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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, February 12*

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# News Excerpts

February 12, 2018

The New York Times

## **Israel's Clash With Iran and Syria: 5 Takeaways**

Israel's cross-border clash with Iranian and Syrian forces on Saturday was a sharp escalation of long-brewing hostilities along its northern frontier — and a bracing alert to those who have focused on other areas of the Syrian civil war, on other aspects of Iran's strategic assertiveness, or who believed that Israel's air superiority left it invincible in its own skies. In the space of several hours, Israel downed what it said was an Iranian drone that had penetrated its airspace, then struck back at what it called the command-and-control center in Syria from which Iran launched the drone. An Israeli F-16, returning from the attack, crashed in northern Israel after coming under heavy Syrian anti-aircraft fire — the first Israeli jet downed under enemy fire in decades. Israel responded with strikes against eight Syrian and four Iranian targets in Syrian territory.

Ha'aretz

## **Trump Says Not Sure Israel Wants Peace**

US President Donald Trump said in an interview published Sunday that Israeli settlements in the West Bank complicate the task of making peace with the Palestinians. Trump, who spoke in an interview with Israel Hayom newspaper, also said that he is not sure Israel and the Palestinians are looking to reaching a peace agreement. According to Trump, "Both sides will have to make hard compromises to reach a peace agreement."

Ynet

## **AG Asks Police to Delay Recommendations on PM**

Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit asked the police on Sunday to hold off on releasing their recommendations in the cases against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Mandelblit asked the investigators to wait until the state has a chance to respond to a petition urging police not to make recommendations concerning the prime minister. The police have been considering delaying the release of the recommendations in the wake of the weekend's escalation in the north.

Times of Israel

## **Labor Leader: Annexation Would Be 'Diplomatic Terror'**

Praising a postponement of legislation aimed at annexing Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the chairman of the opposition Zionist Union faction, Avi Gabbay, said that, if passed, such measures were tantamount to a "diplomatic terror attack." The proposal seeks to apply Israeli sovereignty over all areas of Jewish settlement in the West Bank, which are currently under military rule. Hours earlier, the heads of coalition parties pulled the so-called Sovereignty Bill from the agenda, citing the security incidents on the northern border.

Times of Israel

## **Rivlin Backs Annexation With Full Rights for Palestinians**

President Reuven Rivlin on Monday expressed support for annexing the West Bank but maintained that the move must include full citizenship for all the Palestinians in the area. Underlining that he was speaking for himself rather than in his role as president, the long-time annexationist said: “As Reuven Rivlin, I was born into the belief that the land of Israel is entirely ours.”

The New York Times

## **With Gaza in Crisis, Fears That ‘an Explosion’s Coming’**

Across Gaza, the densely populated enclave of two million Palestinians sandwiched between Israel and Egypt, daily life, long a struggle, is unraveling before people’s eyes. At the heart of the crisis — and its most immediate cause — is a crushing financial squeeze, the result of a tense standoff between Hamas, the militant Islamist group that rules Gaza, and Fatah, the secular party entrenched on the West Bank. United Nations officials warn that Gaza is nearing total collapse, with medical supplies dwindling, clinics closing and 12-hour power outages threatening hospitals. The water is almost entirely undrinkable, and raw sewage is befouling beaches and fishing grounds. Israeli officials and aid workers are bracing for a cholera outbreak any day.

Times of Israel

## **102 Democrats Urge Trump Not to Cut Palestinian Aid**

Over half of the Democrats in Congress are urging Trump to rethink his decision to significantly slash aid to the UN agency working with Palestinian refugees and their descendants. In a letter on Friday, lawmakers said cutting tens of millions of dollars in US contributions to the United Nations Relief Works Agency would intensify anti-Israel sentiment, damage national interests in the region, and diminish prospects for a two-state solution. They warned that “deliberately exacerbating the hardship of the Palestinian people and reducing the ability of their government to function would only contribute to the benefit of those who reject engagement.”

Times of Israel

## **Abbas Heads to Moscow in Bid to Sideline US**

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is expected to ask Russian President Vladimir Putin to help form an international multilateral mechanism for sponsoring the peace process between the Palestinians and Israel, PA officials said on Sunday. Abbas and Putin are scheduled to meet in Moscow on Monday. Abbas, the officials said, wants Russia and other countries to play a larger role in any peace process with Israel in a bid to supplant the US, in the wake of what Ramallah calls Washington’s “hostile policies” towards the Palestinians.

