



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, May 3*

### Headlines:

- Israel Seeks to Renegotiate UN Refugee Deal
- Rivlin: Abbas is 'No Peace Partner'
- Erekat Claims Israel Distorted Abbas Remarks
- Knesset Gives War Power to 2 Top Leaders
- Japan's Abe Tells PM: Israel Must Curb Settlements
- Farmland in Flames from Gazan 'Kite Terrorism'
- Lapid Attacks PM for 'Mistake' in Iran Presentation
- Turks, Saudis, UAE Pump Quarter Billion into E. J'lem

### Commentary:

- **The New York Times: "Let Abbas's Vile Words Be His Last as Leader"**
  - By The New York Times Editorial Board
- **AI Monitor: "Israel Braces for Iranian Military Reaction"**
  - By Ben Caspit, Columnist, AI Monitor

# News Excerpts

May 3, 2018

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Seeks to Renegotiate UN Refugee Deal**

Israel is reportedly looking into renewing negotiations with the UN's refugee agency over a deal to find a solution for the African asylum seekers living in the country. In early April, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that a deal had been signed with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to resettle some of the asylum seekers, but he backed out of the agreement with the UN less than a day later due to backlash from his political base. On Wednesday, Channel 10 reported that the UN agency reached out to Israel and said that as far as it was concerned, the deal was still on the table. In response, Israel's National Security Council reached out to UN officials with the aim of renegotiating the deal and improving its terms.

Ynet

## **Rivlin: Abbas is 'No Peace Partner'**

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin questioned Wednesday how Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas could be considered a legitimate peace partner in light of recent anti-Semitic comments he made suggesting that Jewish behavior brought about Nazi persecution. The US and European Union also condemned Abbas's remarks, echoing criticism on Wednesday by Netanyahu.

Times of Israel

## **Erekat: Israel Distorted Abbas Remarks**

Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat on Wednesday defended Abbas, claiming Israel had distorted Abbas's words and saying that Abbas did not deny the historical massacres of Jews including during the Holocaust. Erekat added that Abbas still "believes in peace, negotiations and the establishment of two states living in peace, security and good neighborliness."

The New York Times

## **Knesset Gives War Power to 2 Top Leaders**

As Israel faces rising tensions with Iran, Syria and Gaza, the Knesset passed a new law allowing the prime minister and defense minister to decide alone whether their nation will go to war. Although the new law restricts the prime minister's power to declare war to "extreme circumstances," it has provoked domestic criticism for concentrating it in the hands of just two people. The measure, an amendment to the Basic Laws that serve as Israel's constitution, passed on Monday night by a vote of 62 to 41 in the 120-seat Knesset.

Ha'aretz

## **Japan's Abe Tells PM: Israel Must Curb Settlements**

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with Netanyahu in Jerusalem on Wednesday and expressed his continued support for a two-state solution, intention not to move Japan's embassy to Jerusalem and desire that Israel restrain its settlement construction. Abe also said that Japan still supports the nuclear agreement with Iran, which it sees as a contribution to Middle East stability. On Tuesday, Abe visited Ramallah, where he told Abbas that American involvement in the peace process is critical.

Jerusalem Post

## **Farmland in Flames from Gazan 'Kite Terrorism'**

Palestinians in Gaza set fire to scores of acres of farmland Wednesday, employing a new airborne weapon, which Israeli politicians have taken to calling "Kite bombs." In the past, Gazans had simply thrown Molotov cocktails over the border fence. The kite bomb used on Wednesday followed a simple design: a flaming rag that was attached to a kite with the capability of getting farther across the fence and igniting dry farm fields. Palestinians in Gaza have been protesting for their 'right of return' during past weeks, leading to clashes on the fence between Gazans and IDF soldiers. Dozens of Palestinians have died in the violence.

Ynet

## **Lapid Attacks PM for 'Mistake' in Iran Presentation**

Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid scolded Netanyahu on Wednesday for what he described as his "mistake of the highest order" in his decision to expose on Monday a massive Israeli intelligence operation that concluded in the discovery of thousands of documents attesting to Iran's nuclear weapons program. According to Lapid, Netanyahu's decision to go public with the intelligence operation cast doubt on his judgement pertaining to matters of national security.

Times of Israel

## **Turks, Saudis, UAE Pump Quarter Billion into E. J'lem**

Less than two weeks away from the scheduled transfer of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are pumping a quarter of a billion dollars into the Islamic Waqf and a slew of Muslim organizations in East Jerusalem, Hadashot news reported Wednesday. The Waqf (Muslim Trust) administers the Temple Mount, home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest shrine, as well as a slew of schools, orphanages, Islamic libraries, Islamic courts and other properties. The mount is the holiest place in Judaism as the site of the ancient temples. Israel maintains overall security control at the site.

