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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, May 14

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News Excerpts

May 14, 2018

Times of Israel

10 Gazans Killed, Hundreds Wounded in Clashes

Violent clashes erupted late Monday morning between Palestinian protesters and Israeli forces along the Gaza Strip's border with Israel ahead of the inauguration of the US embassy in Jerusalem later in the day. Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry said 10 Palestinians were killed and dozens were wounded in the demonstration, which was to be the biggest yet in a weeks-long campaign. The Israeli army said 10,000 Gazans were demonstrating in 10 different locations along the border. Demonstrators were burning tires, hurling rocks and attempting to approach the security fence, the army said.

Ha'aretz

Palestinians in West Bank and Jerusalem Urged to Protest

Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Jerusalem are being urged to turn out en masse to protest Monday's Embassy move. Marches will leave from cities, including Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus and Jericho. But it's still not clear how many Palestinians will answer this call, or to what extent the Palestinian Authority is willing to allow clashes with Israel, even though Fatah, the Palestinian Authority's governing party, is participating in the calls to people to go out and demonstrate.

Ynet

PM Welcomes US Delegation Ahead of Embassy Opening

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday attended an event welcoming the US delegation ahead of Monday's opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem. Many Israeli minister and MKs from the Left and the Right attended the event. The American delegation numbered 250 people, including Congressmen, rabbis and administration officials. Most of the ambassadors of the European Union boycotted the event, with the exception of four: the ambassadors of Austria, Hungary, Romania and the Czech Republic.

The New York Times

As Israel Celebrates Independence, Many See Nightmare

The embassy's move comes at a moment so fraught with both pride and peril that Israelis seem not to know what to feel. Israelis find it hard to rejoice when they find themselves facing some of the same threats they did back in 194. It is hard for Israeli Jews to feel entirely at ease when they remain so estranged from one another and the nearly two million Arab citizens at home, and from millions of people next door: A lasting settlement with the Palestinians seems as elusive as it has been in more than a generation.

Tens of Thousands of Jews Parade through Old City

Some 45,000 Jews paraded through the the Old City of Jerusalem under heavy police security on Sunday in an annual, often tense, Flag March, this year marking the 51st anniversary of the reunification of the city during the 1967 Six Day War. The march, in which primarily religious teenagers march through the Old City decked in white and blue has raised tensions over its route through the Old City's Muslim Quarter. Marchers were confronted by Palestinians protesters at Damascus Gate, but there were no immediate reports of violence. In previous years, the march has sparked sporadic incidents of violence between Israeli revelers and local Palestinian residents.

Palestinians Now Make Up Some 40 Percent of Jerusalem

The number of Palestinians in Jerusalem continues to rise slowly but surely, and now constitutes 38 percent of the city's population, according to a new report. According to various other estimates, however, Palestinians make up as much as 40 percent of Jerusalem's population, because the figures do not include thousands of Palestinians living beyond the security barrier in East Jerusalem and therefore not counted as residents of the capital. Most of the Palestinians living in Jerusalem (95 percent) are not Israeli citizens and are not eligible to vote in Knesset elections. Over the past year, 943 Palestinians have applied for Israeli citizenship. Only 15 received citizenship.

Israel Allocates \$700 Million to Bolster Jewish Jerusalem

The Israeli government allocated some \$700 million on Sunday to bolster Jerusalem, including \$14 million for the regulation of all lands in east Jerusalem. The move, which will see all east Jerusalem lands registered within the next seven years, is meant to further strengthen Israeli sovereignty in the contested eastern part of the city. This would be the first time Israel applies sovereignty to east Jerusalem in practice since it officially annexed it in 1980.

Hundreds Join Alternative 'Peaceful' Jerusalem Day March

With bands, balloons and fanfare, several hundred men, women and children took part in an alternative Jerusalem Day march on Sunday through south Jerusalem and away from the clamor of the central Jerusalem Flag Parade in the Old City of Jerusalem, in what has become an annual event in the capital. The alternative "Jerusalem March," organized by the Yerushalmim Movement and the Reshut Harabim organization, is now in its fifth year and was attended by local politicians, social activists and hundreds of Jerusalemites looking for a festive and more relaxed way to celebrate the reunification of Jerusalem.

