Israel and the Middle East
News Update

Wednesday, August 16

Headlines:

• Iran Building Long-Range Rocket Factory in Syria: Israeli TV
• Haley: Iran Can’t Use Nuclear Deal to Hold World Hostage
• Abbas Congratulates North Korea’s Leader on Independence Day
• Kurds Hope Israel Can Nudge US to Support Independence
• Family of Terrorist to Be Charged for Not Preventing Him
• Pro-Israel Event in NY Cancelled Following Pal’ Pressure
• Israel Seeks UN’s Respect in Campaign for Security Council Seat
• More Israelis Left Israel Than Moved Back in Six Year Record

Commentary:

• Yediot Ahronot: “Big Decisions, Small Forum, Why is this good?”
  – By Giora Eiland, former head of the Israeli National Security Council
• Al Monitor: “Israel Pushes Security Ties while Cairo, Amman Embassies sit Empty”
  – By Akiva Eldar, columnist at Al Monitor Israel Pulse
**Reuters**

**Iran Building Long-Range Rocket Factory in Syria: Israeli TV**

An Israeli television report said on Tuesday that Iran is building a facility in northwest Syria to manufacture long-range rockets, and showed satellite images it said were of the site under construction. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu warned last week that Iran was strengthening its foothold in its ally Syria as Islamic State fighters were being displaced, and said Israel was watching developments and would act against any threat. "Our policy is clear: We vehemently oppose the military buildup by Iran and its proxies, primarily Hezbollah, in Syria and we will do whatever it takes to protect Israel's security," he said in a speech. See also, "Israeli satellite images reveal Iranian ammunition facility under construction in Syria" (Jerusalem Online)

**Times of Israel**

**Haley: Iran Can’t Use Nuclear Deal to Hold World Hostage**

US Ambassador Nikki Haley says Iran should not be allowed “to use the nuclear deal to hold the world hostage.” Haley commented Tuesday after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warned that the landmark 2015 nuclear agreement with the US and five other world powers could fall apart. Rouhani said Tehran could quickly ramp up and advance its nuclear program if the US continues “threats and sanctions” against Iran. Haley warned that “the nuclear deal must not become ‘too big to fail.’” She added that “Iran, under no circumstances, can ever be allowed to have nuclear weapons.” See also, ”U.S. envoy says Iran cannot ‘hold world hostage’ with nuclear deal” (Reuters)

**i24 News**

**Abbas Congratulates North Korea's Leader on Independence Day**

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas congratulated North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un Tuesday on the anniversary of independence from Japan's 1910-45 occupation, amid a US standoff with the rogue state. "The Korean people offered the most precious sacrifices for their freedom and dignity," Abbas said in a message to Kim that was also published by the Palestinian state news agency Wafa. Abbas expressed his thanks for North Korea's "firm solidarity in support of the rights of our people and the just struggle to end the occupation," it added. In a separate message also carried by Wafa, Abbas congratulated South Korean President Moon Jae-In on the anniversary. See also, “Abbas sends greeting to North Korea’s Kim Jong-un” (Ynet News)

**Jerusalem Post**

**Kurds Hope Israel Can Nudge US to Support Independence**

A number of senior Iraqi Kurd officials have visited Israel over the last several weeks urging Jerusalem to both support its independence and send a message to Washington to do the same, Zionist Union MK Ksenia Svetlova said on Monday. A referendum on independence in the Kurdistan region in Iraq is scheduled for September 25. The Jerusalem Post reported on Sunday that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a delegation of US Republican congressmen on Thursday that he is in favor of an independent Kurdish state in parts of Iraq. Netanyahu, according to a source who took part in the discussion, expressed his “positive attitude” toward a Kurdish state in the Kurdish areas of Iraq.
**Family of Terrorist to Be Charged for Not Preventing Him**
The military prosecution is expected to indict five relatives of Omar al-Abed, who stabbed to death three Israeli civilians in the settlement of Halamish last month. The five would be charged with failing to prevent a crime. According to sources in the prosecution, the family members were aware of Abed’s plans to carry out an attack but did not try to stop him. Expected to be charged are Abed’s father, Abed al-Jalil, his mother, Ibtisam al-Jalil, two of his brothers and another relative. As far as is known, the main piece of evidence against the family is a Facebook post Abed wrote a few hours before the attack. According to sources familiar with the details, the family apparently saw the post. The family members allegedly discussed how to respond to the post but did not inform the authorities. See also, “Israel demolishes home of Palestinian terrorist who stabbed three to death” (i24 News)

**Jerusalem Post**

**Pro Israel Event in NY Cancelled Following Pal’ Pressure**
The Queens Museum, which had agreed earlier this summer to host a reenactment of the United Nation’s 1947 vote for the establishment of the State of Israel, scheduled for November 29th, has informed the Israeli Mission to the UN that it will not do so after all. The event, initiated by Israel’s Ambassador Danny Danon, was intended to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the historic vote in its original place: the main gallery of the museum, which hosted the UN General Assembly back then. Preparations for the event had begun, but as news outlets, including The Jerusalem Post, made the plans public, the same Museum official begun expressing concerns about feedback received from “Palestinian friends of the museum.”

