

Newsletter Friday February 8, 2019

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US officials visiting Mideast to seek backing for peace plan

Later this month, White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and other U.S. officials will brief diplomats in at least five Arab countries on the economic section of a U.S. proposal for Israel-Palestinian peace, which they will be asked to largely bankroll.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Senior White House adviser Jared Kushner | Photo: AP

White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and other administration officials are headed to the Middle East later this month to brief diplomats in at least five countries on the economic section of a U.S. proposal for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Kushner, who is U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law, will be joined by U.S. Mideast envoy Jason Greenblatt; U.S. envoy on Iran Brian Hook; and other administration officials who have worked on the economic part of the plan. Stops are confirmed in Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Other stops could be added to the trip, according to a White House official.

The plan includes an economic development proposal for Palestinians that foresees major infrastructure and industrial work, particularly in the Gaza Strip. For the plan to succeed or even pass the starting gate, it will need at least an initial buy-in from both Israel and the Palestinians as well as from the Gulf Arab states, which officials say will be asked to substantially bankroll the economic portion.

Also, Kushner is scheduled to participate next Thursday in a discussion in Warsaw to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to a senior White House official. During the discussion with World Economic Forum Borge Brende, he is expected to give an update on the peace effort and what the administration hopes to accomplish in the coming weeks and months. In Warsaw, Kushner will also be attending a gathering that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said will focus on Middle East stability and efforts to keep Iran from being a destabilizing influence in the region.

Kushner, who will also be joined by his aide Avi Berkowitz, will not brief the diplomats on the "political component" of the peace plan, which covers all core issues of the decades-old conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the officials said.

Instead, they will gauge the level of support for the economic part of the plan, which is expected to include a combination of aid and investment to help the Palestinian people, the officials said.

"Jared is going to share elements of the economic plan to the region. The economic plan only works if the region supports it," said one official who briefed a small group of reporters. "This is a very important part of the overall equation."

Officials said they realized that the Arab diplomats Kushner meets will want to know elements of the political component before rendering a judgment on the economic plan.

"They're not going to support the economic plan without making sure they also support the political plan, and we recognize that. So the support, I'm sure in some manner, will be conditioned on whether they are comfortable with the political plan," one official said.

Release of the Trump peace plan was delayed after Palestinians erupted in anger when Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017.

The current thinking among White House officials is that the peace plan will be unveiled sometime after Israel holds elections on April 9 that will decide the fate of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

It is unclear how the U.S. plan would deal with the sensitive issue of Jerusalem. Palestinians want the city's eastern part as their future capital. Kushner is not visiting Israel on this trip, the officials said.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has refused to talk about any peace plan with the United States in the wake of Trump's recognition of Jerusalem, but White House officials hope that will change.

"We hope Abbas reads the plan, judges it on its merits, and comes to the table for negotiations after we release the plan. His people deserve nothing less," one official said.

U.S. officials, meanwhile, have been meeting with Palestinians "from all walks of life" to keep lines of communication open, the official said.

Newsletter Thursday February 7, 2019

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US objects to UN move on Israeli action in Hebron

United States blocks U.N. Security Council statement that would have expressed regret at Israel's decision to eject a foreign observer force from Hebron, diplomats say • The council discussed Israel's decision at the request of Kuwait and Indonesia.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

The U.N. Security Council in New York City | Photo: AFP

The United States blocked a draft United Nations Security Council statement on Wednesday that would have expressed regret at Israel's decision to eject a foreign observer force from the flashpoint city of Hebron, diplomats said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last week he would not renew the mandate of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, accusing the observers of anti-Israel activity.

The 15-member U.N. Security Council discussed Israel's decision behind closed doors on Wednesday at the request of Kuwait and Indonesia, which also drafted the statement. Such a statement has to be agreed by consensus.

U.N. diplomats said the United States did not believe a council statement on the issue was appropriate.

The draft statement would have also recognized the importance of the TIPH mission and its "efforts to foster calm in a highly sensitive area and fragile situation on the ground, which risks further deteriorating." The United States has long accused the United Nations of anti-Israel bias and shields its ally from Security Council action.

The TIPH was set up after settler Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Palestinians who were praying at the Cave of the Patriarchs in 1994. The city has also seen numerous Palestinian stabbing and shooting attacks against settlers and security forces. The TIPH draws staff from Norway, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey. Its website says it has 64 international staff in the city. An Israeli official said its mandate ends on Jan. 31.

Yishai Fleisher, a spokesman for the Hebron Jewish community, said earlier this week that the TIPH observers have "created an atmosphere of conflict, not a congenial atmosphere of peace."

