



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, February 6

Headlines:

- **Palestinian Kills Israeli in West Bank Stabbing**
- **Lieberman: 'There is No Humanitarian Crisis' in Gaza**
- **US, Russia Clash at UN over Syria Chlorine Attacks**
- **Egypt Denies Report of 100 Israeli Airstrikes in Sinai**
- **Poland Cancels Israeli Education Minister's Visit**
- **Abbas Sets Conditions for Peace Talks, with Little US Role**
- **MKs: US Policy Opportunity For West Bank Sovereignty**

Commentary:

- **Washington Post: "Who is Responsible for Solving Gaza's Massive Electricity Crisis?"**
 - By Diana B. Greenwald, research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School
- **Ha'aretz: "Why Israeli Fighter Jets Aren't Enough to Solve Egypt's ISIS Problem"**
 - By Anshel Pfeffer, Columnist at Ha'aretz

News Excerpts

February 6, 2018

AP

Palestinian Kills Israeli in West Bank Stabbing

A Palestinian stabbed an Israeli man to death at a bus stop near a West Bank settlement on Monday before fleeing the scene, Israeli officials said. The military said an army officer chased the assailant after the stabbing at a bus stop near the entrance to Ariel, hitting the attacker with his vehicle, but the attacker managed to get away. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said the Israeli man died from the stabbing wounds shortly thereafter. Israeli media identified the stabbing victim as Itamar Ben Gal, a 29-year-old father of four. Channel 2 News aired footage from the scene showing the attacker crossing a busy road and then lunging at the man, taking him by surprise. See also, ["ISRAELI STABBED TO DEATH IN WEST BANK ATTACK, ASSAILANT ON THE LOOSE"](#) (*Jerusalem Post*)

Ynet News

Lieberman: 'There is No Humanitarian Crisis' in Gaza

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman asserted Monday there is no humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. "The situation in Gaza is indeed difficult, and it needs to be taken care of, but there is no humanitarian crisis," Lieberman insisted in the face of concerns raised over water and electricity shortages in the strip. Only the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Yoav Mordechai, can determine whether there is a humanitarian crisis in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, Lieberman said. However, he did note that there has been a deterioration in the level of services and infrastructure in the strip, saying it "needs to be taken into account." See also, ["Situation in Gaza approaches critical point"](#) (*Ynet News*)

Ha'aretz

US, Russia Clash at UN over Syria Chlorine Attacks

The United States and Russia clashed at the UN Security Council on Monday over a push by Washington to condemn reported chlorine gas attacks in Syria that have left many injured in recent days, including children. US Ambassador Nikki Haley told the council that there was "obvious evidence from dozens of victims" to corroborate the chlorine attacks in rebel-held Eastern Ghouta. "Now we have reports that the Assad regime has used chlorine gas against its people multiple times in recent weeks, including just yesterday," Haley said. The US proposed that the council adopt a statement condemning "in the strongest terms" the reported February 1 chlorine attack in the town of Douma that injured more than 20 civilians including children, according to the draft seen by AFP. See also, ["Syria war: 'Chlorine attack' on rebel-held Idlib town"](#) (*BBC News*)

Ha'aretz

Egypt Denies Report of 100 Israeli Airstrikes in Sinai

Egyptian Army spokesperson Col. Tamer a-Rifai denied the New York Times report claiming Egypt sanctioned over a 100 Israeli airstrikes in North Sinai in the last two years to aid combat the Islamic State. In an interview to Sada Elbalad newspaper, A-Rifai said late Sunday that Egypt's security forces are the only ones combating terrorist in the area. Addressing media outlets in Egypt, A-Rifai requested they do not report unreliable information that was not approved by the Egyptian army. See also, ["Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, With Cairo's O.K."](#) (*New York Times*)

Poland Cancels Israeli Education Minister's Visit

Poland canceled Education Minister Naftali Bennett's planned visit to the country Monday after the Bayit Yehudi leader accused the Polish people of complicity in the murder of Jews during the Holocaust amid uproar over proposed legislation that would outlaw exactly that. Bennett was scheduled to visit Poland next Wednesday to address Polish students and meet with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Science and Higher Education in Poland, Jarosław Gowin. However, Polish government spokeswoman Joanna Kopcińska clarified Monday evening following Bennett's remarks that "there will be no such visit in Poland." Bennett said he was "honored" by the cancelation. "The Polish government canceled my visit to Poland because I mentioned the crimes of its people. Polish Jewish blood cries out from the ground and no law will silence it," he stated. See also, ["Israeli minister 'honoured' to be barred from Poland over Holocaust bill" \(Reuters\)](#)

