



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, May 31

Headlines:

- **WH Declines to Condemn New Israeli Settlement Homes**
- **Security Cabinet Rejects Retaking Gaza Option**
- **Kuwait Blocks US UNSC bid to Condemn Gaza Rockets**
- **Intelligence Minister Calls to End Fuel, Water Supply to Gaza**
- **Turkish Envoy to US Returning Amid Jerusalem Row**
- **High Court Walks Back Position on Seizing Palestinian Land**
- **US Thwarted in Bid to Change UN Rights Council on Israel**
- **Israelis on Gaza Border Know Rockets Will Return**

Commentary:

- **Times of Israel: “What Gaza’s Flare-Up and Down Have in Common”**
– By Avi Issacharoff, Analyst, Times of Israel
- **Ha’aretz: “Egypt’s the Big Winner, and It Will Come at a Price for Israel”**
– By Zvi Bar’el, Analyst, Ha’aretz

News Excerpts

May 31, 2018

Jerusalem Post

WH Declines to Condemn New Israeli Settlement Homes

The Trump administration declined on Wednesday to condemn Israel's approval of over 2,000 settler homes to be constructed in the West Bank, despite the president's past statements discouraging settlement growth. Since taking office, Trump has characterized construction in the West Bank as "unhelpful" to the pursuit of peace. "The president has made his position on new settlement activity clear, and we encourage all parties to continue to work towards peace," a National Security Council spokesperson said. "The Israeli government has made clear that going forward, its intent is to adopt a policy regarding settlement activity that takes the president's concerns into consideration."

Ynet

Security Cabinet Rejects Retaking Gaza Option

Israel's Security Cabinet convened Wednesday evening, and members rallied behind a decision by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman to swiftly conclude the latest confrontation. Despite calls on Tuesday by Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked and Minister of Energy and Water Resources Yuval Steinitz for the IDF to retake the Gaza Strip by force, not a single member of the Cabinet recommended such a move.

Times of Israel

Kuwait Blocks US UNSC bid to Condemn Gaza Rockets

Kuwait on Wednesday blocked a US-drafted UN Security Council statement that would have strongly condemned Palestinian rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on Israel. The US had circulated the draft text ahead of an emergency council meeting on the rocket and mortar attacks by the Hamas and Islamic Jihad terror groups. Kuwait, a non-permanent council member that represents Arab countries, said that it was blocking the statement to allow for consideration of a draft resolution it has put forward on the protection of Palestinian civilians.

Times of Israel

Intelligence Minister Calls to End Fuel, Water Supply to Gaza

Intelligence Minister Israel Katz on Wednesday said Israel should rid itself of responsibility for the Gaza Strip by cutting all of its ties to the Palestinian enclave, including ending water and electricity supplies. Aid officials have warned that Gaza is facing a humanitarian crisis due to a deteriorated infrastructure that has left Gazans with inadequate supplies of drinking water and severe power shortages. Overnight Tuesday-Wednesday, Israeli Electric Corporation workers began work to repair power lines which were damaged by a Palestinian rocket, cutting off electric supplies to areas in southern Gaza.

Reuters

Turkish Envoy to US Returning Amid Jerusalem Row

Turkey's ambassador to Washington is returning to the US after being recalled for consultations two weeks ago, an official in the Turkish foreign ministry said on Thursday. Serdar Kilic was recalled to Ankara amid a dispute with Israel and Washington over the killing of dozens of Palestinian protesters by Israeli forces on the Gaza border earlier this month. Turkey has been one of the most vocal critics of Israel's response to the Gaza protests and of the U.S. Embassy move, also recalling its ambassador from Tel Aviv and calling for an emergency meeting of Islamic nations.

Times of Israel

High Court Walks Back Position on Seizing Palestinian Land

Chief Justice Esther Hayut ruled Wednesday that Israel cannot rely on a precedent set by one of her colleagues last year green-lighting the seizure of private Palestinian land solely for use by Israeli settlers. Hayut was responding to a petition from the Yesh Din rights group, which called for an additional hearing on the 2017 ruling by Justice Salim Joubran in which he wrote that “the Israeli residents of the area (West Bank)... are also among the civilian population in the area,” and that therefore the state “is obligated to act for their welfare... even by violating the property rights” of the original Palestinian land owners.

