



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, April 2

Headlines:

- **After Gaza Clash, Israel and Palestinians Fight With Words**
- **Israel Reaches Deal with UN on Asylum Seekers**
- **No Gaza Inquiry, Israeli Defense Minister Says**
- **PA Slams Haley After US Vetoes at UNSC**
- **Israeli Watchdog: Army Was Unprepared for Gaza Unrest**
- **Gaza Protest Organizer: All We Seek Is Freedom**
- **Hamas Warns New Protests Will Go Further, Surprise Israel**
- **Trump Admin Backs PLO in Victims' Court Appeal**

Commentary:

- **Times of Israel: “What of the Diplomatic Battlefield?”**
 - By Raphael Ahren, Analyst, Times of Israel
- **Ha’aretz: “Gaza is a Hasbara Nightmare for Israel”**
 - By Chemi Shalev, Columnist, Ha’aretz

News Excerpts

April 2, 2018

The New York Times

After Gaza Clash, Israel and Palestinians Fight With Words

Days after the deadly flare-up along Israel's border with Gaza, during which Israeli troops killed 18 Palestinians, a new war — of videos and strong statements — has erupted over what happened and why. The violence has waned in what was the bloodiest day in Gaza since the war of 2014, but both sides have been pressing their cases to defend their actions. Palestinians, supported by human rights groups, view the events as a legitimate protest that was met with disproportionate force by trigger-happy Israeli soldiers. Israel says it acted judiciously to prevent a dangerous breach of its borders and sovereignty led by Hamas, and to protect nearby communities.

See also, [*"Gaza Footage Shows Protester Shot in the Back While Running Away From Israeli Border" \(Ha'aretz\)*](#)

Jerusalem Post

Israel Reaches Deal with UN on Asylum Seekers

Israel announced on Monday that it reached a deal with the United Nations to allow the deportation of asylum seekers and illegal infiltrators in Israel to Western countries. According to the report, the deal stipulates that Israel could immediately deport some 16,250 people while granting temporary residency to thousands of others for a period of five years. The report said that 16,000 asylum seekers would be deported from Israel, with the assistance and direct intervention of Western countries, and an additional 16,000 would be allowed to stay as long as they meet so far undisclosed criteria.

Reuters

No Gaza Inquiry, Israeli Defense Minister Says

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman rejected on Sunday calls for an inquiry into the killings during the Gaza protest. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the European Union's top diplomat, Federica Mogherini, have called for an independent investigation into Friday's bloodshed. Pope Francis called for "reconciliation for the Holy Land, also experiencing in these days the wounds of ongoing conflict that do not spare the defenseless."

Times of Israel

PA Slams Haley After US Vetoes at UNSC

The Palestinian Authority on Sunday launched a scathing attack on the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, dubbing her an "ambassador of animosity, hatred and dark ideology," after she blocked a UN condemnation of Israel. The United States on Saturday blocked a draft UN Security Council statement urging restraint and calling for an investigation of clashes on the Gaza-Israel border.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Watchdog: Army Was Unprepared for Gaza Unrest

State Comptroller Joseph Shapira warned a year ago that the Israeli army was not prepared for a civilian uprising in the Gaza Strip, according to a report that was not made public. In the document handed to Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and other security officials in March 2017, Shapira said Israeli soldiers were not ready for a mass attempt by civilians to cross into Israel from Gaza, Syria or the West Bank. The report urged defense officials to “address without delay the report’s findings to improve the response to the threat if it should become real.”

Ha'aretz

Gaza Protest Organizer: All We Seek Is Freedom

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are preparing for a prolonged stay near the Israel border, lasting at least until May 15, when Palestinians will mark the 70th anniversary of what they term the “Nakba,” or catastrophe, of Israel’s creation. A member of the organization committee said that while Israel is trying to portray the Palestinians as savages rushing the border fence to attack soldiers, “We say to Israelis that there’s a nation in Gaza which seeks to live and seeks freedom and liberty.”

Times of Israel

Hamas Warns New Protests Will Go Further, Surprise Israel

Defiant Hamas leaders warned Sunday that Palestinians would continue their protests along the Gaza fence, vowing to go beyond the barrier next time and promising fresh surprises for Israel. Mashaal noted that Israel had prevented weapons from reaching the West Bank, only to get car-ramming and stabbing attacks. “Our people are capable of defending themselves,” he said. “In the past, the enemy was used to rockets being launched from the Gaza Strip. But this time Gaza surprised [Israel] with something new, and there’s more in stock.”

Associated Press

Trump Admin Backs PLO in Victims' Court Appeal

Despite its bumpy relationship with the Palestinians, the Trump administration is siding with the Palestine Liberation Organization in urging the Supreme Court to reject an appeal from American victims of terrorist attacks in the Middle East more than a decade ago. The victims are asking the high court to reinstate a \$654 million verdict against the PLO and PA in connection with attacks in Israel in 2002 and 2004 that killed 33 people and wounded hundreds more. A decision to reject the appeal could come as early as Monday. If the court decides to hear the case, it could say so by the middle of this month.