## **Let Abbas's Vile Words Be His Last as Palestinian Leader**

By The New York Times Editorial Board

- Feeding reprehensible anti-Semitic myths and conspiracy theories in a speech on Monday, the Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas, shed all credibility as a trustworthy partner if the Palestinians and Israelis ever again have the nerve to try negotiations. Speaking to the Palestinian legislative body, Mr. Abbas, 82, said the mass murder of European Jews in the Holocaust was the result of the victims' financial activities, not their religious identity and anti-Semitism. "So the Jewish question that was widespread throughout Europe was not against their religion, but against their social function, which relates to usury (unscrupulous money lending) and banking and such," he said, according to the BBC. Mr. Abbas's anti-Semitic tendencies are not new. In the 1980s, he wrote a dissertation that seemed to question the widely accepted Holocaust death toll of six million Jews.
- While seen as a successor to the longtime Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, in 2003 he played down that notion, saying, "The Holocaust was a terrible, unforgivable crime against the Jewish nation, a crime against humanity that cannot be accepted by humankind." Things looked more hopeful in 1993 when Mr. Abbas stood on the White House lawn and watched Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel and Mr. Arafat sign the Oslo Accords that were supposed to eventually lead to two states and peace. In the intervening years, there have been ups and downs in that quest, but the trend for some time has been depressingly downward. The dream of an independent Palestine faded further away and Mr. Abbas came under increasing pressure.
- Since the last serious peace talks collapsed in 2014, Israel's hard-line government has expanded settlement building to cover more of the land envisioned for a Palestinian state. Although President Trump promised a peace plan, none has materialized, but reports suggest it would favor Israel. Arab nations, once the Palestinians' patrons, have lost interest and have turned their attention to fighting wars in Yemen and Syria and checking Iran's regional influence. During a recent meeting with Jewish-American leaders, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia faulted Palestinian leaders for complaining and rejecting past Israeli peace offers.
- Mr. Abbas opposed Mr. Arafat during the 2000-2005 second intifada, recognized Israel, and committed himself to a nonviolent approach to negotiations for peace and a two-state solution. He was valued by the West as Mr. Arafat's successor, and for years he has deployed Palestinian forces to help Israelis maintain security in the West Bank. But pressures, some of his own making and many others caused by Israel, which has ultimate control over the West Bank, are building. Mr. Abbas, who oversees a governing system plagued by corruption and dysfunction, has lost support among the Palestinian people. He has weakened government institutions that are essential for a future state and refused to call new elections, thus overstaying his term by many years and preventing younger leaders from emerging. He has

also failed to unify the Palestinians in the West Bank, where his Fatah faction dominates, with those in the even more desperate circumstances of the Gaza Strip, where Hamas holds sway.

- Even in this gloomy climate, however, Mr. Abbas's vile speech was a new low. No doubt he feels embittered and besieged on all sides. But by succumbing to such dark, corrosive instincts he showed that it is time for him to leave office. Palestinians need a leader with energy, integrity and vision, one who might have a better chance of achieving Palestinian independence and enabling both peoples to live in peace.

## **Israel Braces for Iranian Military Reaction**

By Ben Caspit, Columnist, AI Monitor

- It was an especially crazy day, even for the Middle East. On the morning of April 30, Israelis woke up to images of an Iranian target in the middle of Syria that was devastated by an aerial attack overnight. That evening, they watched as their prime minister, in his role as the ideal presenter when it comes to discussing a nuclear Iran, presented them and the world with the Iranian nuclear archives, brought right to the heart of Tel Aviv by Mossad agents operating in the center of Tehran. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looked like a groom on his wedding day. He had the demeanor of an Apple executive introducing the world to the latest iPhone, not the darkest secrets of Iran's nuclear program. Ostensibly, it was another productive day for Israel's leaders and their security forces. In reality, Israel and Iran were still dancing a deadly tango on the mouth of the Middle Eastern volcano. At some point, what started as a slow waltz will turn into a frenzied sword dance.
- On the morning of April 30, the aerial attack on a munitions storage site near Aleppo could still be heard echoing across the landscape. The fireballs that ripped across the Syrian sky were still burning when The New York Times reported that 200 ballistic missiles, which Iran had stockpiled in an air base in Syria, were destroyed. According to Western intelligence sources, the missiles were intended to be part of an attack that Iran was planning against Israel, in response to an earlier attack by the Israeli air force (according to foreign news sources) against Syria's T-4 air base near Homs, which Iran had been using to launch drones. On May 1, American government sources told NBC that it was Israeli F-15 fighter jets that destroyed the Iranian missiles. Then came Netanyahu's presentation, which received widespread international attention. In it, he exposed what Israel calls the "Iranian lie" in all its boldfaced nakedness. These two events — the night bombings and the intelligence briefing for the press — are directly related.
- The Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) freedom of action against Iran can also be attributed to the fact that until May 12, when President Donald Trump is scheduled to decide the fate of the Iranian nuclear deal, Tehran has put all its actions on hold. The last thing that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leader Qasem Soleimani need now is a major war in the Middle East targeting Israel. That is why Israel is allowing itself to tug on the rope and raise the threshold on an almost daily basis.
- Previous articles in AI-Monitor revealed that some members of the Israeli Cabinet support moving this war against Iran directly to the territory of Iran itself, after allowing it to simmer on a low burner for such a long time. In other words, if something blows up in Israel, something should blow up in Tehran as well. The purpose would be to ensure that Iran cannot hide behind its various "proxies" in the region, whether Hezbollah, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or the Shiite militias. As far as is known, this approach has the support of Defense Minister Avigdor

