



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, March 20

Headlines:

- Israel Said to Strike Syria for Second Time in 24 Hours
- Liberman Threatens to 'Destroy' Syrian Air Defense Systems
- Syria Threatens Israeli Air Force with Air Defense Capabilities
- Netanyahu Threatens to Hold Snap Elections within Days
- Israeli Ministers Speak out Against PM's Threat to Call Elections
- Lapid Rules Out Alternative Coalition in Bid to Defuse Crisis
- PM Sends His Advisors to D.C. to Discuss Settlement Construction
- Hezbollah Says U.N. 'Weak' After Critical Israel Report Pulled

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: “Netanyahu on the Road to Self-Destruction”**
– By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth
- **Ha'aretz: “Israel's Growing Tensions With Syria, Lebanon and Hamas Leave Little Room for Maneuvering”**
– By Amos Harel, military commentator at Ha'aretz

News Excerpts

March 20, 2017

Times of Israel

Israel Said to Strike Syria for Second Time in 24 Hours

Israel is said to have struck Syria overnight Sunday-Monday, the second strike in 24 hours and third in three days as tensions escalated between the two countries over the weekend. Syria media reported early Monday that Israeli jets took out a number of targets near the Lebanon-Syria border including a Hezbollah weapons convoy and Syrian military sites. The reports have not been confirmed. Earlier Sunday, an Israeli drone strike reportedly killed a member of a Syrian pro-regime militia, an attack that came two days after Israeli jets, in an early Friday morning operation, hit an arms transfer meant for Hezbollah near Palmyra, with Syrian air defenses firing missiles at the planes. See also, ["Israel reportedly launches strike on Syria as tensions rise"](#) (LA Times)

i24 News

Lieberman Threatens to 'Destroy' Syrian Air Defense Systems

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman on Sunday threatened to destroy Syrian air defense systems after they fired ground-to-air missiles at Israeli warplanes carrying out strikes. "The next time the Syrians use their air defense systems against our planes we will destroy them without the slightest hesitation," Lieberman said on Israeli public radio. Israeli fighter jets hit several targets in Syria on Friday, with Netanyahu saying the strikes targeted weapons bound for the Hezbollah terror group in Lebanon. See also, ["Eisenkot predicts upcoming war with Lebanese-supported terrorist groups"](#) (Ynet News)

Ynet News

Syria Threatens IAF with Air Defense Capabilities

The Israeli Air Force's (IAF) [strike in Syria](#) has ramped up tensions between the two contiguous enemies and Syria is now threatening to activate more air defense systems against the IAF. The Syrian threats come after Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman [threatened to destroy](#) Syria's entire air defense network. Hezbollah's propaganda wing joined the international spat Sunday, publishing images of Syrian air defense equipment, including the S-200, which was fired at the IAF aircraft Friday. Following the attack, the Syrian military claimed to have shot down one of the Israeli jets; a claim the Syrian military has made more than once following IAF airstrikes in Syrian territory. See also, ["Assad Flexes Muscles With Israel and Plays With Fire"](#) (Haffington Post)

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu Threatens to Hold Snap Elections within Days

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that he will hold snap elections if no deal is reached to shut down Israel's new public broadcaster before its official launch. The prime minister told his ministers on Saturday that if Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon refuses to shut down the new broadcasting corporation and reform the old one by the middle of the week, he will send Israel to the polls. Netanyahu and Kahlon reached an agreement on Thursday that the new public broadcasting corporation will start operating as scheduled on April 30. But on Saturday Netanyahu said that he "changed his mind" about the deal. See also, ["By Threatening Elections, Netanyahu Is Taking a Huge Risk - Why Now?"](#)(Ha'aretz)

Ha'aretz

Israeli Ministers Speak out Against PM's Threat to Call Elections

A host of government ministers, including from the Likud, came out strongly against holding new elections on Sunday, in defiance of Prime Minister Netanyahu's apparent willingness to go to the ballot box over the nascent Israel Broadcasting Cooperation. Transport Yisrael Katz said the furor over the IBC was no reason to go to the polls, as did Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, with Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, also from the Likud, and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, saying that new elections were damaging and unnecessary. Netanyahu is determined to prevent the IBC from beginning operations and said on Saturday night that if Kulanu leader Kahlon did not agree to shut it down, he would dissolve the government. See also, [*"Kahlon responds in IPBC crisis"*](#) ([*Ynet News*](#))

Times of Israel

Lapid Rules Out Alternative Coalition in Bid to Defuse Crisis

The opposition Yesh Atid party on Sunday appeared to rule out joining the Zionist Union party for a coalition reshuffle in lieu of early elections, as a coalition members attempted to heal a crisis that has threatened to bring down the government and lead to snap elections. The comment from the centrist Yesh Atid party came amid reports that Kulanu Party leader Moshe Kahlon was in talks with opposition leader Isaac Herzog about forming a new government as ties with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu soured in recent days over the creation of a new public broadcaster. But Yesh Atid, which would likely be key to forming an alternative bloc of at least 61 Knesset members without going to elections, indicated that it would not back such a maneuver. "In democracies, replacing the leadership is done only through elections," the party said in a statement. "We won't lend a hand to tricks and backroom deals." See also, [*"Kahlon responds in IPBC crisis"*](#) ([*Ynet News*](#))

