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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, April 9*

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# News Excerpts

April 9, 2018

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Strikes Hamas After Border Infiltration Attempt**

The IDF attacked a military compound belonging to Hamas in the northern Gaza Strip early Monday morning in response to the attempted infiltration by Hamas with an improvised explosive device on Sunday. The IDF said that they view Hamas' attempts to turn the border fence into a combat zone and destroy Israel's security and defense infrastructures with "great severity." The IDF said that it will not "allow cynical use of civilians as a cover for terrorist activity against Israeli citizens and IDF forces, and will respond to all attempts at this kind of terrorism."

The New York Times

## **Israel Accused of Bombing Syrian Air Base**

Syria and Russia blamed Israel on Monday for early morning airstrikes on a Syrian military base that a conflict monitoring group said killed 14 people, including fighters from Iran. The strikes came a day after President Trump warned that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and his Russian and Iranian backers would have a "big price to pay" after dozens of people were killed near Damascus in what rescue workers said was a chemical attack. American and French officials denied that their countries had carried out the airstrikes, and a spokesman for the Israeli military declined to comment.

Associated Press

## **Gaza Buries Journalist Killed Covering Mass Protests**

Hundreds attended the funeral on Saturday of well-known Palestinian journalist Yasser Murtaja, killed while covering mass protests in Gaza on Friday. Israeli troops opened fire from across the border, killing at least nine Palestinians and wounding 491 others. Witnesses said Murtaja was over 100 meters from the border, wearing a flak jacket marked "press" and holding his camera when he was shot. The Israeli military has said it fired only at "instigators" involved in attacks on soldiers and was investigating Murtaja's death amid a very hectic environment.

Jerusalem Post

## **ICC Says Israel, Hamas Acts May Be War Crimes**

International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda warned both the IDF and Hamas on Sunday that their actions on the Gaza border could potentially constitute war crimes. Bensouda said that "violence against civilians – in a situation such as the one prevailing in Gaza – could constitute crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court... as could the use of civilian presence for the purpose of shielding military activities." The Israeli Foreign Ministry declined to respond to the ICC statement.

## **Deadly Gaza Protests Draw Attention and Enthusiasm**

Far from being discouraged by the smaller turnout on Friday compared to a week earlier, Palestinians seem energized and enthusiastic about sustaining a generally nonviolent form of protest — even if it is Israel’s harsh response to it and the mounting Palestinian death toll that has put their conflict with Israel back on the international agenda. Israel, endeavoring to explain its use of lethal force, released photos and video of a few Palestinians trying to penetrate the fence and said others had thrown firebombs at soldiers. But while many protesters threw stones or rolled burning, far more could be seen doing little more than standing around — chanting, singing and shouting.

Times of Israel

## **US Blocks Arab-Led UN Call for Gaza Probe**

The United States for a second week in a row blocked a UN Security Council statement supporting the right of Palestinians to “demonstrate peacefully” and endorsing an independent investigation into deadly protests in Gaza. Palestinian UN Ambassador Riyad Mansour said on Friday that 14 of the 15 council nations agreed to the statement, but the US objected. Israel’s Ambassador called on the UNSC to condemn Hamas.

Jerusalem Post

## **Abbas Sets Conditions for Trump Peace Plan**

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said on Sunday that the Palestinian leadership will only engage with the Trump administration’s anticipated peace plan if it backs a two-state solution and recognizes east Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Abbas did not clarify if he would be willing to accept an American-led peace process. Multiple White House officials have recently said the US is finalizing its plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Times of Israel

## **Egypt Sending Mediators to Gaza to Save Palestinian Talks**

Egyptian officials are scheduled to arrive in Gaza soon to discuss the faltering reconciliation agreement between the Hamas and the Fatah-run Palestinian Authority, as well as the recent flare-up of violence along the border with Israel. Egyptian General Intelligence Chief Abbas Kamel, who visited Israel and Ramallah earlier this week, reportedly decided to send an Egyptian delegation to the Gaza Strip. A senior Egyptian security delegation spent weeks in Gaza earlier this year as part of Cairo’s effort to prevent the downfall of the reconciliation agreement.

