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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, May 17*

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# News Excerpts

May 17, 2018

Ma'ariv

## **Israeli Air Force Strikes Hamas Positions in Gaza**

Israeli jets and UAV's attacked six Hamas positions Wednesday evening throughout the Gaza Strip with dozens of missiles. According to the IDF Spokesperson, "The attack was carried out in response to heavy machine gun fire at the city of Sderot and several shooting incidents against IDF soldiers during the day... The terrorist organization of Hamas is solely responsible for what is happening in and out of the Gaza Strip, and it will bear the consequences for the acts of terror carried out from Gaza against the citizens and sovereignty of Israel."

Associated Press

## **Hamas Claims Most Slain Gaza Protesters Were its Members**

Most of the protesters killed this week by Israeli fire along the border with the Gaza Strip were members of Hamas, the militant group said Wednesday, an assertion that deepens the starkly different narratives on both sides over the deaths. Israel, which has faced blistering international criticism over its response, has latched on to the remarks to bolster its claims that Hamas has used the weekly border protests as cover to stage attacks. Human Rights Watch said that under international law, Israel cannot use lethal force against unarmed protesters, regardless of possible affiliation with a militant group.

See also, [\*"What Is the Gaza Fence and Why Has It Set Off Protests" \(The New York Times\)\*](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Sinwar: Hamas Working with Egypt to Prevent War**

Egypt and Hamas are acting to prevent an armed conflict with Israel, said Hamas leader in Gaza Yahye Sinwar on Wednesday, stressing this is a key issue on which Cairo and Hamas agree. Speaking on Al Jazeera, Sinwar claimed that both Egypt and Hamas agreed the protests must not deteriorate into violent, military conflict. Sinwar mentioned Hamas' political leader Ismail Haniyeh's recent visit to Cairo, during which Egypt reiterated its commitment to the Palestinian struggle and right of return, according to Sinwar.

Ynet

## **IDF Spokesperson: Hamas Landed Knockout PR Blow**

The IDF conceded Thursday it did not intend to kill all 60 Gazans, saying, "Some of it is our fault, for not being able to communicate," a senior officer said. "When the dilemma was to defend the Israeli border and our communities near the border on the one hand, or allow rioters to cross over and only have a small number of Palestinian casualties—there was no dilemma at all for soldiers and commanders," said another.

The New York Times

## **A Child of Gaza Dies. The Arguing Begins**

Eight-month-old Layla Ghandour was in the arms of her grandmother when a cloud of tear gas engulfed them at the protest in Gaza on Monday. The child inhaled a draft of acrid gas that set off a rasping cough and watering eyes. Hours later she was dead. The story shot across the globe, providing an emotive focus for outrage at military tactics that Israel's critics said were disproportionately violent. Yet within hours the family's story was being questioned. Doctors said Layla had suffered from a congenital heart defect that, one suggested, might have caused her death. Like many such symbols in the Middle East, a small but intense tragedy of people living chaotic lives in turbulent times has become fodder for competing narratives.

Washington Post

## **Excessive Force or Justified Mob Control?**

Israel's sharpshooters have been permitted to use lethal force against those "endangering" the barrier, Israeli military officials say. The orders are to aim for the legs, they say, though many protesters were shot in the head. The military declines to go into further detail about its rules of engagement, saying they are classified. But human rights groups say the few details provided by the Israeli military make clear that the orders given to soldiers are illegal.

JTA

## **US Envoy Meets with Qatari FM to Discuss Gaza Relief**

US Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt met Wednesday in Qatar with its foreign minister to discuss relief for Gaza, a notable meeting with one of Hamas' only allies at a time when the Gaza Strip's border with Israel is engulfed in violence. "Met today in Doha, Qatar with Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al Than," Greenblatt said Wednesday on his Twitter feed. "We discussed the urgent need for humanitarian relief for Gaza & the Trump Administration's developing peace plan." Greenblatt has said in the past that relief for Gazans would be key to any path to peace.

Reuters

## **US Imposes New Sanctions on Top Hezbollah Officials**

The US and Gulf partners imposed additional sanctions on Lebanon's Hezbollah leadership on Wednesday, targeting its top two officials, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and Naim Qassem. "By targeting Hezbollah's Shura Council, our nations collectively rejected the false distinction between a so-called 'Political Wing' and Hezbollah's global terrorist plotting," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said. The measures were imposed jointly by Washington and its partners in the Terrorist Financing and Targeting Center, or TFTC, which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, it said.

