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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

June 25, 2019

Reuters

In Bahrain, U.S. to Launch Economic Part of Peace Plan Today

The first stage of President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan will be launched on Tuesday at a conference the White House touts as a bid to begin drumming up \$50 billion in investment but which Palestinians deride as an "economy first" approach doomed to fail. The two-day international meeting in Bahrain, led by Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, has been billed as the first part of Washington's long-delayed broader political blueprint to revive the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which will be unveiled at a later date. But neither the Israeli nor Palestinian governments will attend the curtain-raising event in the Bahraini capital, Manama. See also, ["Jared Kushner, US peace team face credibility test in Bahrain" \(CNN\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Kushner: Deal Will Not Adhere to Arab Peace Initiative

Reaching an Israeli-Palestinian deal along the lines of the Arab peace initiative will not be possible, requiring instead a stance between that and the Israeli position, White House senior adviser Jared Kushner said in an interview with Al Jazeera. "I think we all have to recognise that if there ever is a deal, it's not going to be along the lines of the Arab peace initiative. It will be somewhere between the Arab peace initiative and between the Israeli position," Kushner told Al Jazeera in an interview that will air on Tuesday. As part of the Arab Peace Initiative, Arab states led by Saudi Arabia have called for a Palestinian state drawn along borders that pre-date Israel's capture of territory in a 1967 war as well as a capital in east Jerusalem and the right of return for refugees, points rejected by Israel. See also, ["KUSHNER: DEAL WILL NOT ADHERE TO ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE" \(JPost\)](#)

Ynet News

Erekat: Bahrain Workshop is a Joke

The U.S.-led economic workshop starting Tuesday in Bahrain as part of the first part of the American Mideast peace plan is a "joke," PLO Executive Committee Chairman Saeb Erekat told Ynet on Monday. Erekat also said he discovered the existence of the workshop by watching CNN with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "You know how I found out about this workshop? I saw it on CNN with my president, who looked at me and said, 'Saeb, what is this?' I said that I did not know, they did not even bother to consult with us. (Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu, (U.S. official Jared) Kushner, (U.S. Ambassador to Israel David) Friedman – they know what is best for us, they want to decide for me." See also, ["Palestinians protest against Bahrain peace conference" \(France 24\)](#)

CNN

Trump Announces 'Hard-Hitting' New Sanctions Against Iran

President Donald Trump announced new sanctions against Iran Monday in part to retaliate after the downing of a US drone last week, with the punitive measures set to target Iran's Supreme Leader, military officials and its top diplomat, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. Speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, Trump said he signed an executive order imposing "hard hitting" sanctions on Iran that will deny Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his office "and many others" access to financial instruments. "Today's actions follow a series of aggressive behaviors by the Iranian regime in recent weeks, including shooting down of US drones," Trump said.

Iran: U.S. Sanctions on Khamenei Mean ‘End of Diplomacy’

Iran said on Tuesday that US sanctions imposed on Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other top officials in the country permanently closed the path to diplomacy between Tehran and Washington. US President Donald Trump signed an executive order imposing the sanctions on Monday, taking a dramatic and unprecedented step to increase pressure on Iran after Tehran's downing of an American drone last week. Washington said it would also impose sanctions on Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif later this week. "Imposing useless sanctions on Iran's Supreme Leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the commander of Iran's diplomacy (Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif) is the permanent closure of the path of diplomacy," Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said on Twitter. See also, ["Trump Imposes New Economic Sanctions on Iran, Adding to Tensions" \(NYT\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel Shuts Off Fuel Supplies to Gaza After Spate of Arson Attacks

Israel announced Tuesday morning that it would cut supplies of fuel to the Gaza Strip after a rash of cross-border arson attacks. At least 13 brush fires were sparked in southern Israel on Monday by balloon-borne incendiary devices launched from the coastal Palestinian territory, the local fire service said. "In the wake of the uptick of incendiary balloons from Gaza into Israel and arsons in the Gaza border area, it has been decided to stop transfers of fuel to the Gaza power station via the Kerem Shalom crossing beginning this morning," COGAT, the Defense Ministry body charged with liaising with the Palestinians, said in a statement. The punitive measure marks a shift after Israel over the last several weeks opted instead to put various restrictions on the size of the Strip's fishing zone in response to arson attacks. See also, ["Israel Blocks Fuel Deliveries to Gaza Power Plant" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Arutz 7