**Bloomberg**

**Israel Seeks UN’s Respect in Campaign for Sec’ Council Seat**
Outreach to Africa, educational trips for foreign diplomats and a more conciliatory Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu make it clear: Israel is campaigning to overcome its acrimonious relationship with the United Nations in time to win a coveted spot on the Security Council next year. Israel is working to rally enough votes in the 193-member General Assembly to defeat either Germany or Belgium in a three-way race for two spots on the UN’s most powerful body. “They’ve done their campaign with a remarkable level of sophistication, doing it systemically, arranging bilateral agreements,” said India’s ambassador to the UN. “They start with a disadvantage in that there are countries that are not disposed to vote for them.” See also, “Cape Verde denies it’ll start backing Israel at the UN” (TOI)

**Ha’aretz**

**More Israelis Left Israel Than Moved Back in Six Year Record**
After years of a decline in the numbers of Israelis leaving the country for an extended period, the trend reversed itself in 2015 and for the first time since 2009 the number of leavers grew. Approximately 16,700 Israelis left the country to live overseas on a long-term basis in 2015, mostly with their families, while only about 8,500 returned after living abroad for at least a year, the Central Bureau of Statistics reported on Monday. The year 2015 also saw the lowest number of Israelis returning home any time in the past 12 years. The numbers of those returning has been steadily decreasing since 2012. See also, “Why Almost 40 Percent of Israelis Are Thinking of Emigrating” (Ha’aretz)
Big Decisions, Small Forum, Why is this good?

Better to hold in-depth discussions in a small forum instead of superficial discussions in a large forum.

By Giora Eiland, former head of the Israeli National Security Council

- It was reported this week that the prime minister wants to change Basic Law: Government so that the security cabinet, not just the cabinet, is authorized to make a decision that is liable to lead to war. Some were quick to criticize the prime minister. Some said that this initiative was meant to divert attention from the corruption affairs, and others even said that by doing this, Netanyahu wanted to concentrate more and more powers in his own hands.

- I have a different opinion. Prime ministers and ministers only want more power when it means controlling budgets or controlling regulation or having the power to appoint people. When it comes to security, the situation is the reverse. About 20 years ago, when I was the director of the Operations Directorate, the defense minister at the time, Itzik Mordechai, sent me to present a certain operation to the prime minister, also Binyamin Netanyahu at that time. True, the operation was within the authority of the defense minister, but because of its specific sensitivity, he wanted the prime minister to be involved as well. When I arrived at his bureau, his military secretary intercepted me and said: if the defense minister feels that he wants to share the responsibility, let him request a formal meeting of the security cabinet; the prime minister personally has no interest in being a partner to the decision. In other words, prime ministers don’t really want to have too much authority when it comes to security matters.

- Unrelated to the specific timing, the initiative to shift the cabinet’s authorities to the security cabinet is appropriate. One reason has to do with the change in the nature of wars. In the past, we had total wars that took place, on average, every decade. At the time it was correct that the decision to go to war, such as the Six-Day War, be made only by the entire cabinet. Today, the situation is different. We find ourselves in “little wars” every few years, with the potential of being dragged into such clashes every few months. Every strike in Syria on a convoy taking weapons to Hizbullah is liable to lead to a military response by the other side. Decisions are therefore needed much more frequently and in a much shorter time. It is not always possible, in real time, to convene a forum as clumsy as the cabinet and to keep the matter secret.

- The second reason is size. There are about 20 ministers in the cabinet. If we add another ten army and security officials, the forum reaches a size in which an effective discussion is impossible. Even the size of the security cabinet is too large, but discussion there is still possible. It needs to be remembered that sometimes, discussions about war or about a large-scale military operations must be efficient and end within a set time, something that cannot be ensured if there are a large number of participants.

- A third reason is representation: the cabinet is comprised of all the leaders of the factions that belong to the coalition as well as all of the important ministers. This is the forum that is the heart of the government by definition. A fourth reason is the need to be informed. One of the weaknesses typical of Israeli governments throughout the years was the ministers’ insufficient familiarity with military affairs. It is better that ministers such as the welfare or health minister
devote their time to the affairs of their ministries instead of making them devote time and
attention to a matter in which their contribution to the discussion will be very minor.