See also, [“In ‘Historic Palestine Visit,’ India’s Modi Hails Arafat” \(Haaretz\)](#)

## The End of the Zionist Dream in 62 Words

By Maj. Gen. (ret.) Daniel Rothschild, Member of Commanders for Israel's Security

- Today, reports say, Israel's Ministerial Committee for Legislation will consider a law to annex the "zone of settlement" in Judea and Samaria. The proposed law is only 62 words long. 62 words that threaten to completely change the way we live, and bring the Zionist vision to an end. 62 words that fail to seriously weigh the implications of annexation on Israel's economy, national security or strategic interests. 62 words that carry with them 2.7 million Palestinians.
- The proposed law neither defines the territory to be annexed nor delineates it on a map. A small asterisk promises more details at a later stage, after the bill is approved in a preliminary reading. This is how little importance is attached to the most important question regarding our survival – whether we will preserve the vision of the founding fathers of Zionism, a vision realized with the establishment of the State of Israel, or surrender in the face of proposed legislation designed to advance someone's political fortunes in his party primaries, irrespective of the destruction it wreaks.
- If the prime minister or one of his coalition partners does not wake up and stop it, the initiative will lead, not only to the annexation of territory, but to the annexation of 2.7 million Palestinians living in the West Bank. In practice, once implemented, the law would bring about the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, forcing Israel to impose military rule and provide services to the Palestinian population of the West Bank. Defense Minister Lieberman estimated that the annual cost of providing them with National Insurance (social security) alone would be NIS 20 billion. Health, education and other government services would cost tens of billions of shekels per year more. The Palestinians would demand full Israeli citizenship, including voting rights and freedom of movement. If the State of Israel were to grant these, it would lose its solid, Jewish majority. If it refused, it would cease to be democratic.
- Just when the northern border is heating up, the Gaza Strip is on the verge of exploding and the IDF is sending reinforcements to Judea and Samaria to deal with increasing tensions there, sponsors of this law have chosen to light a flame which will ultimately ignite a major conflagration. The collapse of the Palestinian Authority will bring an end to Israeli-Palestinian security coordination. Many members of the Palestinian security forces will aim their weapons at Israel, and popular unrest will break out. The Gaza Strip will not remain quiet either. The situation will require a major IDF presence throughout the West Bank and on the Gazan front. The standing army will not be able to handle the situation alone, requiring the mobilization of reserves. These developments will weigh heavily on the Israeli economy and reduce the ability of the IDF to contend with other threats -- above all, Iranian efforts to establish itself in Syria, and the battle experienced Hezbollah in Lebanon.

- Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, both important security assets, will be jeopardized by domestic violence in these countries as well efforts by Iran, Turkey and other players to exploit the situation by inciting unrest in the Arab world. The chance to establish economic and diplomatic relations with other Arab countries will be lost.
- These developments will put an end to plans by the Trump administration to launch a diplomatic initiative. It will undermine US efforts to put together a regional coalition, including Israel and moderate Arab states, to counter Iranian belligerence -- efforts that serve the interests of all partners. Israel's relations with Jewish communities in the US will also suffer. Annexationist policies will further distance increasing numbers of American Jews from Israel and accelerate the alienation of American Jewish youth from the Jewish state, thereby undermining a key pillar of support for Israel's security.
- The Israeli government must act responsibly, set aside this populist and irresponsible law and remove annexation from the national agenda. Preserving the conditions for separation from the Palestinians must be a key, strategic goal for the State of Israel. Until a peace agreement is reached, Israel can take steps towards separation without altering the deployment of the IDF, without withdrawing one soldier and without evacuating settlements. Only in this way can we guarantee the security of Israel's citizens and ensure that Israel remains Jewish and democratic. It does not require a partner. All it requires is responsible, Zionist leadership.

## **Israel, Syria, Iran Clash in the Skies**

By Ben Caspit, Columnist, AI Monitor

- If the Israeli F-16 fighter jet had been struck by the Syrian missile just a few kilometers north of where it was actually hit Feb. 10, it is quite possible that Israel, Iran, Syria and Lebanon would be at war today. In fact, the plane was hit over Israeli territory (the air force does not have to fly over targets in Syria in order to bomb them), and its pilots parachuted out safely — one of them seriously wounded — in Israeli territory, preventing a serious escalation of events. There is nothing in Israel that hits a raw nerve more than when its soldiers are taken prisoner. The last time that happened along the northern front, the Second Lebanon War broke out in 2006. On Feb. 10, we were very close to the third. For Israel, this was a day of fighting against Iran and Syria, who had the support of Hezbollah and the passive involvement of Russia. According to the Iranian-Shiite coalition, this day of fighting led to what Hezbollah called “a new strategic era.”
- From an Israeli perspective, the results were the exact opposite. Israel announced that it would continue to operate over Syria and Lebanon in order to prevent Iran from establishing itself in these regions. This was the first time that the Israeli and Iranian armies clashed openly, rather than through proxies or under the radar. It was also the first time since 1982 that an Israeli aircraft was downed by Syria’s anti-aircraft batteries. And it was the first time in the last 36 years that Israel launched a far-reaching aerial attack on the Syrian air defense system. All of this was the result of Iranian determination to gain a foothold in Syria, and Israeli determination to prevent that from happening. One determined nation against another could result in a major conflagration, but luckily, there is a certain energy operating in the region to cool down situations like this when they happen. None of the players in this dangerous game needs a war right now: not Iran, not Israel, not Hezbollah, not Assad of course, and certainly not the Russians. And so the whole thing ended with just a single day of fighting — at least for now.
- On the night of Feb. 9-10, at 4:30 a.m., an unmanned Iranian aircraft penetrated Israel by way of Jordan. The aircraft was picked up and followed by Israeli radar, until it broke west over the Beit Shean Valley (just south of the Sea of Galilee) and penetrated Israeli territory. The unmanned aircraft was modeled after an American aircraft manufactured by Lockheed Martin, which was shot down over Iran in 2011. It is relatively fast, hard to locate and shoot down, sophisticated and modern. An Apache helicopter was already waiting for it in Israeli territory. The ability of the Israel Defense Forces to identify the aircraft, follow it, wait for it at a precise location and shoot it down in the darkness of night is all laudable. The unmanned aircraft was intentionally downed over Israeli territory so that it could be studied and in order to collect any information it might offer about Iran’s real capacities. Furthermore, just a quarter of an hour after the aircraft was shot down, the Israeli air force attacked the mobile caravan from which the drone was operated as it tried to escape the area surrounding the T4 military airport near Palmyra. The Iranian caravan was destroyed in real time, and its Iranian crew was killed. The

