



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, May 7

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News Excerpts

May 7, 2018

Times of Israel

Officials Warn of Impending Iranian Missile Strike

Iran is planning to retaliate for recent deadly airstrikes in Syria attributed to the Jewish state by having its proxies fire missiles at military targets in northern Israel sometime in the near future, defense officials warned on Sunday. Israeli military and intelligence services have identified preliminary efforts by Iran in Syria to carry out its reprisal, using its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Hezbollah terrorist group and local Shiite militias to launch a barrage of precision-guided missiles, likely at Israeli military targets in the north. Tehran vowed revenge after Israel's suspected T-4 army base in Syria was struck in an air raid on April 9, killing at least seven members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Reuters

Hezbollah Allies Gain in Lebanon Vote

Hezbollah and its political allies won just over half the seats in Lebanon's parliamentary elections, unofficial results showed, boosting an Iranian-backed movement fiercely opposed to Israel and underlining Tehran's growing regional clout. Branded a terrorist group by the United States, the heavily armed Shiite Hezbollah has grown in strength since joining the war in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad in 2012. The apparent gains made on Sunday by a Hezbollah-backed alliance risk complicating Western policy towards Lebanon, a big recipient of US military support that is banking on foreign aid and loans to revive its stagnant economy.

Ynet

New US Embassy Building in Jerusalem Unveiled

While the new American Embassy in Jerusalem is expected to be inaugurated next week, the road to the diplomatic mission actually beginning operations is still a ways off. The current move, then, is mostly symbolic, including a changing of a sign and the move of the ambassador and his secretary, and possibly a visit from President Donald Trump. The capital's American consulate stretches across 6,000 square meters of actual construction, with rights to up to 25,000 square meters—rights that will be realized in full over the next six years to create the new embassy complex.

Ynet

Chief Justice Hayut: Override Bill 'Dangerous'

Israeli Supreme Court Chief Justice Esther Hayut said on Monday that attempts to enact an override power circumventing the High Court should be "removed from the public agenda," adding that she thought the judiciary was under a "blunt, unprecedented attack that seriously threatens its independence and impartiality."

Kahlon Vows to Block High Court Bill

Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon said on Sunday that his Kulanu party would oppose legislation curtailing the High Court, hours after the bill was green-lit by cabinet ministers, including a lawmaker of his own party. Opposition lawmakers, meanwhile, cried foul over the ministers' endorsement of the bill, arguing that the law, if passed, would turn Israel into "Erdogan's Turkey." The cabinet authorized the controversial bill to limit the powers of the top courts despite ongoing coalition disagreements over the proposed legislation.

Ha'aretz

UNSC Rejects US Request to Condemn Abbas

The United Nations Security Council declined on Friday to adopt a request by the United States to condemn recent remarks by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that were widely criticized as being anti-Semitic. Diplomats said Kuwait rejected the U.S. draft and killed it, arguing that Abbas had already apologized and that it was one-sided. Abbas said on Friday, "If people were offended by my statement, especially people of the Jewish faith, I apologize to them. I would like to assure everyone that it was not my intention to do so, and to reiterate my full respect for the Jewish faith, as well as other monotheistic faiths."

AFP

Israel Strikes Hamas Gaza Post Over Kite Attacks

Israel struck a facility of the Gaza Strip's Hamas rulers overnight, the movement's military wing said on Sunday, with the Israeli army saying it was reacting to kite-borne fire bombings. A military spokeswoman said it was a direct response to a new Palestinian tactic of flying kites with firebombs attached across the Gaza border into Israel to set farmers' fields alight. Israeli media have in recent days reported significant damage to farms due to kite-flown Molotov cocktails, though the devices face difficult odds in making it across the fence while staying alight. Forty-nine Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces since protests and clashes began along the Gaza border on March 30, and hundreds of others have been wounded by gunfire.

Ha'aretz

Birthright Co-founder Says 'Angry' With Israel

Charles Bronfman, the Jewish businessman-philanthropist billionaire is "perplexed and angry" with how Israel is treating the Jews of the Diaspora, and he's out to do something about what he calls "the fractious Jewish world" that will "cause a decline of the Jewish people everywhere." One target of his wrath is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who, for example, reneged on an agreement last year to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall. In his talk, he suggested establishing "a permanent, serious lobby in Jerusalem including both Israeli and North American Jewish groups," jokingly calling it "a reverse AIPAC." "The time has come to demonstrate both the negatives as well as the positives that proposed Israeli legislation will have on North American Jewry," he said.