Abbas Sets Conditions for Peace Talks, with Little US Role

The Palestinians are prepared to return to the negotiating table with Israel, but only on the basis of an international multilateral mechanism, the Arab Peace Initiative and international resolutions pertaining to the Israeli-Arab conflict, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said on Monday. Abbas's comments, which appeared to fall in line with the PA demand that the US not play a leading role in brokering talks, were made during a phone conversation with British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson. Palestinian officials, angry over what they see as US bias in Israel's favor, have refused to work with Washington on a peace initiative and say the US can only play a role as part of a larger multilateral effort, a position Israel, the US and others oppose.

MKs: US Policy Opportunity For West Bank Sovereignty

The time is right for the government to apply sovereignty to West Bank settlements in light of the Trump administration's attitude toward Israel, said cabinet ministers, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein and other MKs at a Land of Israel Caucus conference on Monday. The right-wing caucus held the meeting ahead of a ministerial vote on a bill to apply Israeli law to settlements, a move many of its opponents consider annexation. The legislation was proposed by the caucus leaders, MK Yoav Kisch of Likud and MK Bezalel Smotrich of Bayit Yehudi. Israeli laws do not automatically extend to the West Bank and usually require a military order for them to apply, because the IDF governs the area. Many on the Right see this as discrimination against Israeli citizens based on where they live. "I'm very optimistic," Edelstein said. "The timing is excellent. No one will do this for us and we have to push it." See also, ["The People of Israel want sovereignty" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Who is Responsible for Solving Gaza’s Massive Electricity Crisis?

By Diana B. Greenwald, research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School

- Last week, Beit Hanoun Hospital in the northern Gaza Strip halted its operations, the al-Durra Children’s Hospital drastically reduced its services and seven other health centers across Gaza closed because of a lack of fuel to power their generators. Lapses in the power supply have devastating consequences for every sector of the economy, including health care, education, water and sanitation, and agriculture. The power crisis is a grave symptom of the larger problem plaguing Gaza: the inability or refusal of key actors to govern the territory.
- My research explores how the ongoing occupation and conflict distorts the Palestinian capacity to perform the typical functions of a state in the West Bank, and these complications are even more pronounced in the Gaza Strip. In normal circumstances, electricity is distributed by a public or private utility and paid for by consumers who benefit from it. This ideal exchange can be interrupted in a number of ways — people might tap into electricity networks illegally, or government revenue may be pocketed rather than directed toward improving public infrastructure. However, Gaza stands out as an especially serious breakdown in the contractual model of service provision, because the ability and willingness to pay has been decimated on both sides — the governments and the governed.
- Gazans have traditionally received their electricity supply from three sources: Just under two-thirds is imported from Israel, about 23 percent is generated domestically by the Gaza Power Plant, and the remainder is imported from Egypt. All three are facing major problems.
- First, electricity imported directly from Israel and Egypt is paid for by the Fatah-ruled Palestinian Authority (PA), based in the West Bank city of Ramallah, not by the Hamas government in Gaza. The cost of the Israeli supply is deducted from the revenue that Israel collects on imported goods destined for the Palestinian territories and, under normal circumstances, transfers to the PA. Since the 2007 Fatah-Hamas split, the government in Ramallah has become increasingly frustrated with incurring the costs of electricity supply for the Gaza Strip. In a highly politicized move in June, PA President Mahmoud Abbas requested that Israel reduce the supply of power to Gaza. During much of 2017, power supply was limited to three to four hours per day.
- Second, fuel is artificially expensive for both Gaza’s only power plant and private consumers because of costs associated with the Israeli-imposed blockade and taxes levied by both Israel and the PA. Recently, the “blue tax,” imposed by the PA to ensure fuel prices in the Palestinian territories stay within a certain range of Israeli prices, as mandated by the Oslo accords, amounted to 100 percent of the refined fuel price. For Hamas, as for many Gazans, this has felt punitive. Previously, fuel, along with other goods, was smuggled through tunnels from Egypt to get around border closings, but the Egyptian government has destroyed many of these tunnels in recent years.
- Third, Egypt’s relationship with Gaza is tenuous. Egypt stopped directly exporting fuel to Gaza in the wake of Hamas’s takeover of the territory in 2007 but resumed temporary deliveries this summer under a deal brokered by exiled Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan. Though its initial financing remains murky, this fuel was briefly paid for by the Hamas government. But shortages in recent weeks have reignited the crisis. Additionally, ongoing instability in the Sinai suggests that