## **As a Proud Israeli I Want Peace. Killing Gazans Won't Do It**

By Maya Ilany, Deputy Director, Yachad

- Commentators have again reached for the word “tragedy” to describe Monday’s clash at the Gaza border fence, which resulted in the highest death toll in a single day since the end of the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas. But “tragedy” is the wrong word. Tragedies are inevitable catastrophes, like natural disasters; and it was not inevitable that more than 50 people had to die on Monday. The word signifies a wider problem: by repeatedly asserting that nothing can be done to change things for the better, we are allowing the next round of violence and bloodshed to take place.
- Israel is my home and the conflict has affected every aspect of my life, from the 1991 Gulf war that burdened my childhood; through the second intifada that cast its shadow over my school years with buses exploding regularly in my home town of Tel Aviv; to the 2008-2009 Gaza war that I experienced in the Israel Defence Forces, which I enrolled in for three years as part of my national service and where I served as a journalist and presenter in the official forces radio station. I do not need any convincing about the role that Hamas has played in escalating the crisis in Gaza that led thousands of desperate Palestinians towards the border fence during Monday’s fatal clashes. Life in the Gaza Strip under Hamas rule is defined by despair and scarcity.
- There is a credible argument that Hamas is responsible for Gaza’s poor conditions. Gazans make do with only a few hours of electricity a day, very limited access to drinking water and no jobs. Instead of investing in education and infrastructure, Hamas appears to prioritise spending on arms and ammunition. But the Israeli government, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt are all responsible for the strangulation of Gaza with an 11-year blockade that prevents all exports and restrains imports to a limited supply of humanitarian goods. But while the responsibility for Gaza’s situation does not lie with Israel alone, as some suggest, there is no valid argument that the only options for the Israeli army are either to do nothing or use live fire.
- The truth is that Monday’s events have been on the cards for at least two years. The chief of the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate, Herzi Halevi, had warned the Israeli government in February 2016 that the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza could lead to a conflagration with Israel. The IDF chief of staff, Gadi Eisenkot, echoed Halevi’s warnings a year later, and said that additional deterioration could bring the prospect of a confrontation between the two sides closer. Why have these warning signs been ignored? Politics. The celebration of the new US embassy in Jerusalem was nothing but an opportunity for both Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu to score points with their hard-right supporters – evangelicals in the US and settlers in Israel. While Israeli and US officials were sipping champagne at the opening of the new embassy in Jerusalem, just an hour’s drive away more than 50 people, many of them unarmed, had been shot dead.

- The following morning, rocket alarm sirens were heard in Gaza border communities in southern Israel. Netanyahu may have thanked Jared Kushner for his “pursuit of peace”, but the new embassy in Jerusalem will push the possibility of peace further away. Israel’s rightwing politicians claim to be the only ones who can be trusted with the country’s security, yet they show a reckless disregard for the dangerous consequences of their policies. Though Netanyahu’s government only has a majority of six seats, in the absence of a well-functioning opposition, he is still seen by Israelis to be the only leader who can provide them with security. The chair of the Knesset defence committee, Avi Dichter, said he isn’t worried about the prospect of a border breach because “the IDF has enough bullets for everyone”. The deputy foreign minister, Tzipi Hotovely, said that the events in Gaza have nothing to do with the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem. As a proud Israeli who wants my homeland to be safe and secure, these hollow and simplistic statements just won’t do.
- The Israeli government, which leads a state founded by Jewish refugees from all over the world 70 years ago who chose to take their fate into their own hands, is saying that the status quo is the only option. Meanwhile Palestinians are paying for the lack of brave leadership with their blood. Even if – for the sake of argument – all those who were killed on Monday had been terrorists, and the soldiers had no other choice, what next? What is the Israeli and Palestinian leadership doing to avoid the next round of violence and avoid further loss of life? If our leaders have no answers to these questions, then we need new leaders.

