minister's residence, has yet to be signed. Netanyahu's lawyer, Yossi Cohen, asked the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court to delay by a day the presentation of the plea agreement and the corrected indictment. The prosecution's announcement, part of a response to a petition by journalist Uri Misgav against the plea bargain, said, "despite the fact that as part of the process of criminal mediation the parties reached agreements, the plea agreement has yet to be signed." See also, ["Sara Netanyahu plea bargain put on ice at her attorney's request" \(TOI\)](#)

Ha'aretz

PA Pressing for Jewish-Arab Political Alliance Ahead of Elections

The Palestinian Authority is trying to foster Jewish-Arab political cooperation in Israel, either by setting up a new party or by bolstering the Meretz party. Since April's Israeli election, senior PA officials have held talks with Israeli Arab mayors and political activists to explore the possibility of such cooperation. But PA President Mahmoud Abbas has no contact in recent months with the heads of the Israeli Arab political parties, due to Ramallah's unhappiness with their decision to dismantle the joint ticket they ran on in 2015, known as the Joint List. The party leaders are therefore seeking clarifications from Abbas on what exactly is being considered. The talks are being spearheaded by members of the PA's Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society, headed by Abbas confidant Muhammad Al-Madani. Officially, however, the committee denies any involvement in the issue.

With Annexation Comment, Friedman Just Made Netanyahu's Life More Difficult

By Anshel Pfeffer, Columnist at Ha'aretz

- **U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman is no fool. You don't have to understand much about business to realize that keeping Donald Trump afloat for over two decades through bankruptcy after bankruptcy, as Friedman did, was an act of financial and legal wizardry.**
- **Friedman is also a man who has never tried very hard to hide his political views on Israel. His characterization, in a column he wrote for far-right outlet Arutz Sheva in 2016, of the pro-Israel organization J Street as being "far worse than Kapos ... smug advocates of Israel's destruction delivered from the comfort of their secure American sofas" is just one blatant example. (Note that this was a piece he himself wrote, one in which he could reflect on what he was saying before hitting "Send.")**
- **So, if anything, Friedman was on his best behavior — for him at least — when he was expertly interviewed last week by David Halbfinger in The New York Times. He was speaking not as a private citizen but as the U.S. ambassador, sitting in his official residence (now moved to Jerusalem). And from his point of view, he was making a concession. Friedman fervently believes Israel has a right to all of the West Bank, but in the interview he was prepared to accept that "Israel has the right to retain some, but unlikely all, of the West Bank." This was Friedman at his most moderate.**
- **There is a tendency among journalists and diplomats to see Friedman as Benjamin Netanyahu's ideological partner. The truth is that while they are extremely well coordinated — probably on an unprecedented level for ambassador and leader of a foreign country in which the ambassador is stationed — Friedman is clearly to the right of Netanyahu. And while there is significant overlap, he adheres to a different ideology.**
- **Friedman is a long-standing supporter of the religious settler movement and has even been a fundraiser for some of the most hard-core settlements in the West Bank. As far as he is concerned, the Jewish people has every right to every inch of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, and relinquishing that land is both forbidden by the Torah and an existential threat to the Jewish state.**
- **This makes him a member of an extremely vocal but relatively small community that probably numbers no more than 10 percent of American Jewry. It isn't a large proportion of Israeli society either. The party that best represents his views, the Union of Right-Wing Parties, received less than four percent of the total vote in the April 9 Knesset election. The bizarre sequence of events that made Trump president and his bankruptcy lawyer U.S. ambassador to Israel is, from Friedman's perspective, divine intervention: A window of opportunity opening from the heavens to perpetuate Israel's hold over Judea and Samaria.**
- **Netanyahu, on the other hand, is a secular Jewish nationalist and pragmatist. He doesn't believe in God; only in himself. And, like Friedman, he is adamantly opposed to granting the Palestinians sovereignty in the West Bank.**