Prosecution Drops Charges Against Palestinian Accused of Rape

The Israel Defense Forces' military advocate general announced Tuesday morning that he was dropping the charges against a Palestinian man accused of brutally raping a seven-year-old Israeli girl. The indictment against Mahmoud Qadusa had come under fire for its apparent lack of evidence, a fact that the military prosecutor, Sharon Afek, acknowledged in a statement to the press announcing the annulment of the charges. The statement said that "the evidentiary infrastructure that underlies the indictment does not at this time amount to a 'reasonable chance of conviction.' Therefore, by law, the criminal process cannot continue, the indictment must be withdrawn and Qadusa released from custody." See also, ["Charges Dropped Against Palestinian Accused of Raping 7-year-old in West Bank Settlement" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Knesset Legal Advisor: Knesset Dissolve Cannot Be Annulled

Members of both Likud and Kahol Lavan have been inquiring whether the law to disband the Knesset can be voided to prevent the September 17 election, despite the Knesset legal adviser's position that the law could not be reversed. Speaking at a committee convened to discuss the Knesset's termination three weeks ago, the legal adviser to the Knesset, Eyal Yinon, told the outgoing Knesset members that the vote to dissolve the Knesset is a point of no return. From the moment they voted in favor of disbanding the Knesset a new election cannot be put off and the law cannot be tossed aside to preclude the election, he said. Despite his clarifications, since the official announcement of the September 17 election members of both parties, have been inquiring if there's a way to cancel the law.

Making a Mockery of All of Us

By Limor Livnat, former Minister, Likud Party

- **Way up on high, on a planet of his own, lives a cynical, alienated leader whose remarks, speeches and fervently-made promises have no bearing at all on what he actually does in practice—in the dark, behind the backs of his supporters, his voters and subjects. But Binyamin Netanyahu doesn't act alone. Several ministers and MKs help him with alacrity—at least until they find themselves snubbed. Just ask Ayoub Kara, who has now resigned his ministerial post, or anyone else whom Netanyahu thought might pose a threat to his continued rule, such as Moshe Kahlon, Gideon Saar and others.**
- **Ever since the results were in from the elections, which he moved up to serve his own personal needs, Netanyahu has balked at nothing in his attempt to form a coalition government. At any price. A government, which he wants so badly to form, would be able to pass into legislation the immunity bills and an expanded override clause, just when he wanted to extricate himself from a hearing and possibly from an indictment as well. So what if he promised over a lengthy period of time that he was eager to be given a hearing, where he would be able to prove that “there isn't anything because there wasn't anything?” So he said. After the elections he tried every trick in the book to refrain from picking up the investigation material. Yes, he still enjoys the presumption of innocence. But in order to prove his innocence, one would have thought that he would do everything, literally everything, to capitalize on that opportunity and not to try to avoid this on the pretext that his lawyers weren't paid and other excuses.**
- **When he realized that Lieberman wasn't going to join the coalition and had left him without a majority in the Knesset, and after he tried every means possible to persuade MKs from Blue and White to defect, Netanyahu violated the Likud constitution and had Kahlon and his Kulanu Party merged into the Likud by means of a vote in the Likud Secretariat, even though the party constitution stipulates that a decision of that kind can only be made by the Likud Central Committee. Well, if the new, temporary and fawning justice minister said that we don't have to comply with High Court of Justice rulings (though he did walk back that statement subsequently, and it's good that he did), why should we uphold the Likud constitution? Who is bound by it? The Likud's supreme court ruled in a majority opinion vote that that was a legitimate decision, while citing arguments that it was imperative to prevent a left-wing government from being formed. Menachem Begin would never have bought that.**
- **Then Netanyahu and his closest advisers applied themselves to intensive coalition negotiations. They offered the world to the Labor Party. Senior ministerial portfolios for Avi Gabbay, Tal Rousso, Shelly Yachimovich and Stav Shaffir—while conceding every Likud principle. Negotiations to form a unity government were held with Benny Gantz and his aides. Apparently, that proposal wasn't rejected outright and was only scuttled on account of Yair Lapid's opposition. And in his desperate attempts to prevent the president from tasking anyone else with the job of forming the next government, Netanyahu even reportedly held negotiations with the Arab MKs. Lord have mercy. The very man who charged that Gantz would work with the Arab MKs went and stuck a dirty deal with them behind closed doors twice: first to ensure a majority to dissolve the Knesset; then in the election of the new state comptroller.**