Ha'aretz

PM Sends His Aid to D.C. to Discuss Settlement Construction

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a delegation to Washington Saturday night for talks aimed at reaching a breakthrough between Israel and the United States on an agreement over restricting construction in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. A senior Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, noted that one of the main issues on the agenda was the Netanyahu government's desire to establish a new settlement for displaced residents of the evacuated unauthorized outpost of Amona. See also, [*"Netanyahu's advisors fly to DC for talks regarding settlements"*](#) ([*Ynet News*](#))

Reuters

Hezbollah Says U.N. 'Weak' After Critical Israel Report Pulled

The leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement denounced the United Nations on Saturday as weak after the withdrawal of a report accusing Israel of imposing an "apartheid regime" on Palestinians. A senior U.N. official resigned on Friday after the secretary-general asked her to remove the report, published by the United Nation's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), from the internet. U.N. ESCWA Executive Secretary Rima Khalaf said she was leaving after "powerful member states" had pressured the world body and its chief with "vicious attacks and threats". Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised speech on Saturday that the incident served as a reminder of the "truth of this organization, that it's weak ... and it succumbs to the will of the US".

Netanyahu on the Road to Self-Destruction

The prime minister's sudden concern for the Israel Broadcasting Authority workers is completely false. The only rational explanation for his conduct can be found elsewhere—in the police investigations. But even if he does decide to resign and call elections, the Knesset doesn't have to be dissolved, and the president can task a different MK with establishing a new government.

By Nahum Barnea, Columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- It happened to Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and other prime ministers: The fourth-term curse (It happened to David Ben-Gurion twice, in two separate rounds). The prime minister's hold on the government is stronger than ever; he has gotten rid of his rivals in the party; he has emasculated the opposition; he assembled the government he wanted; the voters look to him and only him. He doesn't know any other prime minister.
- At this point, in children's fairytales, the following sentence arrives: "And he lived happily ever after." Not in politics. In politics, this point marks the beginning of a self-destruction process.
- Benjamin Netanyahu has many reasons to be satisfied. The economic situation in Israel is good right now, mainly thanks to the gas discoveries and the high-tech industry. There is growth and no unemployment. The economic prosperity and security calm have a positive effect on the state of mind on the street. Netanyahu is greeted respectfully in most of the world's capitals.
- On Sunday morning, he left for Beijing for his second visit this term. Last week he was in Moscow, and after he returns from China, he is expected to fly to Washington again. It's true that the Chinese are a problematic partner, that the Russians are connected to our worst enemies and that the Trump administration is not as friendly as Netanyahu thought. The dreams about a crisis with Iran have vanished, and so have the dreams about a settlement on every hill. But the fact that he is travelling between these three world powers is an accomplishment in itself.
- Moreover, the Likud is not just the ruling party—it is the river most competing political forces wish to flow into. Moshe Kahlon and his party; Avigdor Lieberman and his party, Naftali Bennett, Moshe Ya'alon—they are all Likudniks using other names. For better or for worse, the current government is the most solid government Netanyahu has ever had. It contains no ideological differences—the Haredim are having a ball with the unprecedented funds and exemptions they have received, and the others share the same value system. Occasionally, they fake a crisis. Such crises are born on WhatsApp and die on WhatsApp. All it takes is for the prime minister to intervene.
- The most fallacious crisis is Netanyahu's sudden concern for the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) workers. For years, the IBA was run as a corrupt, inflated and unnecessary institution under Netanyahu's wings. He was in favor of shutting it down and establishing the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation (IPBC) instead. He passed the law in the government and in the Knesset. Then he changed his mind, then he changed it again, and then again.

Kahlon stood up against him not because he cares about the IPBC or because it affects his pocket, but because there is a limit to his willingness to be a doormat.

- All this has nothing to do with the state's real agenda. The IBA's influence is small and insignificant, amounting to two hours of morning broadcasts on the radio, and the IPBC's influence won't be any bigger. The only rational explanation for his move can be found elsewhere—in the [police investigations against him](#).
- The acts of corruption Netanyahu is being questioned about will likely lead to a police recommendation to indict him. The investigation isn't over yet. The attorney general is demanding more information. A decision on new elections will freeze and maybe even dissolve the investigation. Netanyahu will argue that the investigation is nothing but a left-wing plot. He will drag the right-wing voters, his party, his coalition members and the Israeli society into a new round, only two years after the previous elections. If he survives, he will argue that the investigation is unnecessary, as the people have already cleared him from any suspicion. And then he will put together the same coalition he is fed up with today.
- Is this a predestination? Not necessarily. A prime minister's resignation doesn't have to lead to new elections. The lawmakers don't have to decide to disband the Knesset. They can go to the president for consultations. The president can choose a different Knesset member and task him with establishing a new government. There are enough candidates, both from the Likud and from other parties. That's the good thing about democracy: Even when the prime minister acts like the only player, he is not the only player.

