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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, July 17

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News Excerpts

July 17, 2017

Israel Radio News

Temple Mount to Be Reopened to Muslim Worshippers

Three gates to the Temple Mount compound are scheduled to be reopened to Muslim worshippers today, and visitors are supposed to be allowed to enter as well. The police are holding constant situation assessments based on developments on the ground. Hundreds of Muslims have visited the Temple Mount since it was opened yesterday afternoon. Clashes between Muslims and the police near the Lions' Gate continued into the night. Palestinian sources reported that ten people were injured. Israel Police officials said that dozens of Muslims blocked the road. Some of them threw stones at police officers and three were arrested.

See also, ["Muslim Authority Protests Temple Mount Security Measures, Block Entrance" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

See also, ["Israel Implements Controversial Security Measures at Sensitive Holy Site" \(Washington Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Jordan King Abdullah Calls for Calm After Temple Mount Attack

Jordan's King Abdullah on Saturday called for calm as he condemned the terror attack near the Temple Mount in a phone call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel feared Friday's attack, in which three Israeli-Arab terrorists killed two policemen, could spark a third intifada. The Temple Mount is under Israeli control and Jordanian custodianship and is managed by the Islamic Waqf. Jews are allowed to visit, but not worship. During the conversation, King Abdullah called on Israel to reopen the Temple Mount, which had been closed for security reasons after the incident.

See also, ["Minister Mulls Home Demolitions for Arab Israelis After Temple Mount Attack" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

MK Odeh Warns of Third Intifada After Friday Attack

Closing the Aksa Mosque on the Temple Mount, following Friday's attack by three Israeli-Arab gunmen that left two policemen dead, could lead to a third intifada, Joint List chairman Ayman Odeh said on Saturday night. The leader of the Arab bloc in the Knesset told Channel 2: "Closing the Aksa Mosque is explosive. The Second Intifada broke out on al-Aksa. I warn against the third." He criticized the attack on Friday, saying Israeli Arabs should wage a "political struggle, and not in any way an armed struggle." MKs from the Islamic Movement-affiliated United Arab List party and the Ta'al party, both part of the Joint List, also released statements condemning violence.

Ynet News

Peretz Reaffirms Support for Gabbay, Mission to Replace Bibi

Newly elected Labor Chairman Avi Gabbay held his first meeting with MK Amir Peretz since defeating him in the second round of the leadership contest last week, during which the two discussed future strategies for dissolving the government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. After the meeting with Gabbay, Peretz said that "the meeting was held in a good spirits," and that he and Gabbay had already begun formulating a plan to "accelerate the dissolution of the government and the replacement of Benjamin Netanyahu."

Ministers Push Bill that Could Stymie East J'lem Withdrawal

The Ministerial Committee for Legislation on Sunday unanimously backed a bill that aims to make it more difficult to give up sections of Jerusalem in a future peace deal. The basic law currently requires the consent of at least 61 MKs, a majority in the 120-member Knesset, for handing over sovereign control of any part of the capital to foreign governments or agencies, including the Palestinians. The bill would raise that to an 80-MK minimum, or fully two-thirds of the Knesset, a threshold that likely makes it all but impossible for a future Israeli government to obtain the Knesset's approval for withdrawing from Jerusalem. The bill must still pass three readings and at least two committee write-ups in the Knesset, an unlikely feat in the two weeks left in the current Knesset session.

Ynet News

Former Intel Chief: Israeli Leadership Risks Heroic Opportunity

The change in attitude towards American policy in the Middle East presents a critical chance for Israel to shape the regional environment in a way that would be favorable to Israel, a former IDF chief of Military Intelligence said Thursday. However, he added the lack of strategy and leadership on the part of Israel's political echelon puts the country at risk of squandering a 'historic opportunity.' "Israel is very strong, even with all the threats around. There is no nuclear Iran, we have peace with Egypt and Jordan, the Syrian military is gone, there is a lot of identical convergence of interests with the Arab world, the president of the US that basically I think his heart is with us," said Amos Yadlin, who also served as commander of the IDF Military Colleges and is now the Executive Director of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). "We have an opportunity here that may not have existed since the founding of the state, to go forward—with the Arabs, with the Americans—to advance peace with the Palestinians according to Israeli parameters. But our government lacks a coherent strategy and leadership.