fuel imports from Egypt may remain volatile — not a particularly promising avenue for boosting Gaza’s long-term power supply. Who is responsible for powering Gaza? All actors involved have expressed nominal interest in solving the power problem in Gaza, but a fundamental question remains unanswered: Given the ongoing conflict, who should cover the costs of electrifying the Strip?

- Some might think Gazans should pay for their own electricity consumption, like everyone else. Of course this would, eventually, make the most sense. But since Hamas took control of the coastal strip in 2007 and Israel initiated a blockade, an ethical dilemma has emerged. As the elected ruling party, Hamas would appear to be responsible for facilitating access to basic goods. But Gaza’s inability to trade with its neighbors and, relatedly, its anemic economy, with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, have resulted in a virtually nonexistent tax base.
- Gazans are also aware that most of their power supply comes from Israel, and therefore most of their payments end up in Israeli coffers or in PA-controlled banks, not in the hands of any government that can serve them. Polls show that Gazans are highly dissatisfied with both Abbas and the so-called reconciliation government, announced by Fatah and Hamas late last year. Further, a recent announcement by the Ramallah government to re-impose other forms of taxation on Gazans has not been well received.
- A series of disappointments have made it hard for Gazans to be optimistic that they will ever have reliable electricity to boost their economy and standard of living. Donor conferences have failed to mobilize international reconstruction assistance on the scale promised. Meanwhile, a U.S. announcement of dramatic cuts to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency budget, pending further reform, has thrown the education, health-care, and emergency and social assistance programs for the enclave’s 1.3 million registered refugees into uncertainty. Further, Abbas’s hard-line stance on the supply of not only energy but also the importation of key medical equipment into Gaza has exacerbated the gap in trust between Gaza and the West Bank government. Even as Israel proposed a plan to international donors for \$1 billion toward Gaza reconstruction last week, including new power lines from Israel, who will pay remains unclear.
- The reality of life in Gaza illustrates that a government elected by the people is alone not sufficient to ensure basic goods and services. There are no citizens of Gaza. There is, effectively, no state. While emergency assistance from the international community is probably necessary to stave off complete collapse in the short term, the hard truth is that a government that is acceptable to external actors — namely, the PA, Israel, Egypt and the broader international community — is needed before the long-term energy problem can be solved.

SUMMARY: Who is responsible for powering Gaza? All actors involved have expressed nominal interest in solving the power problem in Gaza, but a fundamental question remains unanswered: Given the ongoing conflict, who should cover the costs of electrifying the Strip? Some might think Gazans should pay for their own electricity consumption, like everyone else. Of course this would, eventually, make the most sense. But since Hamas took control of the coastal strip in 2007 and Israel initiated a blockade, an ethical dilemma has emerged. As the elected ruling party, Hamas would appear to be responsible for facilitating access to basic goods. But Gaza’s inability to trade with its neighbors and, relatedly, its anemic economy, with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, have resulted in a virtually nonexistent

