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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

May 10, 2018

Ha'aretz

Lieberman: Israel Hit Almost All Iran's Infrastructure in Syria

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said on Thursday that Israel struck "almost all of the Iranian infrastructure in Syria" overnight in response to a rocket barrage at its military outposts in the Golan Heights. He confirmed that no rockets landed in Israeli territory. Early Thursday, Israel attacked dozens of Iranian targets in Syria in what the military said was the most extensive strike in the neighboring country in decades. The strike was carried out in response to a barrage of 20 rockets that was fired from Syria at Israeli military outposts. Israel also said it destroyed several Syrian air-defense systems after coming under heavy fire. This is the first time Israel directly accused Iran of firing towards Israeli territory. Tehran issued several threats over the past month, saying that it would hurt Israel in response to a slew of attacks that were ascribed to the Israeli air force.

Times of Israel

After Putin Meet, PM Says Moscow Won't Curtail Israel

Wrapping up a day-long visit to Moscow, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday evening said he has no reason to believe the Kremlin will attempt to limit Israel's freedom of operation in the region. After a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Netanyahu reiterated Jerusalem's determination to continue to act militarily against Iran's ongoing entrenchment in Syria.

Ynet

International Efforts Being Made to Prevent Gaza Escalation

The Palestinian March of Return campaign is expected to culminate next Monday when the US inaugurates its embassy to Jerusalem. Expecting violence, international brokers are lobbying Hamas to organize a mass rally near the Gaza border with Israel, but position its members along the border line to prevent a spontaneous effort to breach the fence by the masses; an action that is likely to trigger a deadly Israeli response. It is not yet clear what Hamas is being offered in return, as their support of such a breach has already been made clear.

Times of Israel

Report: Western Country Said Brokering Israel-Hamas Talks

A Western country is reportedly brokering talks between Israel and Hamas on a long-term ceasefire in exchange for lifting the blockade over the Gaza Strip. The indirect talks, initiated by Hamas, are reportedly a cause for concern for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who fears they could develop into political ties that would undermine demands the PA has made of Hamas. Israel said it was willing to discuss a truce, security-related issues and humanitarian issues, but "refuses to respond under the threat of" Palestinian mass demonstrations in Gaza.

Ha'aretz

If There's a US Peace Plan, PM Says He Hasn't Seen It

Netanyahu said on Tuesday he has not seen a U.S. peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Several Israeli media outlets have reported the alleged intent of the US administration is to present their plan immediately after the embassy opening on May 14. The administration still hopes to convince the Palestinian to return to the peace process, but does not rule out the possibility of publishing the plan without direct Palestinian involvement.

JTA

Amid Talk of War, Israelis are Keeping Calm and Carrying On

When war broke out on Israel's northern border in 2006, Avigdor Guy remained calm. He lived in the northern port city of Haifa, but he didn't think the war would hit home — until, that is, it did. "Twelve years ago, they asked me if I was worried, and I said no, of course I'm not worried," Guy said. "And then missiles began to fall in Haifa, and it felt really bad." Now, as fears of a war on Israel's northern border heat up once more, Guy, again feels fine. But this time, he says his confidence is justified. Guy, 50, thinks that Israel is better prepared on its northern front than it was in 2006, when the month-long conflict with Hezbollah ended in a draw that was seen as a failure by most Israelis. Recently, he says, Israel has been appropriately focused on threats coming from Syria.

Jerusalem Post

Settlement to Become First to Use Drone Against Terror

A small black drone that looks like a flying spider and sounds like a very loud mosquito could become the latest weapon to help civilian security teams prevent terrorist attacks. On Sunday, the drone, which has thermal cameras for night use, hovered above the Efrat settlement as part of a demonstration showing how it could quickly identify a terrorist on the ground.

Times of Israel

2 Polls Show Big Surge for Likud after Iran Announcement

Two new polls released Wednesday indicated dramatic surges in support for Netanyahu's Likud party following Trump's withdrawal from the Iran deal. One survey, conducted immediately after Trump's Tuesday announcement and partially released by Army Radio, found that if elections were held now, Likud would win 42 seats, a huge jump from its current 30 seats in the Knesset.