IDF Stopped Hamas, But What of the Diplomatic Battlefield?

By Raphael Ahren, Analyst, Times of Israel

- Israel's military considers its handling of the border riots that erupted amid Friday's Hamas-orchestrated "March of Return" to have been effective and legitimate. The security fence was not breached or badly damaged; border security was maintained; Hamas was rebuffed. The military response was "a success," Hadashot TV news's military analyst Roni Daniel, a reliable conduit of the IDF mindset, proclaimed on Saturday evening.
- The IDF's Spokesman Ronen Manelis said Friday evening that the army had faced "a violent, terrorist demonstration at six points" along the fence. He said soldiers used "pinpoint fire" wherever there were attempts to breach or damage the security fence, and that several of those killed "were known to us." By Saturday evening, Hamas had acknowledged that several of the fatalities in what it had said would-be a non-violent protest were actually gunmen from its military wing. Later, the IDF said it had identified at least 10 of the 15 fatalities as members of terror groups.
- But as no shortage of experience has demonstrated, there is a second battlefield on which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is fought — in the diplomatic arena. And here, on Saturday evening, Israeli officials were more hesitant to draw conclusions, with one diplomat telling The Times of Israel that the Foreign Ministry had not yet completed its assessment of this weekend's events. Depending on how things develop over the next couple of days — on the ground in Israel's south and in the halls of international diplomacy — Israel may yet find that, along with an ongoing border battle, it will again be waging a battle to defend Israel's good name.
- From Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on down, it moved quickly to stake out its position. "Respect to our soldiers who are guarding the country's borders and allowing Israeli citizens to celebrate the holiday in peace," Netanyahu said Saturday evening, moments after the end of the Sabbath. "Israel will act determinedly and decisively to defend its sovereignty and the security of its citizens." The Foreign Ministry, which issued a statement Thursday stressing that Israel has the right to defend its borders and that Palestinian terror groups should be held responsible for any violence at the Gaza border, on Saturday night sent out a press release reiterating the same talking points. "The border fence between Israel and the Gaza Strip separates a sovereign state and a terrorist organization. It separates a state that protects its citizens from murderers who send their countrymen into danger," the statement read. "The fence separates an army that uses force in self-defense and in a focused and proportionate manner, and Hamas, an organization that sanctifies murder and death, that for years — yesterday included — has been intent on harming millions of Israelis. Anyone who mistakenly views in this murderous spectacle even an iota of freedom of expression is blind to the threats the State of Israel faces."

- Earlier on Saturday, Deputy Minister for Diplomacy Michael Oren took to Twitter with similar arguments. “Israel regrets civilian casualties but all were caused by Hamas,” Oren wrote. “Recognized as a terror group by the US and Europe, Hamas murders hundreds of innocent Israelis while using Palestinians as shields. It is using them still while trying to destroy Israel. We must defend ourselves.”
- Emphatic though Israeli officials may sound, many of their arguments fall on deaf ears in at least parts of the international community, which over the weekend either condemned Israel or called on both sides to exercise restraint. The United Nations and the European Union demanded independent investigations, the Security Council convened a special emergency session, and Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that “Israel will get trapped under the oppression it inflicts in Palestine.” “The EU mourns the loss of life. Our thoughts are with the families of the victims,” the union’s foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, said Saturday in a statement. Israel’s use live ammunition should be subjected to an “independent and transparent investigation,” she said, echoing earlier comments made by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. “While Israel has the right to protect its borders, the use of force must be proportionate at all times,” Mogherini said, adding that freedom of expression and freedom of assembly “are fundamental rights that must be respected.”
- On Friday night, a Kuwaiti-initiated Security Council session featured Palestinian and other Arab delegates slamming Israel. Still, Israel has the firm support of the US administration, which on Friday said quite mildly that it was “deeply saddened” by the Palestinian deaths. “While Jews around the world gathered with their family at the Seder table to celebrate the Passover holiday, the Palestinians sunk to a new deceitful low so that they could use the UN to spread lies about Israel,” protested Israel’s Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon. “This shameful exploitation of our holiday will not succeed in stopping us from speaking the truth about the Hamas terror-gatherings that aim to destabilize the region.”
- A spokesman for Netanyahu, David Keyes, said dryly that “The United Nations is hardly the right forum given its decades of anti Israel obsession. What the UN should be investigating is Hamas— its brutal terror attacks, calls for genocide of Jews, quest to destroy Israel, and use of children as human shields.” And Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman declared that “I don’t understand the choir of hypocrites who call for a commission of inquiry. They got confused and thought that Hamas organized the Woodstock Festival yesterday and that we should give them flowers.” For all the aggrieved cynicism of comments like that, the fact is that incidents in which Israeli forces kill large numbers of Palestinians generally prompt a difficult diplomatic aftermath. The coming days will determine how difficult.

