

The week ending May 30, 2014

ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIANS

Abbas Asks Palestinian Prime Minister to Seek New Government

According to [The New York Times](#) President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority on Thursday asked Rami Hamdallah, the prime minister, to form a new government of national reconciliation, a move that could send Israeli-Palestinian relations into a tailspin and would disrupt any prospect of a resumption of American-brokered peace talks. The decision to form a new government is the result of a unity pact reached last month between Mr. Abbas's Palestine Liberation Organization, which is dominated by the mainstream Fatah faction, and its rival, Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza. Palestinian officials said the new government, made up of politically independent professionals, would likely be announced within days. Under the terms of the agreement last month, Palestinian leaders agreed to do that within five weeks, and elections were to be held in about six months. "This letter designates Dr. Rami Hamdallah to form a new transitional government," Mr. Abbas said Thursday, according to Wafa, the official Palestinian news agency, at an appearance with Mr. Hamdallah. "I wish him luck in this difficult task which he will undertake." The possibility has already prompted stern warnings from Israel, which says it will not deal with a government "backed by Hamas," even if the ministers themselves are not politically affiliated. Hamas has refused to recognize Israel, which, like the United States and the European Union, classifies Hamas as a terrorist organization.

Hamas, Iran meet for first time in three years as unity deal nears

[Haaretz reports](#) Hamas' political leader, Khaled Meshal, met with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian last Thursday, the first public meeting between the two sides in three years. According to Iranian sources, the meeting was held in Doha, Qatar, where Meshal has been living since 2012. Ties were severed between the two sides after Hamas refused to support Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, leading to the ouster of Hamas from its headquarters in Damascus. Hamas is extremely keen to improve relations with Iran, since the organization has been left without patrons following last year's collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. The meeting reportedly dealt with two issues: the reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, and the ongoing Syrian civil war. Palestinian websites stated that Meshal supported the unity pact, claiming it as vital for the Palestinian people. Meshal reportedly said that Israel has exploited the rift, and the crisis in the Arab world, to continue building settlements and increasing the Jewish presence in East Jerusalem. Meshal praised Iranian support for the "axis of resistance," as he called it, as well as Iran's calls for a political resolution to the war in Syria. The timing of Meshal's meeting with the Iranian official is important in view of reports suggesting an imminent declaration of a united Palestinian government. In

previous years, the Palestinian Authority accused Iran of meddling in Palestinian politics, pressuring Hamas and Islamic Jihad not to join such a government. It is believed that, this time, the Iranians will not interfere to such an extent, but will still wish to maintain close ties with both Islamic factions in Gaza. In Ramallah, meanwhile, there is talk of the new government being announced by the end of this week.

IRAN

Iran hackers said to use Facebook to spy on Israelis

[The Times of Israel](#) reports Hackers, most likely in Iran, have been using fake profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media networks to mine data from Israeli, American, and British corporations and government bodies. An American security group, iSIGHT Partners, on Thursday published details of the scam, describing how the hackers conducted “a coordinated, long-term cyber espionage campaign” to target more than 2,000 government and business officials. It was an elaborate, well-organized version of a classic “spear phishing” campaign, in which users are either tricked into giving up personal information, like logins or passwords, or have their data hijacked by malware that gets onto their systems when they click on links, iSIGHT said. And while there’s no direct proof that Iran is behind the scam, the company said, there was plenty of circumstantial evidence — including the times of day when the hackers connected with their victims, connecting at odd hours and taking breaks that corresponded, among other things, with midday “siesta time” in Tehran. The scam, called “Newscaster,” has been going on since at least 2011, iSIGHT said, with hackers building online personalities using detailed, believable personal profiles on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, Blogger, and others. The profiles ostensibly belonged to journalists, defense contractors, and government officials, positioning themselves as strong supporters of Israel and connecting with victims who were also strong supporters of Israel. At least 2,000 top-level politicians, diplomatic personnel, Congressional aides, journalists, and others were victims of the scam, said iSIGHT.

ISRAEL IN THE NEWS

Pope Francis sets date for prayer meeting with Peres & Abbas

[The Associated Press](#) reports Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will join Pope Francis for an afternoon praying for peace at the Vatican on June 8, the Vatican said Thursday. Francis had invited both men to “my home” to pray during his recent trip to the Middle East. Speaking from the biblical town of Bethlehem, Francis said: “Building peace is difficult, but living without peace is a constant torment.” Both men immediately agreed, and subsequently approved the June 8 date, the Vatican said in a statement Thursday. Francis has stressed that he is not seeking to jumpstart peace negotiations, but merely bring the two sides together to pray. He said he had arranged for a rabbi and a Muslim cleric to lead the prayers, along with him. “It will be a prayer meeting. It’s not to do mediation or find solutions,” he told reporters on the flight home from Jerusalem on Monday. “We’ll meet just to pray, and then everyone will go home. But I think praying is important, praying together.” He called both Abbas and Peres “men of peace.” The prospects of any breakthrough are slim. Peres, a 90-year-old Nobel peace laureate, holds a largely ceremonial office and is set to step down this summer.