## **What's Next in Israel-Palestinian Conflict?**

By Ben Caspit, Columnist, AI Monitor

- The distances from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to Gaza have never seemed so great, although they are only a few dozen kilometers. Less than an hour's drive separates the three locales. On May 14, three events, from seemingly distant planets, took place in them almost simultaneously. In Jerusalem, the US Embassy was inaugurated with much fanfare, national pride and religious ritual, both Jewish and Christian. In Tel Aviv, secular liberal Israel celebrated Netta Barzilai's win at the eminently popular Eurovision song contest. Meanwhile, Gaza counted at least 60 Palestinian deaths at the border, after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spent the day fighting tens of thousands of Palestinians attempting to reach or break through the fence at what has been billed as the Great Return March. Thus, the national capital was filled with hymns, flags, prayers and festive speeches; the cultural, secular and free-thinking capital was replete with pop, trash and colorful costumes; and besieged Gaza was filled with fire and blood.
- The IDF is now conducting two active, open military conflicts, albeit at relatively low intensities. In the north, the conflict with Iran turned into a day of real warfare May 10 and was crowned with a decisive Israeli victory. In the south, however, seven successive weeks of Palestinian marches to and assaults on the Gaza border fence were blocked by an "iron wall" of snipers that the IDF erected. "Yesterday's activity [at the border fence] was completely different than the earlier weeks," a senior Israeli officer told AI-Monitor on May 15, speaking on condition of anonymity. "We expected the 100,000 people that Hamas promised to bring, and only around 40,000 were there. But the violence level was still much higher than we had become accustomed to in the previous weeks."
- According to the officer, the demonstrators were dispersed at 13 different locations along the length of the fence. "Among them were several cells from Hamas' elite Nukhba unit, breakthrough cells," he said. "Three of these units were halted at the fence itself in battles against the IDF. As far as we know, they incurred about 10 casualties, but not a single Palestinian crossed the fence. Our guiding principle — that the Gaza border fence will not be harmed and not a single Palestinian will cross it to the Israeli side — has been meticulously safeguarded." This article is being written the morning of May 15, as both sides gear up for another day of battle. It is Nakba Day, the day on which the Palestinians memorialize the tragedy they suffered in 1948 — a resounding defeat in what for Israelis is their War of Independence. The IDF's current assessment is that the height of the struggle is behind them and that Hamas is recalculating its approach.
- According to a highly placed Israeli military source speaking on the condition of anonymity, "They understand that they have reached a dead end. They were not successful in setting the West Bank on fire, it was almost completely quiet there yesterday. They were not successful in awakening the world but only convinced such already convinced people as Turkish President

[Recep Tayyip] Erdogan. They were not able to cross the fence, they were not able to resolve their problem and the futility of their situation. It is clear to us that they are searching for an alternative.” On the morning of May 12, Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, flew to Cairo for talks via Egyptian helicopter. On the morning of May 15, the Egyptians opened the Rafah border crossing in coordination with Israel. In a surprising decision, the Israelis on the night of May 14, close to midnight, authorized the opening of the Kerem Shalom crossing the following day, through which merchandise and supplies can reach Gaza. “We will enable the transfer of medical equipment, fuel and lots of supplies, to help them recover,” a senior Israeli officer told Al-Monitor, speaking on the condition of anonymity. “It also might help them climb down from the tree [of continued demonstrations].”

- The question of questions is where do both sides go from here. If, indeed, the scope of the demonstrations and the number of injuries declines on Nakba Day, both the Israelis and Palestinians will have to decide where they are headed. The two leaderships will have to make hard decisions. Since the end of the 2014 Israel-Gaza war, there has not been such a clear watershed as now, with the sides perhaps prepared to change their strategic positions. It is doubtful, however, that the leaderships of both sides are prepared to climb down from the tree simultaneously.
- Despite the intense demonstrations and large number of victims, euphoria has swept Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel in recent days. Netanyahu has never enjoyed such a positive week in his entire career, not even when he scored his greatest political victories. It began with the now-famous presentation in which he showed the world the Iranian nuclear archives stolen by Mossad in the heart of Tehran and brought to Tel Aviv. It continued with President Donald Trump's announcement that he was abandoning the nuclear agreement with Iran, a proclamation that aroused immense joy in Israel. That was followed by the day of warfare between Israel and Iran, in which the Iranians were unable to inflict any damage on Israel but instead absorbed a strong blow to the infrastructures it had built over the last months on Syrian territory. On the night of May 12, a young Israeli singer won the Eurovision song contest. After conquering Europe, Netta Barzilai drew tens of thousands of Israeli celebrants to Rabin Square in Tel Aviv for a giant celebration May 14. Meanwhile, the US Embassy moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 14 in a ceremony described as “messianic” by some on Israel's secular, liberal left. Netanyahu rose to heights he had never before attained. The criminal investigations against him have been almost totally forgotten, and he seems more unbeatable than ever.
- Netanyahu could have envisioned two sorts of moves concerning Gaza. He could have encouraged the Palestinian Authority to come down from its tree and grasp the reins of civil administration in Gaza, or, alternately, he could have championed indirect negotiations with Hamas over a long-term cease-fire. Given the current state of affairs, however, it is difficult to imagine Netanyahu leading any sort of meaningful reconciliation-process vis-a-vis Hamas, which over the last few months had dispatched several proposals in this vein in Israel's direction but did not receive an answer. Before agreeing to any kind of negotiations, Israel is demanding that Hamas return the bodies of two Israeli soldiers, Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, and release

three Israel civilians it is holding in Gaza. This is where the two sides are stuck. Will the eruption of the border-fence violence and high number of casualties on the Palestinian side help both sides free themselves from their shared cul-de-sac? The answer will come in the following weeks. Probably not.