What Everyone's Getting Wrong About the Embassy Move

By Daniel Shapiro, former US Ambassador to Israel

- The Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem has stirred up a variety of responses in the region and elsewhere. Some say that it means the death of hopes for peace. Others assert that it marks Israel's final victory over the Palestinians. And still others insist that it justifies further Palestinian intransigence. In fact, none of these statements is true. Advocates of a two-state solution see the embassy move as a blunder by the United States that signals the death knell of prospects for peace. But the sky is not falling. Moving the U.S. Embassy to a location in West Jerusalem is correct and reasonable. West Jerusalem has served as Israel's capital since the founding of the state, and no plausible two-state map would change that. Our embassy's presence in the city reinforces the legitimacy of historic Jewish ties to the city, which are too often denied by Palestinians.
- Moreover, nothing about our embassy's location there would prevent the emergence of a shared city with two capitals as part of a two-state solution. Perhaps inadvertently, President Trump's decision has opened the door for much more frank discussion about an eventual Palestinian capital, and U.S. Embassy to Palestine, in East Jerusalem. Long a taboo in both Israeli and American politics, the ice is beginning to break. White House officials reportedly informed Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman last month that Trump's emerging peace plan would call for Israel to transfer four Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority. That's a start. The precise boundaries could be determined only in negotiations, and Israel would need to remain connected with key holy sites. Those talks may not happen under the current Israeli and Palestinian leadership, but openly discussing this necessary aspect of a realistic, conflict-ending two-state solution – which remains the United States' strategic objective — will prepare the ground for when there are leadership changes.
- Meanwhile, triumphalists in Israel and the United States think that the embassy move means that Israel has “won” the conflict. (As Axios's Barak Ravid has reported, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is now demanding that the Palestinians accept any offer Trump puts on the table, suggesting he shares this view.) But these declarations of victory are premature. It is true that Israel is strategically stronger than ever, that its legitimacy is more widely recognized and that it enjoys gradual warming with a range of Arab states. These are all welcome developments. Yet however good that feels, the inexorable demographic dilemmas of how Israel can maintain both its Jewish and its democratic character while controlling all of the West Bank and its Palestinian population have not changed at all.
- On this subject, the crown prince is a good example of the principle that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” His statements — which betray his limited understanding of Israeli-Palestinian final status issues, the realities of Palestinian politics and the limits of Saudi influence — may delude some in Israel that the hard decisions can be avoided. But they can't, and eventually, a

future Israeli government will have to make some wrenching choices. Ongoing expansion of settlements outside of blocs that could be accommodated in land swaps only makes those choices harder. Even the crown prince acknowledges that the Saudis cannot normalize relations with Israel without meaningful progress toward a two-state solution. If the conflict simply festers, Israel could squander the real opportunity for full integration into the region. So Israel's own interests still require finding a path to end the conflict in two states, or at least to keep that prospect alive.

- At the same time, some Palestinians insist they can increase Israel's isolation by demanding one-person, one-vote and screaming "apartheid." But this is not a winning strategy. Palestinians can hold out and refuse to tell hard truths to their own people about the legitimacy of a Jewish state, Israel's permanence and the immorality of violence, but their ability to generate pressure on Israel is declining. Continuing to refuse to negotiate — Palestinian leaders today even boycott talks with U.S. officials — will produce neither one state with full citizenship for West Bank Palestinians, nor relief for those in Gaza suffering under Hamas's rule, nor crushing pressure on Israel. Rather, it will mean a slow, grinding perpetuation of the status quo-minus.
- Palestinians need new leadership, particularly after Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas disgraced and disqualified himself with a series of vile anti-Semitic canards. Unless those who follow him address the Israeli public's legitimate anxieties about Palestinian intentions, their people will continue to languish while much of the world shrugs its shoulders, turns away from a hopeless cause and makes high-tech deals with Israel. The U.S. Embassy in Israel belongs in Jerusalem, and I will join those celebrating this overdue step. But the next day, surprisingly little about this conflict will have changed. The current leaders may be unable to act to pull out of their stalemate, but reality will find a way of forcing their successors to confront their illusions.