- **So is it either Bibi or Tibi? It turns out that it's Bibi and Tibi. And now, the peak from Netanyahu and crew: they are now looking into ways to cancel the elections that are scheduled to be held on September 17. Because who needs elections? Why waste all that money? Just yesterday the cabinet voted in favor of a "small" 1.4 billion shekel across-the-board budget cut—NIS 80 million of which is from the education budget.**
- **The depth of that disdainful disrespect for the rules and tools of democracy long ago crossed every boundary. Netanyahu plays with the tools that he has been given as Likud chairman and prime minister as if they were his personal toys, and he invokes the names of his spiritual fathers in vain. An election was held. Another one was called. Then they decided to cancel it. Or maybe they will hold it after all. June 2019 has been a hot month. They're making a mockery of the law and of us.**

Summary: So is it either Bibi or Tibi? It turns out that it's Bibi and Tibi. And now, the peak from Netanyahu and crew: they are now looking into ways to cancel the elections that are scheduled to be held on September 17. Because who needs elections? Why waste all that money? Just yesterday the cabinet voted in favor of a "small" 1.4 billion shekel across-the-board budget cut—NIS 80 million of which is from the education budget. The depth of that disdainful disrespect for the rules and tools of democracy long ago crossed every boundary. Netanyahu plays with the tools that he has been given as Likud chairman and prime minister as if they were his personal toys, and he invokes the names of his spiritual fathers in vain. An election was held. Another one was called. Then they decided to cancel it. Or maybe they will hold it after all. June 2019 has been a hot month. They're making a mockery of the law and of us.

Something Stopped Trump from Striking Iran, and It Wasn't 150 Lives

By Zvi Barel, commentator at Ha'aretz

- **U.S. President Donald Trump's flip-flopping over the past three days may be the most important calming signal that the Middle East has received recently. It was said that all the major ingredients that could justify an American military offensive against Iran had come together. Things had come to a boil in the Persian Gulf when Saudi, Japanese and other tanker ships were damaged in naval attacks. Without decisive proof, Iran was suggested as the culprit. And Yemini Houthis fired missiles into Saudi Arabia – into Jizan province and at an airfield in Abha – prompting battle cries against Iran.**
- **Iran has shortened the period in which it will step up its enrichment of uranium and thereby violate the nuclear deal. The heads of the Iranian army and Revolutionary Guards have threatened that, despite their desire to avoid a violent confrontation, they wouldn't hesitate to hit American targets if Iran were attacked. Tensions peaked with Iran's downing of an American drone last week. The legitimization for an attack was now ripe, a bank of Iranian targets was assembled and the order to deploy American forces was given. But all of a sudden, nothing. It was back to square one.**
- **On a closer look, the two justifications for carrying out a U.S. attack were flimsy. "Circumstantial proof" is insufficient to launch a strike that in the blink of an eye could spiral into a regional war. The downing of the drone got caught up between American claims that the aircraft had been over international waters and the Iranians' assertions that the drone had violated their airspace.**
- **Such proof is often used by Israel to justify attacks on Hamas on a scale that doesn't affect the Middle East as a whole. But this isn't sufficient for a world power that has to take into account the possibility that its close allies could be hit. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, at least publicly, said they didn't want a war in the Gulf.**
- **Israeli defense officials have said Iran could employ its branches in Lebanon and Syria, either in response to an attack on it or to put pressure on Washington. Only the Israeli government, which should have adopted the Saudi stance because Israeli targets are also on the Iranians' list, remained silent.**
- **Trump explained his decision not to attack was a desire to avoid killing 150 Iranians. Such a humanitarian explanation would have been heartwarming if it hadn't come from the president still arming the Saudi military that's killing thousands in Yemen. This is also the president who wasn't upset that thousands of Syrian and Iranian civilians were hit in American attacks during the war against the Islamic State. It's also the president who's incapable of showing concern for the masses of migrants seeking to enter the United States from Mexico.**
- **In any event, hadn't the estimate of 150 dead in a U.S. strike been known before the decision to attack was made? The American intelligence services should be given credit for being able to estimate the number of fatalities in such an attack, but it would be interesting to know when such casualties stopped being unavoidable collateral damage and became a humanitarian disaster that Washington couldn't tolerate.**