Israel's Growing Tensions With Syria, Lebanon and Hamas Leave Little Room for Maneuvering

With the political system in a frenzy over the police investigations into Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the dispute over the public broadcasting corporation and the possible advancing of elections, Israel is facing two potential security imbroglios, one with Syria and Lebanon and the second with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In both cases, it seems as if Israel is reaching the limits of its maneuvering room, which increases the risk of a confrontation.

By Amos Harel, military correspondent at Ha'aretz

- The increasing tension in the north began before dawn Friday with an attack in Syria that went somewhat awry. Israel, in an unusual move, was forced to admit that it had attacked military targets – i.e., a weapons convoy headed for Hezbollah in Lebanon – after an anti-aircraft missile fired by the Syrian Army missed hitting the Israeli Air Force planes but entered Israeli airspace, and was successfully intercepted by an Arrow missile in the Jordan Valley region.
- According to Arabic media and pretty clear hints from the Israeli leadership, the IAF has been attacking weapons convoys and depots in Syria for more than five years. But the high profile of this latest incident forced Israel to drop the veil of ambiguity it managed to maintain after the previous attacks. It also needed to pass an indirect calming message to the Jordanian public, because part of the interceptor fell in Jordanian territory, and without a public Israeli explanation King Abdullah II of Jordan could have been embarrassed by his seeming restraint in response to Israeli “aggression.”
- On Sunday morning Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman warned that the next time the air force will destroy any antiaircraft missile battery that fired on Israel’s aircraft. Then Sunday afternoon, Syria reported the assassination of a militiaman affiliated with the regime on the Golan Heights, an operation that Arab media attributed to Israel.
- At the same time, Chief of General Staff Gadi Eisenkot, at the change of command ceremony in Safed for the head of Northern Command, said, “Hezbollah is violating UN resolutions and is preparing for war.” He added that “in a future war there will be a clear address – the Lebanese government.”
- Behind these incidents and declarations lies one central development: the success of Syrian President Bashar Assad to totally turn things around in his country’s civil war and the confidence that Russia’s military intervention provides Assad’s camp, which also reflects onto Hezbollah. It isn’t just Aleppo; in recent days the Assad regime has completed its conquest of the region of Homs, where the rebels had asserted control, reaching an agreement under which the rebels withdrew from one of Syria’s largest cities.
- Meanwhile, the fact that the Shi’ite axis has the upper hand in Syria strengthens Hezbollah’s domestic position and its influence over the Lebanese government in Beirut. But the growing cooperation between the terror group and the Lebanese Army has led Israel to issue strong warnings to the Lebanese government.

- Israel now has to weigh its steps carefully because Russia is in the neighborhood. Over the weekend the Israeli ambassador to Russia was summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry for the first time to explain Friday's attack. Russia is trying to come to a permanent cease-fire in Syria, an effort that's meeting with apathy and hesitancy from the U.S. administration. Netanyahu, who until now has led a responsible policy with regard to the north, has on several occasions this past month warned against the Iranians establishing a foothold in Syria, whether through the port that Tehran is trying to lease near Latakia, or through the entry of Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah to forward positions on the Syrian border of the Golan Heights.
- Meanwhile, in the south, sporadic rocket fire from Gaza to the Negev continues; there were rockets fired last Wednesday and Saturday. Yesterday there were warning sirens in the Gaza border communities that turned out to be false alarms – which have become pretty common recently, indicating either the sensitivity of the military apparatus or a rise in the frequency of attempted fire by Hamas.
- In recent weeks the Israeli responses to these rocket launches have been pretty tame. There's been lots of tough rhetoric, but the military actions have generally been limited to hitting Hamas positions along the Gaza-Israel border, ending them as soon as possible after the rocket is fired. This indicates that for now the government doesn't want to get dragged into a broader confrontation for no reason, even as the IDF continues to prepare for the violence if it does break out. Still, almost every senior Israeli official who is asked raises the possibility that the Gaza border will heat up during the summer. These tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies.
- Things aren't exactly calm in the West Bank, either. Last week three Palestinians were killed by IDF fire. In Ramallah an armed wanted man was killed; in the Hebron area a Palestinian teenager was shot dead in an incident when stones and firebombs were thrown at troops, and at the Gush Etzion junction a young Palestinian woman whom the IDF said tried to ram into soldiers was killed.
- One gets the impression that the Palestinians in the West Bank are getting more restless. Some of this restlessness is being directed at the Palestinian Authority, whose security apparatuses are being again portrayed as collaborating with Israel. The prime minister, who is currently on an official visit to China, will have to address all these developments.