Foreign Policy

US Thwarted in Bid to Change UN Rights Council on Israel

Nearly a year ago, Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, issued an ultimatum to the UN to reform the U.N. Human Rights Council with a view to easing its criticism of Israel, or face an American walkout. But a diplomatic campaign by Washington to bring about such a reform ran aground this month, as key European allies said they would not support a vote at the UN General Assembly on ending the rights council's special scrutiny of Israel.

Ha'aretz

Israelis on Gaza Border Know Rockets Will Return

Residents of the war-weary Gaza border communities greeted the news of a cease-fire with a mixture of skepticism and disbelief. In the best-case scenario, they predicted, the latest truce between Israel and Hamas might last for a few months or a few years – that is to say, until the next inevitable round of violence. In the worst-case scenario, they said, it would break down within a day or two.

What the Gaza Flare-Up and Flare-Down Have in Common

By Avi Issacharoff, Analyst, Times of Israel

- With the tailing off of the Gaza conflict, and the end to the barrages into Israel and the IDF's counterstrikes, it's plain that the shared desire of both Hamas and Israel for a return to "normality," and the avoidance of war, prevailed. Proof of this is that the status quo ante has been restored, with no change to the previous understandings between the sides. Israel and Hamas recommitted to their familiar formula: quiet will be met with quiet. Neither side wants an escalation. To use a boxing analogy, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and then Israel, put on the gloves for 24 hours, but heeded the bell and retired to their corners at the end of the round.
- What set off the hostilities this time? Each side naturally has its version. In the days preceding the escalation, three Islamic Jihad operatives were killed in an IDF strike at Rafah, and a Hamas operative was killed in the north of the Strip in an incident in which two other Gazans cut through the border fence. Hamas and Islamic Jihad assert that the barrage of mortar and rocket fire at Israel on Tuesday was intended to convey the message to Israel that those deaths were unacceptable, and that they would not accept an ostensible new IDF equation for Gaza. In their telling, it is a breach of previous understandings when "innocent" activities — by which they also mean cutting and crossing through the border fence — are met with fatal Israeli fire. This narrative, however, conveniently neglects to mention that all four of the Gazan fatalities were terror group members operating close to the border, that Israeli troops came under fire in the incident in which the Hamas operative was killed, and that the Islamic Jihad members had placed an explosive device at the fence.
- Now that the flames have died down a little, these two terrorist organizations are marketing their fire into Israel as a fully coordinated, joint operation. In reality, the picture is likely more complicated: After the three Islamic Jihad operatives were killed, and it sought to respond, the group's masters in Tehran encouraged an escalation. For its part, Hamas initially ignored the mortar fire, in order to allow Islamic Jihad to let off steam, but then joined in with the attacks on Israel so as not to lose too many points in Palestinian public opinion. At the same time, Hamas was conveying messages to Egypt within hours of the start of the barrages that it wanted a return to the previous truce.
- Meanwhile, on the Israeli side, various senior ministers were indicating an ostensible desire to hit the Gaza terrorists hard while also conveying a sense of "hold us back." But in Israel, too, it was patently obvious that there was a desire to return to the familiar, if fragile, quiet. Even when hitting back, the Israeli army was careful mainly to target unmanned positions and facilities. As of this writing, there was not a single Gazan fatality reported in the dozens of Israeli retaliatory strikes.

- Rocket and mortar fire from Gaza was far more indiscriminate; in the first Islamic Jihad barrage on Tuesday morning a shell exploded in the yard of a kindergarten. Nonetheless, it appeared that the terror group commanders did not wish to lose complete control and to force Israel into a harsher response. That first barrage came before the children had arrived. Looking at both sides, there was almost the sense of an unseen hand coordinating where to fire and how heavily, until the previous calm had been restored.
- This makes for a curious bottom line. Hamas and Israel, bitter enemies, are both desperately determined to preserve the current situation with respect to Israel-Gaza. This is because the alternative to ongoing tense calm is war — which is likely to bring the fall of Hamas on one hand, and chaos and a much more complex security situation for Israel on the other. Despite this curious common interest, and even as the truce takes fragile hold, the dire economic and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip means that the potential for a descent into war is ever-present — even though war is something both sides so anxiously want to avoid.