The TIPH has monitored "breaches of the agreements [and] violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law," the force's website says.

Indonesia's U.N. ambassador, Dian Djani, told reporters that he and Kuwaiti Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi brought up Israel's action because they don't want "to make sure the situation that is already fragile and tense ... is not going to worsen."

Al-Otaibi said there was "overwhelming support" for an expression of concern that Israel's action might exacerbate the situation on the ground, saying the mission "was like a preventative tool."

Ambassador Anatolio Ndong Mba of Equatorial Guinea, the current council president, signaled differences among council members immediately after the meeting, where the U.S. reportedly said Israel had a right not to renew the temporary mission.

Ndong Mba said he had been authorized to inform the Israeli and Palestinian ambassadors about Wednesday's meeting and to discuss a proposed Security Council visit to the territory that the Palestinians claim for a future independent state.

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian ambassador at the U.N., stressed that "it is the duty of the Security Council on the basis of the resolutions" to ensure the protection of Palestinian civilians and said he looked forward to meeting with Ndong Mba "as quickly as possible."

He said the Palestinians will react to a Security Council visit "in the most positive way."

But Al-Otaibi told reporters that council visits require approval by all 15 members as well as the countries involved, so the U.S. and Israel would have to give a green light.

Mansour said it was premature to say whether the trip would go ahead.

"The positive thing is that there is an agreement, an authorization to the president of the Security Council to begin the process of consultation on that issue," he said. "Let us give it time, with a positive expectation that it might happen."

Newsletter Wednesday February 6, 2019

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Settler group reports surge in population in Judea and Samaria

Figures from West Bank Jewish Population group: Jewish population in settlements grew 3.3% in 2018, compared to Israel's overall population growth of 1.9% • Settlers praise policies of Trump administration • PA: US support for settlements doomed to fail.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

A new housing project is underway in the settlement Naale, near Modiin | Photo: AP

The number of people living in Israeli settlements surged at a much faster rate than the overall Israeli population last year and predicted even more rapid growth, the West Bank Jewish Population Stats group reported Tuesday.

Director Baruch Gordon said the current U.S. administration has created a much friendlier environment for the settlers, clearing the way for a surge in construction in the coming years.

"It's just simply opened up. There's no longer this cloud looming over it," Gordon said.

Gordon's project conducts an annual study of official population data obtained from the Interior Ministry. The report is sponsored by Bet El Institutions, a prominent settler organization.

The latest data shows the population in Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria grew to 449,508 as of Jan. 1, up 3.3% from 435,159 people a year earlier.

In comparison, Israel's overall population grew 1.9% last year to 8.907 million people, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics.

The Interior Ministry was not immediately able to confirm the figures but said it had been in touch with Gordon's group and that the numbers appeared authentic.

The data showed robust growth in settlements across the board, from large towns located near Israeli population centers to isolated communities deep inside Judea and Samaria.

Gordon cited several reasons for the rapid growth. An estimated two-thirds of the settler population are religious Jews, who tend to have larger families. In addition, he said the cheap costs of housing have lured many young families that cannot afford homes in Israel proper.

But he also said the Trump administration's attitude toward the settlements is also having an effect.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama, like a string of Republican and Democratic predecessors, put heavy pressure on Israel to halt construction.

Trump, in contrast, has done little to stop construction. While urging restraint at times, the White House has otherwise remained quiet as Israel has pressed forward with numerous developments.

This, in effect, has given Israel a green light to lay the groundwork for a surge in construction that should materialize over the next year or two, Gordon said.

"Since the change of the U.S. administration, the atmosphere for construction permits has become much easier. They're being given with greater ease," he said.

"I think possibly the next report and certainly in the ones after that, I think we'll start to see a huge surge in the numbers here," he added.

The figures did not include data for east Jerusalem, where well over 200,000 Israeli Jews now live.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, called the growth in the settler population a "direct result" of U.S. policy.

"The American support for settlements through silence is doomed to failure because there is no peace and stability without an agreement with the Palestinian people and its legitimate leadership," he said.

A U.S. Embassy official said Trump has made his position on settlements "clear" and has received Israeli pledges to take his concerns into consideration.

"The administration is firmly committed to pursuing a comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity under diplomatic protocol.

The left-wing group Peace Now, which opposes the settlements, said the data in Tuesday's report seemed "logical," citing the Israeli government's policy "to encourage construction and relocation to the West Bank."