Israel Braces for Incendiary Week in Gaza, West Bank

By Amos Harel, Analyst, Ha'aretz

- After a satisfactory outcome, for the time being, that ended the round of clashes with Iran in Syria, Israel's defense establishment will have to focus this week on events in the territories. The main risk of escalation spiraling out of control will come from the major protests planned along the border fence with the Gaza Strip on Monday and Tuesday. But in the north, too, the massive strikes by the Israel Air Force and thwarting Iranian action were not the end of the matter — and at this point there is no hint that Iran is considering putting a stop to establishing itself militarily in Syria. Hamas-sponsored demonstrations were held at the Gaza border Friday for the seventh consecutive week. One Palestinian was killed and hundreds were wounded, some by live fire, representing a decline in casualties. Hamas' latest action — sending kites with incendiary devices into kibbutz and moshav fields near the Gaza border (which the media has dramatically dubbed “kite terror,” to the displeasure of Israel Defense Forces officers) — seems to have met its match.
- The IDF is using volunteers to operate fast, small drones in the area. Within a few minutes a drone was seen downing a burning kite by ramming it, and another drone stuck a hook into another kite and brought it down. The solutions, as usual, were improvised very quickly. A major in the career army suggested using drones to ram the kites; the commander of the Gaza Battalion camp, who likes to fish on his furloughs, thought up the drone with the hook. The whole thing took an absurd turn when a right-wing activist tried to launch a revenge kite at Gaza and set fire by mistake to a field on the Israeli side. And the winds in this large open area are often fickle, hampering the soldiers' efforts to use tear gas, which sometimes blows back onto the Israeli troops.
- But the army now seems much more organized, having now gained experience with the Palestinians' new methods: mass protests, supposedly civilian, under the guise of which dozens of young activists in the Palestinian military wings approach the fence and try to damage and cross it. The view from the embankment next to which a sniper's post has been put up south of the Karni crossing reveals something of the task's complexity. Only a few dozen meters separates the barbed-wire fencing that the IDF has installed west of the border fence, in the Gaza Strip and the border fence itself. A mass assault on this buffer zone could happen within only a few minutes, and on previous weekends, improvised explosives and grenades were thrown from this area.
- At every point of friction the army has posted brigade and battalion commanders who personally authorize snipers to open fire. Sometimes, particularly when the sniper is in the career army or a police officer, the snipers themselves refrain from taking a shot because they cannot be sure that they will hit a protester only in the shoulder or the leg as the rules require. According to the

army, newer and more deadly ammunition is not being used along the fence. A good many of the fatalities are based by a bullet straying upward or ricochet from the ground.

- From a second visit to the area in recent weeks and a series of discussions with commanders and soldiers, no sense can be discerned that snipers are trigger-happy, as some statements from the left wing have it. The IDF has also invited foreign diplomats to the border; a visit to the sniper posts during clashes might fill out the perspective they have from their embassies in Tel Aviv. There are some surprising patterns in Palestinian behavior. For the second week in a row, protesters have set fire to the Palestinian side of the Kerem Shalom crossing through which goods enter the Strip. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman has ordered the crossing closed until the damage can be assessed. And despite the electricity shortage in the Strip, the tent camps from which protests march set out toward the crossing are light up with floodlights in the middle of the day.
- Beginning Sunday, 11 battalions — more than three times the usual troop numbers — will be deployed along the fence ahead of the expected protests. The army is preparing for about 100,000 protestors and anticipate mass attempts, more violent than in the past, to breach the fence. This time, the events are less identified with Hamas. The opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem Monday and Nakba Day on Tuesday will provide an all-Palestinian context to the protest and could sweep in supporters of other Palestinian groups. On Saturday night, the Israel Air Force struck a tunnel Hamas dug under the Erez Crossing on the northern border of the Strip. This is the ninth tunnel the IDF has destroyed in the Strip during the last six months. Demonstrations are also anticipated in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, although meanwhile widespread enthusiasm has not been seen and there has been complete quiet in the West Bank for these weeks in the Gaza Strip in which many were killed and injured. But the need to show dominance in the street could also bring Fatah supporters out in the next two days. And the opening of the U.S. Embassy could spark new motivation for lone-wolf attacks. On Friday two car-ramming attempts took place in the West Bank and a soldier was slightly injured. Forces in the West Bank have been beefed up with another brigade.
- The exchange of blows on the Syrian border early Thursday morning, which was described by many politicians and some media outlets almost like a national holiday, garnered little attention in Iran. Israel believes that the regime wants to keep a low profile on the clashes and conceal its losses, the final number of which was not made clear. In Iran, by the way, the opposite theory is being heard, as if Israel had many casualties and is hiding this from the public (a claim that even a brief acquaintance with Israeli society would prove unreasonable). After the incidents, the question came up of why Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds force, deployed his troops so carelessly, with most of the rockets fired landing in Syrian territory and four shot down by an Iron Dome battery. According to Military Intelligence, Soleimani was under pressure to launch an immediate attack after Israel hit a number of weapons stores and launchers on the previous days. And for the first time, one of the weapons was revealed that the Iranians wanted to deploy in Syria: Iranian-made anti-aircraft missile systems whose range (about 110 kilometers) is intended to hit Israel Air Force planes during Israeli strikes in Syria.