- The important thing, however, isn't simply Trump's decision-making process, if the way he tosses around orders can be deemed a process. It's the consequences of his most recent decision on the confrontation zone in the Persian Gulf and beyond. The U.S. administration has a vision and aspirations vis-à-vis Iran, but it lacks a strategy to bring them about. The sanctions that Trump has imposed are among the harshest that the country has known, but eight months after being put in place, they still haven't made Iran succumb.
- In their regular interpretations, analysts have been able to point out the huge losses that the Iranians have been sustaining, the exodus of companies that could invest in the country and the fact that most of Iran's oil customers have stopped buying from the Islamic Republic. But what's lacking is information or an estimate on how long Iran can survive under such harsh conditions.
- Iraq under Saddam Hussein continued to function for more than a decade under a sanctions regime that was harsher than that currently imposed on Iran, and Saddam's regime was ultimately only defeated on the battlefield. There is no proof that the Iranian regime will act any differently, but the Trump administration has presented no practical strategy for a situation in which Iran sticks to its policy and refuses to negotiate a new nuclear agreement. Is the United States prepared to resort to all-out war to bring down the Iranian regime?
- Iran's decision to exceed the limitations of the current nuclear agreement appear to give the United States and the Western signatories to the agreement grounds to attack Iran. But such concerted action would require a consensus among these countries. It doesn't exist at the moment and it's doubtful that it could be achieved. Some European Union countries are making major efforts, albeit without major success, to create a path to bypass the U.S. sanctions. And Russia and China certainly wouldn't lend a hand to a war against Iran.
- The United States could therefore find itself alone facing both Iran and international antagonism. Granted that the anti-American international coalition that arose following the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear accord hasn't impressed Trump, but there's a fundamental difference between diplomacy and war. In any case, even when it comes to such circumstances, Washington doesn't appear to have a convincing road map.
- The dilemma that should guide any military confrontation is whether it should be broken down into a series of attacks designed to "send a message" or whether an assault should be reserved for a last resort that would be applied with full force. In other circumstances, the response to the attacks in the Gulf could have sufficed with surgical, one-time strikes that would send a message.
- But the Gulf region could react poorly to narrowly targeted attacks and spiral quickly into a battlefield involving many countries. It appears that this consideration rather than a loss of life among Iranian civilians is what stopped Trump from carrying out his earlier decision.
- Israel will certainly tell him that in the process he has raised the threshold for a response and that Iran will interpret the decision as weakness on the part of the United States, because that's how things are in the Middle East. From Jerusalem's standpoint, a twofold opportunity has been missed – Sending Iran a message, and it's the United States, not Israel, that would send the message. But sending messages isn't a linear process that assures a desired result. Israel learned that well on other fronts, just as the United States learned its lesson in its own confrontations.

Summary: Trump explained his decision not to attack was a desire to avoid killing 150 Iranians. Such a humanitarian explanation would have been heartwarming if it hadn't come from the president still arming the Saudi military that's killing thousands in Yemen. This is also the president who wasn't upset that thousands of Syrian and Iranian civilians were hit in American attacks during the war against the Islamic State. It's also the president who's incapable of showing concern for the masses of migrants seeking to enter the United States from Mexico. In any event, hadn't the estimate of 150 dead in a U.S. strike been known before the decision to attack was made? The American intelligence services should be given credit for being able to estimate the number of fatalities in such an attack, but it would be interesting to know when such casualties stopped being unavoidable collateral damage and became a humanitarian disaster that Washington couldn't tolerate.