• Instead of sharing sensitive security matters with more and more ministers, they should be
  concentrated. It is better for the security cabinet to be as small as possible, but as in-depth as
  possible. The most important discussions should not be held during war but rather when it is
  quiet. Take, for example, Lebanon and Gaza. In the case of Lebanon, there is a debate over
  whether the correct strategy is to fight Hizbullah or whether when the “third Lebanon war” takes
  place, that the State of Lebanon be defined as the enemy. Such a discussion should take place
  in a calm atmosphere, not when the rockets are falling. The same is true for Gaza: is the correct
  policy the one that is being pursued now, or would it be correct to recognize de facto that Hamas
  is the legitimate ruler in Gaza and therefore we should coordinate with it to rehabilitate the Gaza
  Strip and prevent the next clash.

• To summarize: better to hold in-depth discussions in a small forum instead of superficial
  discussions in a large forum.

SUMMARY: Unrelated to the specific timing, the initiative to shift the cabinet’s authorities
to the security cabinet is appropriate. One reason has to do with the change in the nature
of wars. In the past, we had total wars that took place, on average, every decade. At the
time it was correct that the decision to go to war, such as the Six-Day War, be made only
by the entire cabinet. Today, the situation is different. We find ourselves in “little wars”
every few years, with the potential of being dragged into such clashes every few months.
Every strike in Syria on a convoy taking weapons to Hizbullah is liable to lead to a military
response by the other side. Decisions are therefore needed much more frequently and in
a much shorter time. It is not always possible, in real time, to convene a forum as clumsy
as the cabinet and to keep the matter secret.
Israel Pushes Security Ties while Cairo, Amman Embassies sit Empty

By Akiva Eldar, columnist at Al Monitor Israel Pulse

- White House officials confirmed Aug. 11 that a high-ranking delegation would visit the Middle East at the end of the month to discuss “strengthening our relations with regional partners and the economic steps that can be taken both now and after a peace deal is signed to ensure security, stability and prosperity for the region.” In his seven months in office, President Donald Trump has had time to realize that Israel cannot expect peace with its Arab neighbors without resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli-Saudi ties and the preservation of Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Jordanian partnerships require a divorce agreement and a fair and reasonable division of assets between the Jewish State and the Palestinian one. Israel can reach peace with the Arab world only after resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. The White House also made sure to add, “The president is personally committed to achieving a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.”

- Two days earlier, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made it clear that he did not intend to carry out the division of real estate required to break with occupied Palestine. He is trying to convince the public that he can dance at two weddings — that he can approve the construction of a new West Bank settlement in territories designated for a future Palestinian state and be accorded a warm welcome in world capitals. At the embarrassing rally organized by Likud activists in support of the Netanyahus on Aug. 9, Netanyahu declared, “We have Dimona and we have Amona.” Netanyahu was responding to Labor chair Avi Gabbay’s July 10 statement about the need to first take care of Dimona residents, meaning poor Israelis, before the Amona settlers. Dimona is an impoverished city in the heart of southern Israel, and Amona is the West bank settlement evacuated last February by court order. Chastising the media, Netanyahu added, “You recall that the fake news media repeats … that if we don’t withdraw from areas of our historical homeland we will be isolated, weakened and abandoned.” Instead, he boasted, Israel is enjoying an unprecedented “political prosperity” on all continents.

- In a July 19 meeting with four Eastern Europe leaders, Netanyahu bragged that unlike the “crazy” behavior of Western Europe, which conditions its ties with Israel on progress in peace talks with the Palestinians, the Arabs “talk with us about technology and everything we’re talking about here.” True, Israeli defense officials, senior figures of the country’s weapons industry and cybersecurity experts secretly share intelligence and combat doctrine with colleagues from neighboring Arab states. However, the attitude of those states — among them Egypt and Jordan, which have peace treaties with Israel — are more like that of a married person and a lover: They satisfy each other’s needs but keep their relationship away from prying eyes.

- Israel’s embassy in Cairo has been vacant for nine months. This is the longest period since the establishment of ties between the two countries in 1979 that the embassy — Israel’s first in an Arab state — has been unstaffed. Israel’s embassy in Amman has also been abandoned since the clash over Jerusalem’s Temple Mount in July and the ensuing violence on July 23,
in which an Israeli embassy guard in Amman shot dead two Jordanians, one of whom tried to attack him. But even prior to that crisis, there had been a decline in the embassy’s public activity in Jordan. On Aug. 13 an Israeli security delegation arrived in Cairo, attempting to reach an arrangement with the Egyptians on security measures that would enable the reopening of the embassy. According to Ynet, the sides have reached understandings that will soon enable the return of Ambassador David Govrin to the Egyptian capital.