- But he doesn't seek to extend Israeli sovereignty over the entire territory either. He has no desire to rule directly over the Palestinians and would prefer to see them accepting limited autonomy over disjointed enclaves of Gaza and parts of the West Bank instead. He knows they are not about to accept that, so he is in no hurry to annex any territory beyond what Israel's Labor government already annexed in and around Jerusalem in 1967. For now, he is content to preserve Israel's rule of Area C — the 60 percent of the West Bank under full Israeli civil and security control. Sovereignty can wait. If necessary, for another generation.
- It's a matter of priorities. While the settler movement has been clamoring for sovereignty for decades, Netanyahu has had other priorities — mainly countering Iran on multiple battlefields. The “creeping annexation,” the building of settlements and normalizing of the occupation, has been happening under every Israeli prime minister over the last 52 years. But Netanyahu would prefer not to provoke another intifada or jeopardize the ties he is building with the Saudis and other Arab regimes by annexing parts of the West Bank anytime soon.
- Back in April, when Netanyahu dangled annexation as an enticing carrot for right-wing voters, it was nothing more than an election promise. He was vague, contradictory and didn't back it up with any form of policy planning. When he actually sat down for government coalition talks and the hard-right leaders made a list of demands for the first stage of annexations, he waved them away. “We've talked to Trump's people. We know that Netanyahu could do so much more,” said one frustrated right-winger. “He doesn't want to, and he's been making excuses that we have to wait for the Trump plan.”
- Throughout his entire political career, Netanyahu's overriding strategy has been to try to take the Palestinian issue off the international agenda. That meant both stymieing the Palestinians' national aspirations but also reining in the settlers somewhat. Over the years, international pressure on Israel has decreased as a result of fatigue from lack of progress; different politicians coming to power; and the gradual shift of the global center of gravity away from the West and toward Asian powers who are interested in commerce, not human rights. A rush for annexation, resulting in an outbreak of violence, could refocus international attention. Why risk it?
- The easiest way for Netanyahu to counter the settlers' demands while keeping them in his coalition was to complain about pressure from the Americans. That was his answer every time he was asked why Israel wasn't building more settlements or evicting more Palestinians. Friedman has taken away Netanyahu's excuse.
- It is certainly no coincidence that Netanyahu — usually so quick to praise the slightest gesture coming from the Trump administration — has yet to say a word publicly about the interview. Friedman has done Netanyahu no favors. In less than 100 days — assuming the right wing/religious bloc wins another majority in 2019's second election, which is almost a certainty — Netanyahu will be more vulnerable than ever. The far right is furious at him for not appointing Bezalel Smotrich as justice minister, and for going behind their backs to Labor leader Avi Gabbay two weeks ago in an attempt to cement a last-minute coalition.
- Netanyahu, with his pre-trial indictment hearings just around the corner, will have no more excuses when they demand annexation. By then, the Trump peace plan — if it ever existed in reality — will almost certainly be dead and buried after the farcical “economic workshop” in Bahrain and with Trump entering his own election season and quite possible impeachment. Friedman has denied Netanyahu his main strategy for holding back the far right, and made his life much more difficult on the day after the September 17 election.

Summary: It is certainly no coincidence that Netanyahu — usually so quick to praise the slightest gesture coming from the Trump administration — has yet to say a word publicly about the interview. Friedman has done Netanyahu no favors. In less than 100 days — assuming the right wing/religious bloc wins another majority in 2019’s second election, which is almost a certainty — Netanyahu will be more vulnerable than ever. The far right is furious at him for not appointing Bezalel Smotrich as justice minister, and for going behind their backs to Labor leader Avi Gabbay two weeks ago in an attempt to cement a last-minute coalition. Netanyahu, with his pre-trial indictment hearings just around the corner, will have no more excuses when they demand annexation. By then, the Trump peace plan — if it ever existed in reality — will almost certainly be dead and buried after the farcical “economic workshop” in Bahrain and with Trump entering his own election season and quite possible impeachment. Friedman has denied Netanyahu his main strategy for holding back the far right, and made his life much more difficult on the day after the September 17 election.

Israelis Should Not Celebrate U.S. Ambassador's Talk of West Bank Annexation

By Ben Dror Yemini, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- In certain circumstances, U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman said last week, Washington would recognize the annexation of Palestinian territories by Israel. As expected, Friedman's comments led to fierce criticism. The Palestinians already call him the "settler spokesman." But in fact, instead of blaming the settlers, the Palestinians can only blame themselves. And given that we are in the era of "narratives," namely, lies that pretend to be history, we should pay attention to the facts.
- The Palestinians have rejected every proposal that would lead to them having a state. The Peel Commission of 1937 offered the Jews just four percent of the land designated for the Jewish National Home by the League of Nations' 1922 Mandate for Palestine and 17 percent of the Land of Israel west of the Jordan River. The Arab side said no.
- In 1947, the United Nations proposed a Jewish state on 55 percent of Western Palestine. The Arab side said no. The ensuing War of Independence ended with 78 percent of the Land of Israel in the hands of the Jews. In 1967, immediately after the Six-Day War, the idea arose to offer the Arabs all the territories captured in the war in exchange for peace. The Arab side responded with the infamous "three nos" of Khartoum. It seems therefore that the main factor in annexation - as far as the expansion of the Jewish entity can be called annexation - is Arab rejectionism. They have said no, over and over again, and as a result lost more and more territory. Now the Palestinians are demanding the 1967 lines, which were so vehemently rejected in the past. But when you do give it to them - they don't want to take it.
- In the past two decades, there were further proposals that gave the Palestinians 95 percent of the territories – from President Bill Clinton in late 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008, and Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama in 2014. According to every peace proposal, the major settlement blocs - which comprise about five percent of the West Bank - will remain in Israeli hands. If this is the definition of annexation, then Friedman did not say anything new. The point is, it is not clear what Friedman did mean.
- Is this annexation in the vein of the peace proposals, or annexation as imagined by the Yesha Council of Settlers? The former is completely legitimate, but only within the framework of an arrangement. The second option would be a disaster that would lead to Israel's destruction. I suspect that Friedman, however, did mean the latter. Palestinian rejectionism is leading the slow march toward the common solution of the extreme right and the anti-Israel left - a single big country.
- Donald Trump, at the beginning of his tenure, did not reject the idea of a single state, and now Friedman has poured oil on that fire. And the blame is placed on the Palestinians. But the Palestinians are achieving their goal. True, they derided and rejected Friedman, but declarations of annexation both from Israel and the U.S. serve their purpose. Senior Palestinian official Ziad Abu Ziyad said in response to Friedman that annexation should happen, but it should be annexation of all of the territories in order to create a bi-national state. Friedman's statement, therefore, is no cause for Israeli celebration; it is cause for concern.