Peace Now said the Trump effect "cannot be seen at this time" because of the lag time between approval of permits and actual construction.

Newsletter Wednesday February 6, 2019

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Trump calls for end of resistance politics in State of Union

U.S. president announces second summit with North Korean dictator on Feb. 27-28, hails defeat of ISIS in Syria • On Iran, Trump says: "We will not avert our eyes from a regime that chants death to America and threatens genocide against the Jewish people."

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. President Donald Trump delivers his State of the Union address on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday | Photo: AP

Facing a divided Congress for the first time, U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday called on Washington to reject "the politics of revenge, resistance and retribution." He warned emboldened Democrats that "ridiculous partisan investigations" into his administration and businesses could hamper a surging American economy.

Trump devoted much of his speech to foreign policy and announced details of a second meeting with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, outlining a Feb. 27-28 summit in Vietnam.

Trump and Kim's first summit garnered only a vaguely worded commitment by the North to denuclearize. But the president said his outreach to Pyongyang had made the U.S. safer.

"If I had not been elected president of the United States, we would right now, in my opinion, be in a major war with North Korea," he said.

Regarding the Middle East, Trump described it as "one of the most complex sets of challenges we face."

"Our approach is based on principled realism – not discredited theories that have failed for decades to yield progress. For this reason, my administration recognized the true capital of Israel – and proudly opened the American Embassy in Jerusalem," he said.

"Our brave troops have now been fighting in the Middle East for almost 19 years. In Afghanistan and Iraq, nearly 7,000 American heroes have given their lives. More than 52,000 Americans have been badly wounded. We have spent more than \$7 trillion in the Middle East.

"As a candidate for president, I pledged a new approach. Great nations do not fight endless wars. When I took office, ISIS controlled more than 20,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria. Today, we have liberated virtually all of that territory from the grip of these bloodthirsty killers.

"Now, as we work with our allies to destroy the remnants of ISIS, it is time to give our brave warriors in Syria a warm welcome home.

"I have also accelerated our negotiations to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. Our troops have fought with unmatched valor – and thanks to their bravery, we are now able to pursue a political solution to this long and bloody conflict.

"In Afghanistan, my administration is holding constructive talks with a number of Afghan groups, including the Taliban. As we make progress in these negotiations, we will be able to reduce our troop presence and focus on counter-terrorism. We do not

know whether we will achieve an agreement – but we do know that after two decades of war, the hour has come to at least try for peace."

He noted that his administration "has acted decisively to confront the world's leading state sponsor of terror: the radical regime in Iran."

"To ensure this corrupt dictatorship never acquires nuclear weapons, I withdrew the United States from the disastrous Iran nuclear deal. And last fall, we put in place the toughest sanctions ever imposed on a country.

"We will not avert our eyes from a regime that chants death to America and threatens genocide against the Jewish people. We must never ignore the vile poison of anti-Semitism, or those who spread its venomous creed. With one voice, we must confront this hatred anywhere and everywhere it occurs," he said.

Trump acknowledged the guests he invited to the speech, including Judah Samet, who survived the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October.

Samet, said Trump, "arrived at the synagogue as the massacre began. But not only did Judah narrowly escape death last fall – more than seven decades ago, he narrowly survived the Nazi concentration camps. Today is Judah's 81st birthday. Judah says he can still remember the exact moment, nearly 75 years ago, after 10 months in a concentration camp, when he and his family were put on a train and told they were going to another camp. Suddenly the train screeched to a halt. A soldier appeared. Judah's family braced for the worst. Then, his father cried out with joy: 'It's the Americans.'

"A second Holocaust survivor who is here tonight, Joshua Kaufman, was a prisoner at Dachau Concentration Camp. He remembers watching through a hole in the wall of a cattle car as American soldiers rolled in with tanks. 'To me,' Joshua recalls, 'the American soldiers were proof that God exists, and they came down from the sky.'"

Trump's appeals for bipartisanship in his State of the Union address clashed with the rancorous atmosphere he has helped cultivate in the nation's capital – as well as the desire of most Democrats to block his agenda during his next two years in office. Their opposition was on vivid display as Democratic congresswomen in the audience formed a sea of white in a nod to early 20th-century suffragettes.

Trump spoke at a critical moment in his presidency, staring down a two-year stretch that will determine whether he is re-elected or leaves office in defeat. His speech sought to shore up Republican support that had eroded slightly during the recent government shutdown and previewed a fresh defense against Democrats as they ready a round of investigations into every aspect of his administration.

"If there is going to be peace and legislation, there cannot be war and investigation," he declared. Lawmakers in the cavernous House chamber sat largely silent.