Liberman, Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz, all of them senior Cabinet members. As one minister told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "Israel must smash the equation, which says that even when it takes a hit in its territory, all will remain quiet in Iran. We have to start making the Iranians pay in their own territory."

- Now that the IDF is bracing for an Iranian response to recent alleged Israeli attacks in Syria (which, it is thought, left dozens of Iranian troops dead), Israel will be forced to decide how exactly it will respond. The intelligence assessment is that Iran will attempt a response that exacts a similar cost and mode of operation to those taken by Israel. In other words, it would attack an Israeli military target and try to take a toll on uniformed troops. If that is the case, will Israel "contain" the Iranian response and react in a measured and tempered way so that the situation doesn't deteriorate any further? It all depends on the circumstances of the attack. Should Israel respond against Iranian targets in Syria, or should it attack Iran itself? This lies at the base of a significant debate, which has yet to be decided. Regardless, Israel is not denying that a war against Iran is already well underway. "We cannot allow ourselves to get into a war of choice," Liberman told the IDF's general staff in June 2016 during his first meeting with them as defense minister.
- Liberman considers a war against Iran to be a classic "war of no choice." He told Al-Monitor, "We cannot allow Iran to station air defense systems in Syria, which would seal the skies to us all the way to Beersheba. No way. That's not going to happen. We consider this to be a red line, and it leaves us without a choice. It is true that Israel prefers peace and quiet. Our economy is thriving, and the country is flourishing, but we will stand vigilant on this red line. We will not let it happen, no matter how much it costs." When asked whether Israel has coordinated this policy with the Russians and President Vladimir Putin, Liberman answered, "The Russians understand our interests, and we understand their interests. We have no desire to hurt anyone, but at the same time, we cannot allow Iran to shut down our airspace. Everybody understands that."
- The Mossad's enormous achievement in successfully pilfering Iran's nuclear archives and transferring them from Iran to Tel Aviv was like a blast of wind in Israel's sails, even if Jerusalem is well aware that the archive did not contain a "smoking gun," proving that Iran is violating its agreement with the superpowers. "That's not the issue," a senior Israeli intelligence official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "It's a very different story. This archive, which was stolen right out from under the Iranians' noses, proves two things. First, it proves that they have been lying to the whole world this entire time when they announced that they never wanted to achieve nuclear capacity for military purposes and that achieving that would run counter to the spirit of Islam. Secondly, it proves that they have not reneged on their original intent, and that they have not shelved their program. On the contrary, they have put it on hold so that they can relaunch it as soon as the agreement expires. The rest of the world needs to realize that. Now, anyone who wants to understand that will," he concluded.
- Meanwhile, Israel is reveling in the Mossad's intelligence coup. Transportation and Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz told Al-Monitor, "It was a challenging and riveting operation so

unimaginable, that it seems to have been drawn from the script of some fictional Hollywood blockbuster. The truth is that no one would have ever imagined doing such a thing. It was a case of fact being stranger than fiction and one of Israeli intelligence's greatest achievements of all time." When asked how the Iranians reacted, Katz responded, "When they first found out, two months ago, I assume that they were absolutely shocked. The whole issue was kept far away from the public, even in Iran. The number of people who knew the secret could be counted on one hand. They never dreamed that their greatest enemy would get its hand on their most closely guarded secret." Then I asked Katz how the Americans responded. "With absolute admiration and awe," he said.