Ha'aretz

PM: Israel Opposes US, Russia Cease-Fire Deal in Syria

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told reporters after his meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday that Israel opposes the cease-fire agreement in southern Syria that the United States and Russia reached because it perpetuates the Iranian presence in the country. The prime minister noted that in his meeting with Macron, he made it clear to the French president that Israel was totally opposed to the cease-fire plan. A senior Israeli official who asked not to be named due to the diplomatic sensitivity of the matter said Israel is aware of Iranian intentions to substantially expand its presence in Syria. Iran is not only interested in sending advisers to Syria, the official said, but also in dispatching extensive military forces including the establishment of an airbase for Iranian aircraft and a naval base.

See also, ["PM Opposes Syrian Ceasefire, Says It Will Strengthen Iran" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Temple Mount Closure Was the Right Thing to Do

By Ron Ben-Yishai

- When a terror attack takes place, the immediate response is carried out in three stages: First, there is an attempt to minimize the damage and, most importantly, to prevent more casualties and damage to property; second, there is an evacuation of the wounded so they can receive life-saving medical treatment at the scene or at the hospital; and third, after the wounded have been evacuated, a situation assessment is held, followed by prevention and deterrence measures against copycat attacks.
- A thorough investigation is carried out only after these three stages are completed, in a bid to draw conclusions and be better prepared for the prevention of future attacks. Friday's attack in Jerusalem, which left Staff Sgt. Maj. Ha'il Satawi and Staff Sgt. Maj. Kamil Shnaan dead, had a religious motive and was carried out in the most religiously explosive place in the Middle East right now—the Temple Mount. It was therefore important to act quickly, not just to stop and neutralize the terrorists so they would not cause further deaths and damage, but also to prevent a major flare-up in the territories, in Israel and in the Muslim world in general.
- And that was done, properly, by the security forces and the Israeli government. Closing the Temple Mount for Muslim prayers prevented incitement and violent rioting, which could have developed had the prayers been held as usual. Stopping the prayer at the Temple Mount was also necessary in order to conduct a thorough search in the compound and ensure there are no more weapons there or stockpiles of Molotov cocktails and stones, which Muslim worshipers sometimes use to target the Jews praying in the Western Wall beneath them.
- The Shin Bet and Israel Police know very well that stopping the prayer at the Temple Mount could in itself spark violent riots among Muslims and inflame the situation, but they estimated that because the attack was carried out by Muslims who violated the Temple Mount's sanctity, the response to the compound's closure for prayer would not be so strong. This estimate was fully verified—for now, at least. The Palestinian and Israeli Arabs have been exercising restraint, which is likely the result of considerable feelings of guilt over the fact that the terrorists who operated in the holy site came from their ranks.
- Closing Jerusalem's Old City to traffic was necessary as well, to prevent friction between Muslims and Jews in the narrow alleys. This friction, after a Temple Mount attack and the killing of terrorists which was reported all over social media, would have almost certainly led to murder attempts and violent clashes. The solution was to neutralize the danger by turning the Old City into an almost sterile zone.
- International damage largely averted
- It's also important to keep in mind that if the Old City hadn't been closed on Friday, the tourists who were planning to visit it would have been in serious danger. The Palestinians are arguing, of course, that the closure of the Old City and the Temple Mount were in fact punitive measures taken by the Israeli government, as east Jerusalem merchants suffered from the Old City's closure. From personal knowledge, I can say this claim is false.