Looming over the president's address was a fast-approaching Feb. 15 deadline to fund the government and avoid another shutdown. Democrats have refused to acquiesce to his demands for a border wall, and Republicans are increasingly unwilling to shut down the government to help him fulfill his signature campaign pledge. Nor does the GOP support the president's plan to declare a national emergency if Congress won't fund the wall.

Wary of publicly highlighting those intraparty divisions, Trump made no mention of an emergency declaration in his remarks. He did offer a lengthy defense of his call for a border wall, declaring: "I will build it." But he delivered no ultimatums about what it would take for him to sign legislation to keep the government open.

"I am asking you to defend our very dangerous southern border out of love and devotion to our fellow citizens and to our country," he said, painting a dark and foreboding picture of the risks posed to Americans by illegal immigration.

The 72-year-old Trump harkened back to moments of American greatness, celebrating the moon landing as astronaut Buzz Aldrin looked on from the audience and heralding the liberation of Europe from the Nazis.

"Together, we represent the most extraordinary nation in all of history. What will we do with this moment? How will we be remembered?" Trump said.

The president ticked through a litany of issues with crossover appeal, including boosting infrastructure, lowering prescription drug costs and combating childhood cancer. But he also appealed to his political base, both with his harsh rhetoric on illegal immigration and a call for Congress to pass legislation to prohibit the "late-term abortion of children."

As he condemned political turmoil in Venezuela, Trump declared that "America will never be a socialist country" – a remark that may also have been targeted at high-profile Democrats who identify as socialists.

The diverse Democratic caucus, which includes a bevy of women, sat silently for much of Trump's speech. But they leaped to their feet when he noted there are "more women in the workforce than ever before."

Trump's other guests for the speech included Alice Marie Johnson, a woman whose life sentence for drug offenses was commuted by the president, and Joshua Trump, a sixth-grade student from Wilmington, Delaware, who has been bullied over his last name.

Likud members vote on party list for 21st Knesset

Ministers try to position themselves as possible successors to PM Netanyahu • MKs battling for 21 places still open on list after party reserved spots for representatives of specific sectors • Netanyahu to Likud members: Mergers on the Left pose a danger.

Yehuda Shlezinger // published on 05/02/2019

Primaries staff at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds | Photo: KOKO

Some 120,000 registered Likud members were deciding Tuesday on their party's list for the 21st Knesset.

The power struggle that was attracting the most attention was between head of the Likud, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and former Likud minister Gideon Sa'ar, who was accused last October of trying to organize a putsch against Netanyahu.

On Sunday, Netanyahu brought up the Sa'ar scandal in an interview to Likud TV.

"I didn't make up these accusations. Two Likud members contacted me and said that Sa'ar had reached out to them and laid out a plan for after the election, and asked for their support in persuading President Rivlin to put him, rather than me, in charge of assembling the next government. I didn't make it up. His trick didn't succeed," Netanyahu said.

Sa'ar was quick to respond. The former minister told Army Radio: "When false stories are spread about you, you need to address them, otherwise your silence is seen as confirmation. It's sad that two days before the primaries, the prime minister has tried to recycle this ridiculous story that he told a few months ago."

"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. ... What's more, this happened in the Likud TV studio, which was established to battle fake news. And he [Netanyahu] created fake news," Sa'ar said.

In a later interview to Channel 12, Sa'ar said that Netanyahu was "creating and spreading false stories."

"The prime minister and his family are persecuting me," he said.

Even without the rivalry between Netanyahu and Sa'ar, tension in the Likud is running high. On Monday, Likud ministers and MKs toured the country, trying to enlist as much last-minute support as possible ahead of Tuesday's vote. Ministers are jockeying to position themselves as possible successors to Netanyahu while Likud MKs are battling to make it into the 21 places on the list that remain open after the reserved spots have been

filled. Competitors for these open spots include Sa'ar, Immigration and Absorption Minister Yoav Gallant, and former Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat.

Netanyahu issued a message to Likud primary voters in which he said, "I am calling on you to come and vote in the primaries. I'm calling on you to ensure the Likud is victorious by voting for my proposal. I am asking to reserve midlevel spots for three candidates to guarantee that the Likud can run against mergers of left-wing parties. These mergers are a danger to us and it's important that the Likud assemble the next government. We must pass the proposal, which will increase our chances of winning."