Egypt's the Big Winner, and It Will Come at a Price for Israel

By Zvi Bar'el, Analyst, Ha'aretz

- “Gone is the era in which the rules of confrontation are dictated exclusively by one side,” a joint statement of the Palestinian armed groups in Gaza said on Wednesday. The statement was apparently meant to signal to Israel that it could no longer strike at Gaza without retaliation, but it also ties the organizations’ own hands, as they have undertaken not to attack as long as Israel doesn’t. This is the formula on which the 2014 Gaza-Israel postwar agreements were based on, and this what the organizations have agreed on under the almost-failed Egyptian brokerage.
- The return to the starting point repositions Hamas as the one responsible for every development in the Strip, whether carried out by itself or by other organizations like Islamic Jihad, the “popular committees” or the Salafi groups. Israel’s readiness to return to “the 2014 lines” shows it sees Hamas as a responsible partner, even without talking to it directly. In fact, Israel is acting in Gaza as though there’s no Palestinian Authority, which in the past used to mediate the talks on calming the Strip. By so doing Israel believes it has completed the Gaza Strip’s separation from the West Bank. Such a separation is convenient for Israel, enabling it to justify putting off the peace talks, claiming that as long as the PA wasn’t in control of the Strip there was no point in holding peace talks with it.
- But the separation is upheld only in the military aspect and will no longer be possible if and when U.S. President Donald Trump presents his peace plan. Meanwhile it will help manage the occupation in Gaza on Israel and Egypt’s terms. Hamas as a covert partner has so far lived in peace with these terms, as long as it received promises from Egypt to open the Rafah crossing for Gazans to pass to and from Egypt – as Egypt did for Ramadan. It seems Hamas will also be able to receive funds from the United Arab Emirates, which has already contributed money to the Strip and is ready to give the Gazan government tens of millions of dollars the moment the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation is implemented. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, despite their ideological differences, agree on the Palestinian reconciliation issue and the Egyptian sponsorship.
- Israel, which hastened to declare victory in the current flare-up, hasn’t really achieved a turning point in the status quo that prevailed before the events. If Israel wanted to display its deterrent power, here too it has found that the 2014 conflict’s deterrence has eroded, both in view of the March of Return in Gaza and the duel waged by Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Instead of deterrence, Israel and the organizations have struck a balance of agreements, as though the parties were two enemy states accepting the limitations of their strength.
- The big winner appears to be Egypt, which has once again proved its ability to achieve calm when and where it is required. Egypt’s status as a partner to running Gaza from outside was built on the trust forged between it and Israel, and between Egypt and Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Egypt and Israel have established unprecedented cooperation as part of Egypt’s war against

terror in Sinai. Israel allowed Egypt to bring large forces into Sinai, including its air force, in a loosening of the Camp David agreements. In exchange, Israel received a firm Egyptian campaign against Hamas tunnels and the organizations' weapons trails.

- Hamas, for its part, was forced to accept Egypt as broker after cutting itself loose from Iran, due to Hamas' castigation of Iran's ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad, and following the economic pressure Egypt imposed on the passage of goods and residents to and from Gaza. Unlike Israel, Egypt is under no international pressure over its policy in Gaza, while Israel is seen as solely responsible for the 11-year siege. But Israel's dependence on Egypt's ability to play honest broker, which is capable of cooling down any military confrontation, will require Israel to contribute its part to stabilize Gaza's economy. Not only for humanitarian considerations, about which Israel couldn't care less, but to prevent more outbursts like the marches of return or a deterioration to a military conflagration.
- This may strengthen Hamas, but it's the price Israel will have to pay so that this partner will continue to bear responsibility for the understandings achieved after the recent flare-up. Also, the continued Gaza-blockade policy will hardly be effective if Egypt decides to fully open the Rafah crossing as part of its policy to preserve Hamas' power. This power is necessary to Egypt, as it is to Israel, to protect its border on the east. It is to be hoped that Israel will finally recognize the futility of the blockade on Gaza, rather than see it as another prestigious asset that is too valuable to give up.