- The third step taken by the Israeli government in commendable speed was to prevent an escalation of the situation in the Muslim world, which would have harmed Israel's international standing. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's declaration, following an evaluation of the situation, that the status quo at the Temple Mount would be preserved and that the prayers there would be resumed on Sunday, as well as the interview given by Major-General Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of the government's activities in the territories, were the right move at the right time. The comments made by Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan at the Temple Mount were also restrained and to the point, helping to ward off claims made by Arab elements, led by Jordan.
- We shouldn't be surprised by Jordan and Qatar's reactions to the events, as well as by the response of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which condemned the Israeli raid of the Temple Mount. When it comes to the State of Israel, Arab politicians have always favored "alternative facts" over the truth. It serves them as a defense mechanism against the rage of their countries' citizens. In Jordan, for example, the majority of the population is Palestinian and the Islamist movements are very strong.
- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, on the other hand, condemned the terror attack upon realizing an outburst of Palestinian violence as a result of incitement would harm him just as it would harm Israel. An escalation in the Middle East is in no one's interest right now, and that was evident in the statement released by Turkey and Egypt, likely following Netanyahu's calming message that the status quo would be maintained.
- There are still some tensions in the Silwan neighborhood, and there were two attempted terror attacks near Atarot which were likely inspired by the Temple Mount events, but the Arab street in Israel and in east Jerusalem is quiet. The international damage has likely been largely averted as well, and Israel can keep claiming it is defending the holy sites better than all its predecessors and maintaining freedom of worship for all religions in that sensitive place.
- Next stage: Long-term prevention and deterrence
- In the 1990s, there was a massive terrorist attack in Islam's holiest place—the Kaaba of Mecca. The Saudi security forces didn't hesitate before shooting the terrorists, and even detonating explosive devices which destroyed part of the holy site. The incident lasted several days, but the Muslim world kept quiet. The Arab League, and other Islamist elements that are attacking Israel right now, should be reminded of that incident.
- The prevention and damage minimization stage of the Temple Mount attack is drawing to an end. On Sunday, Israel's defense establishment will have to move to the next stage, which is a long-term prevention of additional attacks in this sensitive place. The measures that should be taken include scattering camera and metal detectors around the Temple Mount and at its entrances, as well as deterrence.
- We should remember that Israel's security forces—the IDF, the Shin Bet and the Israel Police—have been highly efficient in handling the wave of terrorism that began in September 2015. One of the causes of that wave of terrorism was the call on Jews to visit the Temple Mount.

- The wave of lone-wolf terrorism was suppressed thanks to a proper policy led by the defense establishment, which aimed to distinguish between the terrorists and the population trying to live its life. Another reason was a creative and technological intelligence collection which made it possible to thwart these kinds of terror attacks. A third reason was the Palestinian security apparatus' determination.
- But even when the situation calmed down in late 2016, the Temple Mount kept producing terror attacks, mostly by "local cells" of Palestinians. Israel should consider not only better defense and screening measures at the Temple Mount gates, but also wider moves that would deter people from repeatedly trying to target the site.
- In this context, it's quite surprising that the leading inciter when it comes to the Temple Mount, Sheikh Raed Salah of the Islamic Movement's northern branch, is still free to incite without any restrictions. It's very possible that this sheikh holds imputed liability for Friday's murderous attack at the Temple Mount.

Ron Ben-Yishai is a national security correspondent and commentator for Yedioth Ahronoth and Israeli TV's Channel 1.

Summary:

Closing Jerusalem's Old City to traffic was necessary as well, to prevent friction between Muslims and Jews in the narrow alleys. This friction, after a Temple Mount attack and the killing of terrorists which was reported all over social media, would have almost certainly led to murder attempts and violent clashes. The solution was to neutralize the danger by turning the Old City into an almost sterile zone.

Israeli-Pal. Water Deal Could Chart Course for Further Talks

By Shlomi Eldar

- President Donald Trump's envoy to the Middle East, Jason Greenblatt, said at a July 13 joint press conference for Israeli and Palestinian representatives that "Water is a precious commodity in the Middle East. The US welcomes the agreement reached by the Palestinian Authority [PA] and the government of Israel, which will allow for the sale of 32 million cubic meters of water from Israel to the [PA]." The deal, which will allow Palestinians to purchase water at reduced rates, was made in the context of the Red Sea-Dead Sea canal project led by Israel and Jordan.
- Also participating in the press conference, which took place in Jerusalem's King David Hotel, were Israeli Regional Cooperation Minister Tzahi Hanegbi and the head of the Palestinian Water Authority, Mazen Ghonaim. "This is the biggest, most ambitious project ever in our region," said Hanegbi. It is hard to remember the last time that official representatives of Israel and the Palestinians sat together in such a festive setting to celebrate the turning of a new page in their relationship. "I hope that this is an indication of what is to come," said Greenblatt. Perhaps he was referring to the renewal of negotiations to reach a permanent resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- As far as the Palestinians were concerned, it was important to emphasize that this water agreement will not impact any other future political negotiations. They do not want to let Israel claim in any future talks that the issue of water has already been resolved and there is no reason to discuss it further. "This is a regional agreement which has nothing to do with the core issues of any final agreement or the rights of Palestinians to water," said Ghonaim. He went on to say that the 32 million cubic meters of water that the Palestinians will be able to purchase at a reduced rate will be divided between the West Bank (22 million cubic meters) and Gaza (10 million cubic meters). "This will ease the suffering of our people in Gaza in particular," he explained, "since 97% of the water there is unusable."
- Israel claims that for the past three years, the Palestinians have refused to be integrated into the Red Sea-Dead Sea canal project, fearing that any understanding on the issue of water will be detrimental to reaching a comprehensive diplomatic agreement. A Palestinian source who spoke with AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity rejected this assertion, stating that Israel's preconditions for the inclusion of the Palestinians in the project made no sense. "All Israel said was that the Palestinians were welcome to participate," he claimed, "but for the past three years, it refused to get into any serious discussion about [their] role in this ambitious project, because of the tense relationship with [Palestinian President Mahmoud] Abbas."
- During the Barack Obama administration, US Secretary of State John Kerry worked hard to include the Palestinians in the project, mainly because the donor nations helping to finance it made funding conditional on Palestinian participation. The underlying principle was and remains that their participation will resolve the water crisis in Gaza and the West Bank and at the same time provide Palestinians with hundreds of jobs, immediately easing the unemployment crisis. Greenblatt has done in his short tenure what Kerry couldn't do in all his years in office.