- But even if the Israeli diplomats in Cairo return to their desks, ties between the two countries will probably not be resuscitated. Govrin said at an Institute for National Security Studies conference in March that bilateral relations are primarily military. He warned that such a focus risks eroding peace. The ambassador complimented the strong ties between Netanyahu and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, but emphasized that for peace to form deep roots, it must be based on two pillars — a military one and a civil-economic one.

- In an April 1 article for Egypt's Al-Ahram, Ahmad Fuad Anwar, a professor at Alexandria University who concentrates on Israel, criticized Netanyahu's failure to set up a pro-peace government, preferring to establish a government with far-right elements. In an April 29 article, Anwar wrote that Egyptian-Israeli relations have not known such tension since the first Separation of Forces Agreement was signed in 1974.

- Haaretz correspondent Barak Ravid reported on Aug. 8 that at a debate in the foreign affairs subcommittee of the Knesset's Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, representatives of the Foreign Ministry and the Trade Ministry expressed concern over the significant decline in ties with Egypt since the diplomatic staff left. While representatives of the National Security Council in the prime minister’s office said Netanyahu places more importance on intact defense ties with Egypt than on the staffing of the embassy, representatives of the military's planning division noted that tensions between Israel and Egypt are having a negative impact on ties with senior Egyptian military officers.

- This week, Al-Monitor heard the views of two former Israeli ambassadors on the paralysis of Israel’s two diplomatic offices in Arab states. Shimon Shamir, who served as ambassador in both Egypt and Jordan, was unambiguous, stating, “If the peace is important, the embassies are important.” Shamir added that a big question mark hangs over ties between countries that do not exchange ambassadors. “This is a symbolic manifestation, but also a practical sign that the peace is not stable and is at risk,” he said. The senior Middle East scholar noted that embassy staff “are deployed at the front, facing a hostile media and reacting to conspiracy theories and evil accusations that endanger the peace.”

- Shamir added, “Failure to send back an ambassador sends a message to the public there.” He stressed that ties between peoples create lasting relationships, whereas ties between governments can be terminated in a minute. “The Egyptian people don’t know whether there is defense coordination with Israel,” the retired diplomat said. “The people do know that there’s no Israeli embassy.” Shamir was not oblivious to the security threats faced by the embassy staff, but noted that the United States does not shut down its embassies in states where American diplomats are under threat. “Diplomats are soldiers on the front,” he said. “You don’t pull back soldiers from the front because of a threat to their lives.”
• Oded Eran, formerly Israel’s ambassador to Jordan and currently a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, presented a different view. “It’s a little hard for professional diplomats to admit, but states have economic and defense interests that can only be protected by compromising on principles and symbols,” he said. Eran added that Israeli prime ministers have diminished the status of ambassadors to that of a flag. “It’s highly doubtful that the prime minister knew the identity of the ambassador in Amman before deciding to make time on his schedule for a photo op with the security guard,” he said in a biting reference to the guard pulled from Israel’s embassy in Jordan after the shooting. Israeli prime ministers, he added, have accepted the format set by late King Hussein of Jordan and former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who preferred to conduct ties with Israel via special envoys and defense officials. This formula enabled the Arab leaders to limit domestic criticism over their relationship with Israel amid the continuing stalemate in talks with the Palestinians and the ongoing Israeli settlement drive.

• Eran agreed that lowering the Israeli flag in Arab capitals is a negligible price compared to the one Israel would have to pay for a full and effective ambassadorial presence in Cairo, Amman and other Arab capitals that are signatories of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. He is likely referring to precious territorial currency. What domestic political price is Trump willing to pay to prove he’s “personally committed to achieving a peace deal?

SUMMARY: Israel’s embassy in Cairo has been vacant for nine months. This is the longest period since the establishment of ties between the two countries in 1979 that the embassy — Israel’s first in an Arab state — has been unstaffed. Israel’s embassy in Amman has also been abandoned since the clash over Jerusalem’s Temple Mount in July and the ensuing violence on July 23, in which an Israeli embassy guard in Amman shot dead two Jordanians, one of whom tried to attack him. But even prior to that crisis, there had been a decline in the embassy’s public activity in Jordan. On Aug. 13 an Israeli security delegation arrived in Cairo, attempting to reach an arrangement with the Egyptians on security measures that would enable the reopening of the embassy. According to Ynet, the sides have reached understandings that will soon enable the return of Ambassador David Govrin to the Egyptian capital. But even if the Israeli diplomats in Cairo return to their desks, ties between the two countries will probably not be resuscitated. Govrin said at an Institute for National Security Studies conference in March that bilateral relations are primarily military. He warned that such a focus risks eroding peace. The ambassador complimented the strong ties between Netanyahu and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, but emphasized that for peace to form deep roots, it must be based on two pillars — a military one and a civil-economic one.