## **IDF: Our Activity on Gaza Border is Preventing War**

By Nahum Barnea, Analyst, Ynet

- The Karni Crossing, Friday. From 10 am, Gazans have been travelling down the road leading from Saja'iyya to the Karni Crossing, which used to be the main meeting point between the Israeli economy and the Gazan economy. They settle between the water tower and the large greenhouses, near the border. In front of them, there are two fences. One stretches along the borderline. It's an improved system equipped with all the electronic accessories. To the west, within the Gaza Strip's sovereign area, there is a looped barbed fence aimed at preventing access to the border fence. The distance between the two fences is 70 to 100 meters. This is the battlefield or, if you insist, the killing zone. On ordinary days, one can see IDF equipment and soldiers operating in this area, with the Gazan side's forced acceptance. A Palestinian who enters this area is seen as trying to break through the border fence into Israel. The IDF order is to implement the rules of engagement: First of all, to shoot into the air, and then to shoot towards his body.
- Clashes between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza are for me one of the most difficult aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Positions that are already hardened become even more so in the red hot Gaza forge, as you have Israel facing off against an actual terrorist group while casualty numbers – including civilian ones – mount terrifyingly fast and in a one-sided fashion on the Palestinian side. While black and white tend not to be useful colors when thinking about conflict in the Holy Land, they dominate nearly every corner of the Israel-Palestine space whenever fighting erupts in Gaza. Rather than try to repaint the overall picture with some gray, it may be useful for each side to get some of the other side's black and white in the hopes of avoiding the same predictable fault lines this Friday and every Friday for a month and a half.
- The Palestinians try to roll burning tires into this area, hoping they will set the border fence on fire. Meanwhile, they conduct an experiment: Every burning tire raises a cloud of black smoke. The west wind carries the smoke over the young joboba orchard, whose seeds are used to produce oil for cosmetic purposes. Cosmetics and tire smoke don't go together. From there, the pillar of smoke travels to the homes of Kibbutz Nahal Oz, and moves eastward towards Kibbutz Sa'ad. The smoke produces great photos. It's what it does best. The battle is over the narrative, the perception. "There is no other story here," one of the IDF commanders tells me the next day. The question is how will this day be perceived by the Israelis, by the Gazans, by the Palestinians in the West Bank, by the public opinion in Arab countries, by Western governments. Five different fronts, each with its own politics. Israel can't win such a conflict. All it can do is avoid losing.
- Now, I'm going to complicate this complex account even more by saying that although Hamas and Israel are archenemies, although each side seeks to eliminate the other side, both sides have a shared interest in some sense. I'll explain. Meanwhile, in the eucalyptus grove at the

entrance to Nahal Oz, I meet two IDF commanders. "It started out as a civil initiative on social media," one of them says. "It was detected by Hamas, which enlisted the initiative for its own purposes. It wants popular but violent protest activities. Its goal is to put Gaza back on the Arab and international agenda. The right of return is just a platform." But that's our goal too, I said. Major-General Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of government activities in the territories, traveled last month to Cairo, to Washington (twice) and to Brussels to try to convince Arab and Western governments to do something to prevent Gaza from collapsing. If Gaza falls, it will fall on our doorstep.