Gaza is a Hasbara Nightmare for Israel

By Chemi Shalev, Columnist, Ha'aretz

- For the first time in a long while, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict took a central place over the weekend in international media news reports. Israeli spokespersons did supply evidence of Hamas militants trying to breach the border fence in Gaza under the guise of a supposedly popular protest, but Western opinion makers preferred the viral video of a Palestinian teen getting shot in the back and an overarching narrative of despondent Gazans protesting their oppression and blockade. Fifteen Palestinians were killed, hundreds were injured and the fence remained intact, but in the battlefield of propaganda, Hamas scored a victory.
- Future developments are also in the hands of the Islamic organization. The more Hamas persists with the “March of the Million,” as it has been dubbed, and the more it succeeds in separating the protests from acts of violence and terror, the more it will succeed in defying and embarrassing Israel as well as Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority. If commanders of the Israel Defense Forces don't find a way to repel efforts to breach the fence without causing so many casualties, Israel's predicament will grow exponentially. Friday's day of bloodshed may be quickly forgotten if it remains a solitary event, but if the bloodshed recurs over and over during the six-week campaign that is slated to culminate on the Palestinian Nakba Day in mid-May, the international community will be forced to refocus its attentions on the conflict. Criticism of, and pressure on, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which has virtually evaporated in recent months, could return with a vengeance.
- The working assumption on the Israeli side is that terror and violence are an inherent part of Hamas' self-identity; the Islamist group is supposedly incapable of suspending its “armed struggle,” even temporarily. If this is the case, Israel's distress will soon pass and Hamas will squander the advantages it gained in the mass skirmishes near the fence. If the Israeli conception turns out to be wrong, however, and Hamas proves itself capable of tactical discipline and restraint, it could manufacture what has always been Israel's hasbara nightmare: Mass, nonviolent Palestinian protests that compel the IDF to kill and maim unarmed civilians. Analogies to Mahatma Gandhi, apartheid South Africa and even the struggle for civil rights in America, superficial and preposterous as they may be, will frame the next stage of the Palestinian struggle.
- The immediate support of the Trump administration, expressed in a Passover-eve tweet by special envoy Jason Greenblatt, who lambasted Hamas incitement and its “hostile march,” is ostensibly a positive development from Israel's point of view. Contrary to Trump, Barack Obama would have been quick to criticize what is being widely described as Israel's excessive use of force, and might have conferred with Western European countries on a proper diplomatic response. Israel welcomes and Netanyahu often extols its unparalleled coordination with the

Trump administration, but it could also turn out to be a double-edged sword, which will only make things worse.

- Trump, after all, is one of the most despised U.S. presidents in modern history, in Western public opinion in general and among American liberals in particular. Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and his decision to move the U.S. Embassy there are widely perceived as contributing to Palestinians frustration and sense of isolation. As long as Israel maintains a low profile and doesn't star in negative news headlines, its intimate relations with Trump cause only marginal damage; in times of crisis, however, the damage can be substantial. The criticism that would have been leveled at Israel in the wake of "Bloody Friday" in any case is fueled by widespread resentment of Trump and his policies - and by a wish to punish his favorites. The more the U.S. administration defends Israel's unpopular actions, the more its critics, including American liberals, will treat Trump and Netanyahu as one unsavory package.
- The unqualified U.S. support strengthens the resolve of Netanyahu and his ministers to stick with their do-nothing policies toward both Gaza and the peace process. Most Israelis view Hamas purely as a terror organization, and their gut reaction is that Israel can't and shouldn't be perceived as caving in to terror and violence. At a time when early elections seem just beyond the horizon, the last thing Netanyahu's right-wing coalition wants to do is deviate from its established policies, which would be tantamount to admitting the error of its ways. Calls from the left to review the IDF's conduct in Gaza and reassess Netanyahu's policies toward the Palestinians overall could bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back to the center of public discourse after an extended absence, but will also provide the prime minister with an excuse - as if he needs one - to divert attention away from the crisis in Gaza to backstabbing internal enemies from within.
- The Book of Hosea, however, taught us "He who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind." Israel's ongoing diplomatic paralysis on the Palestinian issue and its misguided belief that the status quo can be maintained indefinitely provided the opening for Hamas' propaganda coup: The Islamist group can suddenly see light at the end of the tunnels that the IDF is systematically destroying. Hamas may shed crocodile tears over the dead and injured, but even if their numbers are doubled and tripled over the next few days, it is a small price to pay for resuscitating its prominence and for pushing both Netanyahu and Abbas into a corner. The fact that Jerusalem maneuvered itself into a position in which a proven terrorist group that still dreams of destroying "the Zionist entity" can outmaneuver Israel in the court of public opinion and cast it as malevolent occupier with an itchy trigger finger is a monumental failure, one that can only get worse as long as Netanyahu and his government prefer to entrench themselves in their obtuse self-righteousness.