Why Israeli Fighter Jets Aren't Enough to Solve Egypt's ISIS Problem

By Anshel Pfeffer, Columnist at Ha'aretz

- Since it signed the Camp David accords in 1979, Egypt has been receiving American military assistance and has totally upgraded its inventory from Soviet weapons systems to hardware Made in the USA. It's front-line squadrons field F-16C/D bloc 52 fighter jets and AH-64D Apache attack helicopters – similar models to those used by Israel's air force. With the largest army in the Arab world, you would have expected Egypt to be capable of handling an insurrection in northern Sinai which by all accounts numbers no more than 1,000 fighters. But as an unending series of attacks on both civilian and military targets in the peninsula have proven, the Egyptian army is at the best “containing” Wilayat Sinai, the local branch of ISIS, but still far from mopping it up. While ISIS has lost nearly all of the vast territory it held only two years ago in Iraq and Syria, where its main forces have been decimated, the group's much smaller affiliate in Egypt's backyard is still going strong.
- The New York Times reported this weekend that Israel has been helping Egypt in Sinai and over the last two years has carried out over 100 airstrikes using fighter jets, attack helicopters and drones, at the Egyptian government's request. What makes the Israeli F-16s and Apache more capable than the identical Egyptian ones is a combination of air-crew experience, upgraded Israeli avionics, a wider range of guided munitions, the backup of an array of advanced ground and air-based sensors, unmanned aircraft and a superior command and control system. All these make Israel's aircraft more adept at seeking out ISIS targets in the desert and its pilots more secure when facing MANPADS – shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles that the jihadists are assumed to have in their possession. But the tactical advantages of Israeli air power is not the only reason Israel is willing to risk pilots and aircraft on missions that are ascribed to Egypt.
- In 2010, Israel's national strategic assessment cited the “Mubarak succession” as one of the main points of concern. The veteran dictator was ill and Israeli analysts were anxiously evaluating the chances of potential successors. Hosni Mubarak had taken over from Anwar Sadat in 1981, after the Egyptian president who made peace with Israel was gunned down in Cairo during a military parade. For three decades, Mubarak had been a dependable ally, maintaining the “cold peace.” His deposal in the January 25 revolution took everyone by shock and for the next two and a half years, until Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi, took power in a military coup, there was deep fear for the future of the Israeli-Egyptian alliance. The Mubarak succession had finally been resolved favorably.
- In private, senior Israeli officers call him “our Sissi,” and in public, no other Egyptian president has ever been so open about enjoying a good relationship with Israel's leaders — in a Washington Post interview in 2015, Sissi said that he speaks “a lot” over the phone with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Beneath the bonhomie, is an unprecedented level of intelligence and military cooperation. This alliance underpins the peace, even if on the surface in Cairo, most of Egypt's media and intelligentsia remain hostile to any prospect of “normalization.”

- **But there are limits to the effectiveness of the alliance. Airstrikes alone, no matter who carries them out, are not enough to wipe out ISIS in Sinai. Before ISIS came along, the original group, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, was a local insurgency made up of disgruntled members of local Bedouin tribes, reinforced by Islamists who had fled Cairo and other cities. They are fighting on home turf, among their own people; they know how to blend into the villages and mountains.**
- **The Egyptian army may be large and control major sections of the Egyptian economy, but its poor conscripts and imperious officers are not equipped and trained to fight an asymmetrical battle in terrain where they are regarded by many as foreign occupiers. Northern Sinai, unlike the tourist resorts on the Red Sea in the southern part of the peninsula, has been overlooked and underfunded for decades. There is little allegiance there to the central government in Cairo. The army barely manages to control the main coastal road and at night the soldiers cower in their armored vehicles.**
- **By the end of 2016, airstrikes had decimated ISIS' fighters; they were down to about 300 men and their leader was killed. But the Egyptian army failed to pursue its advantage on the ground and Wilayat Sinai soon rebounded, reinforced by new commanders and fighters who had fled Syria and Iraq, with experience and knowhow gained in the Caliphate's battles. Just as in last year's battles of Mosul and Raqqa it took a ground force to finally rout ISIS from its main strongholds, so too Israeli air support and aid from the U.S. and other Western states will not be enough to defeat Wiliyat Sinai unless Egypt's own forces begin pursuing the insurgents on the ground.**

SUMMARY: there are limits to the effectiveness of the alliance. Airstrikes alone, no matter who carries them out, are not enough to wipe out ISIS in Sinai. Before ISIS came along, the original group, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, was a local insurgency made up of disgruntled members of local Bedouin tribes, reinforced by Islamists who had fled Cairo and other cities. They are fighting on home turf, among their own people; they know how to blend into the villages and mountains. The Egyptian army may be large and control major sections of the Egyptian economy, but its poor conscripts and imperious officers are not equipped and trained to fight an asymmetrical battle in terrain where they are regarded by many as foreign occupiers. Northern Sinai, unlike the tourist resorts on the Red Sea in the southern part of the peninsula, has been overlooked and underfunded for decades. There is little allegiance there to the central government in Cairo. The army barely manages to control the main coastal road and at night the soldiers cower in their armored vehicles.