- Military Intelligence says the round of fighting in Syria is over. Iran will find it difficult to continue with a direct conflict, when its long-range missiles have not yet been deployed to any major extent and most of its actions can be seen by Israeli intelligence. Hezbollah, even after its success in the Lebanese elections, is not anxious to volunteer its men for the fighting. But Soleimani is described as a formidable foe, who will do his homework quickly and study new methods of action and in any case is not expected to give up the plan of establishing Iranian forces in Syria just because of a few bruises. The army is pleased so far with the “game of chess” with the Iranians in Syria and are trying not to be swept up in the melodramatic media praise over the success of the operations.
- It may be assumed that from the point of view of IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, there is a great deal of irony in the embrace he is now receiving from right-wing journalists and tweets. These are the same people who accused him regularly over the past two years of defeatism and leftist tendencies because of his attitude toward Elor Azaria — the soldier who was released from prison last week after serving time for the manslaughter death of an incapacitated Palestinian assailant — and his insistence on not turning the West Bank into the Wild West at the height of lone-wolf knife attacks. Developments after May 15 depend first and foremost on the number of casualties among Palestinian demonstrators at the Gaza border over the next few days. The holy month of Ramadan begins right after the current wave of protests and every year for the past nine years, fasting periods ended with a larger than usual number of terror attacks. In the north, the battle with Iran may be expected to continue, perhaps less intensely and a slower rate than in the past month. However, Israel’s security problems will not disappear, even if it seems that at the moment the IDF is meeting the most important challenge from its perspective — fulfilling its missions while avoiding all-out war.

Don't Like US Embassy Move? Get Over It

By Naftali Bennett, Israeli Education Minister

- The inauguration of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem is an important recognition of Israel's inherent right to govern itself. It is also the start of a new era, one in which the international community's relationship is based on reality and fact, not fantasy and fiction. President Trump's decision to allow the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act to move forward is historic. At the most basic level, it states what has been obvious to Jews for thousands of years: Jerusalem is, has been and will always be the capital of the Jewish people. This notion was formally adopted by Israel when it named Jerusalem its capital in December 1949. For too many years, however, foreign countries continued to site their embassies in Tel Aviv, a symbolic statement with a clear message — a refusal to recognize Jerusalem, even West Jerusalem, as the country's capital. By moving its embassy to Jerusalem, the United States is making a statement: Israel is no longer a second-class country whose capital isn't recognized by the world. Although we are a small country, we have long punched above our weight in the international arena. By acknowledging Jerusalem as our capital, President Trump has given us the respect and dignity all other nations have enjoyed for a long time.
- We would never question Britain's, Germany's or Canada's choice of their capital city. So we would never dream of locating our embassies anywhere but in London, Berlin or Ottawa. Capital cities are determined by the governments of the states, not by outsiders or visiting diplomats. Yet even though Israel has long made clear that Jerusalem is its capital, we have been disrespected and our decision ignored. Today, that starts to change. Yes, we might disagree with many governments about the future of East Jerusalem. From our perspective the Holy Basin — including Temple Mount, the Western Wall, Mount of Olives and the City of David — will always be an integral part of Israel. Others do not share this view. Yet even those who argue with us about the eastern parts of the city understand that West Jerusalem is Israel's seat of government. Ambassadors to Israel present their credentials at the President's Residence, visit government offices and meet in the Knesset — yet these countries locate their embassies elsewhere. Despite our diplomatic argument, despite a difference of opinion on East Jerusalem's final status, having an embassy in West Jerusalem, in the areas everyone knows are and will remain Israeli, is the most natural thing. There is no other country whose capital is questioned by the world, and Israel should not suffer from such discrimination.
- Jerusalem once hosted many foreign embassies, from Africa, Latin America and even Europe. None of these embassies closed immediately after the 1967 Six-Day War. Instead, they were shut down one by one, because of Arab political and diplomatic pressure starting after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The Dutch and Colombian embassies, as well as others that operated in Jerusalem until 1980, showed that the move to Tel Aviv was nothing but a political choice. Just as we welcome the American embassy, there are already others, including Guatemala and Paraguay, following Washington's lead and planning their embassies' relocation to Jerusalem.

This trend will only grow, and I look forward to the day when having an embassy in Jerusalem will be the norm, not the exception.