Trump, Netanyahu Coordination Goes Beyond Iran Deal

By Ben Caspit, Columnist, AI Monitor

- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his associates are applauding the May 8 announcement by President Donald Trump to withdraw the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement. “There is only one thing that isn’t clear,” one of the people closest to Netanyahu told AI-Monitor, speaking on the condition of anonymity. “That is, who works for whom? Does Netanyahu work for Trump, or is President Trump at the service of Netanyahu?” From the outside, at least, upon close inspection, it looks like the two men are perfectly in sync. From the inside, this seems even more so. When it comes to the US administration’s recent actions, the people in Netanyahu’s inner circle knew exactly what would happen and when, and they have known it for the past few weeks. No one in Jerusalem was surprised by Trump’s statement. It almost seemed as if the president’s speech had been written in Hebrew and only then translated into English.
- “There has always been close coordination between the Israeli and the American defense establishments,” a senior Israeli defense official told AI-Monitor, also speaking on the condition of anonymity. “Intelligence coordination has also gotten stronger over the past few years, but the current story is a whole different ballgame. This kind of cooperation between the two leaders and their two offices — the Oval Office in the White House and the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem — sometimes makes it seem as if they are actually just one single, large office.”
- The most recent meeting between the two men took place on March 5, when Netanyahu visited Washington for the annual AIPAC conference. At the time, the Israel Police were busy recruiting Nir Hefetz, a former close confidante and communications consultant, to become the third state witness to testify against Netanyahu in the string of legal cases he confronts. Two days after Netanyahu's meeting with Trump, the prime minister released a video condemning the wholesale recruitment of state witnesses against him, yet again declaring, “There was nothing, because there is nothing.” He ended the video stating, “They will continue doing what they do, and I will continue doing what I do, taking historic steps here on behalf of the State of Israel. Time will tell how important this visit is to Israel’s security.” While Netanyahu speaks frequently in broad, historical terms, when he posted the video, his associates hinted that this time he really meant it. One can now say with certainty that every step being taken by the United States in the Middle East and also by Israel were coordinated between Netanyahu and Trump at their meeting on March 5. The final security touches were added by Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, who recently returned from a series of meetings in Washington, most of them at the Pentagon.
- This rare type of coordination between Netanyahu and Trump focused on the diplomatic front as part of a combined effort to block the spread of Iran in the Middle East — not just Iran’s nuclear program — and to take down the ayatollahs’ regime. Liberman spoke with officials, chief among

them Secretary of Defense James Mattis, about security coordination. At this meeting, they raised various scenarios concerning escalation on various fronts in response to a continuation of the mysterious attacks taking place on Syrian territory on an almost daily basis and generally attributed to the Israeli air force. These scenarios included a local and limited confrontation between Israel and Iran on Syrian territory, a confrontation between Israel and Iran that spreads to include Hezbollah and could bring the whole region to war, and a war between Israel and an Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah alliance that could lead to Russian involvement in some way or another over the course of events.

- Al-Monitor has learned from an Israeli security source that during these discussions, the United States promised Israel full and total support on all fronts. While US support is a given on the diplomatic front — that is, at the UN Security Council and in the international arena — they also spoke about military support. If a regional war does break out, the United States will immediately make its position clear, express support for Israel and send Moscow the right signals. This is to ensure that Russian President Vladimir Putin stays out of the conflict and does not try to intervene, whether directly or indirectly, on behalf of his allies, Iran and Syria. Upon returning from Washington, Liberman informed the prime minister that he had received a “green light” in security matters. The joint US-Israeli plan, which could also be called the Trump-Netanyahu plan, was on its way.
- Just moments before Trump began his speech announcing the resounding US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran, the Israel Defense Forces ordered the opening of public bomb shelters across the Golan Heights. At first, it was announced that this was done in response to intelligence reports of “irregular” movements by Iranian forces and Shiite militias on Syrian territory. It should be recalled that Israel is still waiting for an Iranian military response to the strikes attributed to it over the last few weeks that targeted Iranian objectives in Syria. Even the opening of the bomb shelters, which left Israelis worried, was coordinated between Washington and Jerusalem. In other words, there is no assurance that it took place in response to intelligence warnings.
- The night the shelters opened, there was another devastating air attack against Iranian targets in Syria, this time near the town of Kiswah. Once again, the strike apparently targeted a stockpile of rockets and missiles that Iran had moved into Syrian territory, with the goal of firing them at a military target in Israel. Although Israel has not taken responsibility for the attack, based on the way it was carried out, it seems highly likely that it was a preemptive strike by the Israeli air force, intended to prevent an Iranian response. Trump, in his speech, mentioned Israel’s contribution to exposing Iran’s lies. He was referring to Netanyahu’s April 30 presentation, in which he revealed the Iranian nuclear archive, stolen by Mossad and brought from Tehran to Israel. By now it is clear that apart from all the tremendous political benefits Netanyahu gained from that presentation, it was also intended to give Trump the “home court advantage” in advance of his big announcement on Tuesday. The coordination between the two men does seem perfect. It is closer than any coordination of this sort between the leaders of the United States and Israel.

- All said, however, it must be emphasized that the bulk of the work still lies ahead. So far, Netanyahu and Trump have put quite a few miles under their belts, but it is all talk rather than deeds. Trump may speak tough, but he is still moving ahead with his policy of withdrawal from the Middle East. Meanwhile, Netanyahu has so far avoided any real military clashes or adventurism. They still have more than one ordeal ahead and they won't be easy, as they will now be tested by their actions. These ordeals will determine the fate of their joint plan to defeat Iran.