- **"It is obvious that [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu is afraid of Trump," said a senior Palestinian official involved in contacts between the PA and the US administration. The official, speaking to Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, went on, "Israel realized that this is not a game and compromised. It was worried that Palestinian participation in the Red Sea-Dead Sea canal project would be considered a case of establishing facts on the ground with long-term diplomatic implications on the PA's role in the Arava region, while the Americans viewed Palestinian participation as being of humanitarian rather than diplomatic significance. It could be used to reach additional agreements and even a breakthrough, as happened during Greenblatt's current visit."**
- **The Palestinians credit Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon for an important role in pushing forward with the Red Sea-Dead Sea canal. His understated activities, say the Palestinians, helped to establish trust between him and Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. Kahlon was also mentioned in the context of the agreement signed July 10 between the Israel Electric Company and the Palestinian Authority to operate a secondary power station in the Jenin region. It will increase the supply of electricity to the West Bank and allow the regular flow of electricity to Palestinian residents of the region after many years of uncertainty. At the signing, Israel was represented by Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, but Abbas' office highlighted Kahlon's contribution to the deal and continues to speak warmly of him.**
- **The Red Sea-Dead Sea canal project is the largest of all the initiatives intended to bring economic stability to the Palestinian Authority. This grand scheme has been a topic of extensive discussion for the last three decades, but only now is it actually taking shape, with work scheduled to begin soon. The initiative promises to not only resolve the regional water crisis but also, among other things, save the Dead Sea from disappearing by allowing water from the Red Sea to flow into it, creating hydroelectric energy as it drops from sea level at the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, the surface of which stands at the lowest land elevation on Earth.**
- **"The Red Sea-Dead Sea canal project is very important to the Palestinian economy, but it is also important to creating a positive new atmosphere which can lead to contacts aimed at reaching a comprehensive diplomatic arrangement," said a senior Palestinian source on condition of anonymity. He added that Greenblatt realizes that ensuring an economic lifeline to the PA through huge projects like the canal project will create an atmosphere of trust between the parties unlike anything seen in the past few years. Other projects and initiatives include foreign aid from the Trump administration that is soon to reach the PA, he claimed. Reducing unemployment and stimulating the economy will prompt the Palestinian public to support a renewal of negotiations with Israel, on the realization that future peace will bear economic benefits and should be given a chance.**
- **Improving the Palestinian economy is also a top priority for the Israeli defense establishment, which sees immense implications for security. For months now, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories has been pressuring the political leadership to take steps in that direction, based on the assumption that Palestinian hardships lead to desperation, and desperation leads to terror.**

Shlomi Eldar is a columnist for Al-Monitor's Israel Pulse. For the past two decades, he has covered the Palestinian Authority and especially the Gaza Strip for Israel's Channels 1 and 10, reporting on the emergence of Hamas. In 2007, he was awarded the Sokolov Prize, Israel's most important media award, for this work.

Summary:

During the Barack Obama administration, US Secretary of State John Kerry worked hard to include the Palestinians in the project, mainly because the donor nations helping to finance it made funding conditional on Palestinian participation. The underlying principle was and remains that their participation will resolve the water crisis in Gaza and the West Bank and at the same time provide Palestinians with hundreds of jobs, immediately easing the unemployment crisis. Greenblatt has done in his short tenure what Kerry couldn't do in all his years in office.