- "Gaza is in serious distress," one of the officers replied. "Hamas is in serious distress. It has no achievements. The Qataris and Iranians are transferring some money, but apart from that it's in complete isolation. Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in Gaza, consults no one. He makes his decisions on his own. He went towards Egypt and towards a reconciliation with (Palestinian President Mahmoud) Abbas. The move failed because of Abbas. There isn't much left for him to do. The reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority is pretty hopeless. He isn't interested in another battle with Israel. He knows he will suffer a heavy blow and won't achieve a thing. Having no other choice, he took over the civil protest initiative." As far as he's concerned, I said, it's a good idea. "It is," one of the officers said, "but when he did it last Friday, he did it his way. There were armed cells among the protesters that wanted to break through the fence to set it on fire, to kidnap soldiers and perhaps break into one of the kibbutzim. There are several people within the crowd, members of Hamas' elite Nukhba force, who are hiding guns, knives, explosives under their clothes. Their intention was to turn into a fighting force." Nineteen or 20 Palestinians were killed on the first Friday, I said. "One-third of the dead are armed terrorists," one of the officers said. "Another 40 percent are members of the organizations, including a Nukhba company commander. Most of the others were identified as key instigators. The first person who was killed was a farmer. It was a misidentification by a tank."
- The orders received from the General Staff are clear. A soldier is allowed to fire in three cases: If he is in a life-threatening situation, if he detects damage to state infrastructure and if he spots key instigators. In the last case, he must receive approval from a commander. First, he fires into the air, and only then he shoots towards the person's body. "Let's assume that 400 people had broken through the border fence," one of the officers said. "We would have had to stop them with fire. At least 50 of them would have been killed. It would have been a strategic event. They would have had to retaliate. We would have had to retaliate. In fact, we are preventing war through our surgical activity. There are no interim situations in Gaza. If you start it all over again, there will be missiles on Ashkelon, Be'er Sheva and Jerusalem. People don't understand that." I saw the crowds flocking to the border, I said. They included women and children too. "There are those who come because of the water and food they are handing out there," one of them replied. "That's the situation in Gaza. And there is a rate: \$3,000 for a dead person, \$500 for serious wounds, \$300 for moderate wounds."
- I returned to the jojoba orchard, opposite the Karni Crossing. It was 2 pm, when the prayers at the mosques came to an end. Around the water tower, the crowds totaled several thousand

people. Black smoke emanated from four other spots in the north and in the south. The ambulance screams blended with the shouts from the crowd and the warning announcements from the Israeli side. A tire was followed by a tire. Brigadier-General Dedi Simchi, the commissioner of Israel's Fire and Rescue Services, arrived with his elite unit, 36 firefighters whose unit is known as Lehava ("flame") —the same name chosen by one of the Kahanist gangs. The firefighters brought water cannons to use against the tires. They also brought huge ventilators, wind-pushers. Some 20,000 Gazans arrived at the fences, half the number of people who arrived the previous Friday. The death toll dropped by half too, to nine. But the numbers don't matter: As far as Hamas is concerned, it was an achievement. "They are achieving more in these events than they achieved in Operations Cast Lead, Pillar of Defense and Protective Edge," one of the officers told me.

- One of the nine dead was journalist Yaser Murtaja, who was killed during the day. His funeral was held Saturday in Gaza in the presence of an enormous crowd. His death was the greatest damage to the Israeli battle over the narrative during the weekend. I asked an authorized military source how is it possible that a person wearing a protective vest marked PRESS was shot and killed. The answer was: "We're looking into it. There is no order in the IDF to shoot at journalists." But this story isn't a zero-sum game. The IDF's achievement in the two days of conflict isn't insignificant: It stopped the protestors from breaking through the fence, it prevented the situation from deteriorating to a comprehensive conflict and it didn't violate the holiday routine in the Israeli communities. "There wasn't a single Code Red alarm during the holiday," one of the officers told me. Hamas played a considerable part in this achievement, I said. It wasn't worthwhile for it to fire Qassam rockets, so it didn't. These days prove that Hamas can gain full control on the ground when it wants to.
- The IDF's failure is on another front, in convincing the political echelon to do something positive to prevent Gaza from collapsing. Military documents raise different ideas, including transferring the control of Gaza from Hamas to the Palestinian Authority or to a consortium of Arab League states. The documents talk about investments in Gaza, including Israeli government investments, in rebuilding the civilian infrastructures, the water, the sewage, the electricity, etc. Gaza could threaten us in ways we have yet to experience. For example, with an epidemic that would spread into Israel. Or perhaps with a white flag that would be raised over all the homes of Gaza. And then what would we do?