Israeli air force says this is yet another example of its exceptional ability to act quickly and lethally.

- But that was also when the problem occurred. The Israeli aircraft encountered massive Syrian anti-aircraft fire, which included dozens of anti-aircraft missiles of different types. One Israeli aircraft was hit over Israeli territory, and its pilots were forced to abandon it. At this stage, Israel had to decide what to do next. Should it have “contained” the incident, make do with an initial response and end it with that, or should Israel have launched a new wave of reaction? The decision was to launch another wave, in which the Israeli air force conducted a massive attack on 12 targets deep in Syrian territory. Of these targets, four were Iranian, while the remaining eight were Syrian. Russian military officials and experts happened to have been at least at one of the targets that was bombed: an airport belonging to the Syrian army.
- As this article was being written, released assessments claim that Iran suffered casualties from the Israeli assault, as did the Syrian army. Israel destroyed a large number of Syrian anti-aircraft batteries, mainly SA-5 and SA-17 missiles, including some that were only just received by Syria. A Syrian radar installation upon which the country’s air defense relies was also destroyed. According to a statement by the IDF, this was the most painful blow against Syria’s air defense system since the First Lebanon War in 1982. When the smoke finally cleared over this day of fighting, each of the sides could have claimed a heroic victory. In other words, it was a tie, with each side losing valuable assets. Israel paid a steep price for its continued red line policy, Iran paid a price for violating Israeli sovereignty and the Assad regime paid a heavy price for its participation in the incident. Meanwhile, the Russians realized that their achievements in Syria and Lebanon are at risk.
- On the evening of Feb. 10, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The statement released in the wake of this conversation was terse. In fact, the conversation was very serious and tense. The message that Israel has been trying to get through to the Russians for quite a while now — whether in meetings between the two countries’ leaders or through military and intelligence connections — is that Iran has gone from being an asset operating on behalf of Russian interests into a burden. Israel effectively made quite clear that it would not hesitate to ruin Putin’s party in Syria if Israel’s own interests are harmed. With the devastating blow delivered to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s air defense system Feb. 10, Israel showed how serious it really is. While this may have come at a price, one senior Israeli military official called it absolutely necessary and totally justified. “Assad knows that despite everything, he is still vulnerable and that Israel is not some coalition of amateur rebel gangs. We have no intention of giving in, and we have no intention of allowing Iran to establish itself in Syria or complete its precision rocket and missile project. Period,” he told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity.
- For a while now, Israel has been following events at the airport outside Palmyra, which was bombed. According to Israel’s follow-up, the Iranians arrived there quite a while ago and turned it into another one of their strongholds in the Assad state. Then, on Feb. 10, Israel crossed its

own Rubicon by launching a direct attack on Iranian targets operated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Behind the scenes, Israel knows how to make it quite clear that if Iran doesn't get the message, Assad will pay the price. In effect, what Israel is trying to do is to take the Assad regime hostage, now that it has finally started to stand on its own two feet again.

- The main problem Israel had — and still has — is the Russian presence. How long will Putin restrain himself when confronted with Israel's policy? Is Israel approaching Russia's red line, risking real friction with the superpower that has located itself along Israel's northern borders? Based on the laconic statement by Russia's Foreign Ministry, Israel might be. The Russians called on all the parties to respect Syrian sovereignty. Things have reached the stage where more than anything else, Israel needs the protective American umbrella and the Trump administration's active involvement in everything happening in Syria. But despite US President Donald Trump's sharp criticism of everything his predecessor did to diminish American deterrence in the region, the impression for now is that Washington is stronger in words than in deeds. Yet soon it will have to decide which direction it is going to take.