Trump wants US military to protect Israel, still seeks Syria pullout
U.S. president laments "endless wars" in Syria and Afghanistan, says U.S. can respond to developments in Syria from bases in neighboring Iraq • Trump: Also important to keep a U.S. military presence in Iraq so that Washington can keep a close eye on Iran.

Yoni Hersch, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 04/02/2019

U.S. President Donald Trump at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq in December | Photo: AP

U.S. President Donald Trump said his country's military would continue to protect Israel, but vowed to push ahead with a planned troop withdrawal from Syria.

He said it was important to keep a U.S. military presence in Iraq so that Washington can keep a close eye on Iran "because Iran is a real problem," according to a CBS interview.

The U.S. president lamented "endless wars" in Syria and Afghanistan in an interview with CBS' "Face the Nation" and made clear he wants to reduce the costly U.S. military presence in those countries despite warnings against such moves from his military advisers and spy chiefs.

The United States could rely heavily on intelligence work in Afghanistan, he said, and respond to developments in Syria from U.S. bases in neighboring Iraq.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have sent weapons and thousands of soldiers to Syria to help shore up the rule of Syrian President Bashar Assad during a seven-year civil war there.

Trump said the United States has spent a "fortune" on the Al Asad Air Base in western Iraq, which he visited in December, and that the United States should hold on to it.

"One of the reasons I want to keep it is because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is a real problem," he said in the CBS interview.

Asked if that meant he wanted to be able to strike against Iran, Trump said, "No, because I want to be able to watch Iran. All I want to do is be able to watch. We have an unbelievable and expensive military base built in Iraq. It's perfectly situated for looking at all over different parts of the troubled Middle East rather than pulling up," he said.

The president defended his decision in December to withdraw troops from Syria but refused to provide a timetable for the pullout, which drew criticism from members of his own Republican Party and concerns among some allies.

In a rebuke, the Republican-led U.S. Senate advanced largely symbolic legislation on Thursday opposing plans for any abrupt withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan.

Trump initially said the withdrawal from Syria should be immediate but he has since said it would be gradual.

Some of the forces moving out of Syria will go to Iraq, where they can monitor any resurgence of Islamic State or other terrorist groups and "ultimately some will be coming home," Trump said.

He said U.S. forces could be deployed again if there is a resurgence of terrorist groups like al-Qaida. "We'll come back if we have to," he said.

Trump said on Thursday he would bring U.S. troops home if a peace deal was reached to end 17 years of war in Afghanistan.

He told CBS he would be open to keeping a small number of troops there as well as intelligence operations to monitor for "nests" of terrorist activity, according to the interview taped on Friday.

Trump did not say whether he trusted Afghanistan's Taliban group but said he believed they want peace.

"They're tired. Everybody's tired," Trump said. "I don't like endless wars."

Newsletter Sunday February 3, 2019

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| Exclusive: Israel, France in secret talks over access to ancient tombs

The east Jerusalem compound known as the Tombs of the Kings has been administered by the French Consulate for the past 150 years • Talks are deadlocked due to France's demand that Israel recognize its sovereignty at the site and forego any future claim.

Ariel Kahana

The Tombs of the Kings site in east Jerusalem | Photo: Amit Ararat

Israel and France are holding secret talks aimed at opening the ancient compound known as the Tombs of the Kings near the Old City of Jerusalem, Israel Hayom has learned.

The catacomb has been under the administration of the French Consulate in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah for the past 150 years owing to international agreements dating back to the Ottoman period.

Scholars believe the tombs date back to the Second Temple Period. Queen Helena of Adiabene, a convert to Judaism, was believed to have been buried in a special sarcophagus that was found at the site, which was subsequently put on display at Paris' Louvre museum along with other sarcophagi revealed by excavations there.

The French Jewish community along with religious figures in Israel have long asked to obtain access to the site, where according to Jewish tradition Ben Kalba Sabbua - a famous resident of the city during the Roman period – is believed to have been buried.

The secret talks have been going on for the past three years, but the French Consulate has claimed the site cannot be reopened until its renovations there are completed. That claim has been met with skepticism by Israeli authorities, who note that the renovations appear to have been going on for about a decade.

According to sources at the Foreign Ministry, France wants to secure two Israeli concessions before it changes its policy. The first, that Israel recognizes French sovereignty over the site and the second, that Israel commits not to mount a legal challenge over ownership of the site.

Israel has rejected both demands thus far.

Sources informed Israel Hayom that when President Reuven Rivlin visited France last month, he was surprised when his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron presented his country's demands for the site. Rivlin did not respond because he was not familiar with the details of the case.

The issue has come up multiple times in conversations between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Macron.