## Hamas Hijacked the Gaza Protests

By Amos Harel, Analyst, Ha'aretz

- The burning of tires at Friday's protest at the Gaza border turned out to be a gimmick, an attempt to give a special character to the second weekend of protests that are meant to continue until mid-May. The pillar of smoke over Beit Hanun could be easily seen from the Ashkelon area and farther south; smoke also rose from the Karni crossing opposite Kibbutz Nahal Oz. But this probably didn't really impede the army's sharpshooters at points where protests were taking place along the border. This Friday too ended with many wounded Palestinians, and if the number was at all limited it was because both sides tweaked their modus operandi. The smoke from the burning tires certainly caused a great deal of damage to the environment on both sides of the border. But without a western wind, the people of the Gaza Strip choked on the fire set by their own people.
- Fewer Palestinians took part in the protests compared to the previous Friday. There was also less shooting. Even with binoculars it was hard to see from Nahal Oz's fields, a short distance from the fence, what was happening at the fence. A few thousand Palestinians were congregating at a safe distance a few hundred meters from the fence. Behind them were ambulances and motorcyclists, apparently Hamas men, directing traffic. From time to time a few people appeared to be moving toward the fence. Sharpshooters were stationed in trenches and on embankments on the Israeli side, and through the thick smoke a single sharpshooter could be heard firing. The clash was focused around the abandoned compound of the Karni crossing, which Israel closed after a series of attacks related to the 2005 Gaza pullout.
- Over more than two hours, soldiers fired three or four bullets and tear gas canisters, while water from a fire truck was sprayed to put out the tire fires. During the evening, according to reports from Gaza, there was one fatality and dozens of people were hurt, some by rubber-coated steel bullets and others by tear gas. A total of nine people were killed and hundreds injured throughout the Strip. According to the Israel Defense Forces, the clashes worsened after 5 P.M. when small groups of young men tried to break through the fence at a number of points.
- The IDF General Staff describes the protest as a popular initiative that the Hamas leadership latched onto for its own purposes and now sets the tone. The Hamas leaders' calculation is simple: A few months ago, economic distress in Gaza was so severe that Yahya Sinwar decided to take an extreme and unexpected step, agreeing to hand over civilian responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority. But reconciliation talks failed after the PA rejected Hamas' attempt to rule the Strip using the Hezbollah model in which Hamas would retain military power. Now the organization finds itself stuck between Israel and Egypt, with PA financial aid cut off and Iran not supplying the assistance the Palestinians had expected.

- The protests provided a shred of a chance of a way out. The protests and the many civilian casualties from the sharpshooters put the Palestinian issue back on the international agenda to some extent. If this continues, Israel might feel the pressure despite the sweeping support of the United States. But the army rejects the idea that the protests are only a civilian operation. Thousands of Hamas operatives were ordered to appear at the border with their families. Under cover of the thousands of people, Hamas fielded small groups of men to try to breach the fence and let hundreds of Palestinians into Israel.
- This is the context in which sharpshooters were permitted to shoot people described as organizers of attacks. The army says that Friday as well, operatives came close to the fence to lay explosives. According to the army, a mass breach toward Israeli communities near the fence would lead to many more casualties on both sides that could escalate to another conflict like the 2014 Gaza war. The IDF prevented such a breach and thwarted real damage to the fence these two past weekends. But the army concedes that the number of Palestinians killed (29 since the beginning of the protests, many of them civilians) is high and there might be implications for Israel, both diplomatically and in terms of Hamas' desire to keep up the momentum in the coming weekends, at least until Nakba Day in mid-May.
- This situation highlights Israel's failure to develop riot-control methods that would also be effective at some distance. There have also been coordination failures between the various security services. The IDF didn't ask for police assistance, saying it could manage. At the end of the second week, the police weren't quick to help and asked to be informed if Palestinians breached the fence. Two things haven't happened. Despite the many Palestinians wounded, no rockets have been fired at the Negev, which also shows that Hamas doesn't want this and is apparently the decision-maker on this. And for now, the casualties haven't dragged the West Bank into protests. For now the West Bank and Gaza are acting as two separate entities in this crisis. The PA has likely lost any remaining sympathy for the troubles in the Strip after the attempted assassination of Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah on a visit to Gaza last month.
- In addition to the international attention Hamas has drawn, it's also tying down Israeli forces on the Gaza border and might eventually disrupt IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot's training program as well. The General Staff believes Hamas has found an effective means of action, so it wants to make this more costly for Hamas in order to prevent a war of attrition in the form of protests and incidents along the fence. Neither side wants an all-out clash, which for Gaza would be especially destructive. But at the moment, civilian distress in Gaza is the most dominant element, and without a solution on the horizon, it seems the weekly clashes will continue for a while.