The Mutual Right of Return

By Ephraim Sneh, Director, S. Daniel Abraham Center for Strategic Dialogue

- There is no way to understand or forgive the statements made by the president of the Palestinian Authority at a session of the Palestinian National Council. His compatriots say that this is his way of atoning for the failure of the path he followed all his life as a leader – opposing terror and striving for an accord with Israel. Ever since he was elected leader in January 2005 his path failed because all Israeli governments, knowing that he was the most moderate among Palestinian leaders, saw to it that he was humiliated and weakened. In effect, they opted for Hamas over him.
- When Ehud Olmert attempted and ultimately succeeded in reaching an agreement with him at the end of the summer of 2008, Olmert's resignation was already a fait accompli. Other than this episode, Israel's governments squandered the opportunity that opened up before them on the day Mahmoud Abbas replaced Yasser Arafat. They didn't want him or a compromise that he could deliver. That's the truth of the matter. Despite this, anyone wishing to advance an agreement in the Land of Israel — and such an accord is ineluctable — must create a narrative of conciliation, built not on ignorance but on an understanding of the sensitivities of the other side. The grave and vexing words uttered by Abbas attest more to ignorance and to a profound lack of understanding of the Israeli side and of the Jewish people.
- The most sensitive and loaded emotional issue for both sides is their historical affinity to this land, in its entirety. Notwithstanding all the nonsense they've heard in the past week, Palestinians, must understand that the cradle of the historical legacy of the Jewish people lies in the heart of the West Bank. Jeremiah and Amos did not prophesize in Bat Yam or Holon, but in Anatot and Tekoa. Our national past is rooted in Shiloh and Beit El, on the road to Efrata. Yes, we have a right to return to these places. However, all Israelis who support a two-state solution and a division of this land relinquish the exercising of this right, even at the heavy but unavoidable cost of evacuating tens of thousands of Israelis who have exercised this right. This concession is aimed at enabling a peaceful life in the Land of Israel, which includes a Jewish and democratic state on most of its territory.
- The Palestinians cleave to the “right of return” but they have relinquished the return. Abbas said so publicly with regard to his family home in Safed, attracting heaps of abuse from Hamas. They know refugees will not return to live within the boundaries of a sovereign State of Israel. There is a reason Hamas finds it difficult to mobilize masses to participate in its provocative displays on the Gaza border. However, when they say “right of return” the Palestinians are referring to their historical affinity with Jaffa, Lod, Ramle and hundreds of villages that were abandoned in 1948. We as Israelis must understand and respect that.

- One must distinguish between a right and its realization. A narrative of conciliation can be built on the understanding that for the sake of coexistence between two national entities in this land both sides relinquish the exercising of what each one of them sees as their historical right. It's possible that in response to a request by Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump will demand that the Palestinians concede the "right of return." Currently, this is a surefire recipe for preventing any negotiations from taking place. But if, on the other hand, there is a mutual concession regarding the exercising of such a right, that is written into a narrative or conciliation, the road to dialogue may be opened. Boldness is required on both sides in order to create a new formula that can replace the stalemate and the ignorance.

Palestinian Succession War Heats Up

By Shlomi Eldar, Columnist, AI Monitor

- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' speech to the Palestinian National Council April 30 drew harsh criticism from Israel, Europe and the United States. He was criticized and accused of making anti-Semitic statements at home as well. But even before Abbas delivered his embarrassing and scandalous speech, some in the Fatah movement had started to speak about the need to replace him. After the speech, what had been limited to private conversations suddenly became public in the Palestinian Authority (PA) and throughout the world. It was not his anti-Semitic remarks that tipped the scale and led many Fatah activists to the conclusion that it was his time to go, but rather the state of the PA and his inadequate functioning, which can no longer be concealed. The international condemnations, including a blistering editorial in The New York Times that declared it was time for him to vacate his seat, reinforced the sense that Abbas is no longer functioning and that in addition to the issues brought about by his advanced age and deteriorating health, he doesn't truly perceive the reality of the PA under his leadership.
- The problem is that during the long years of his rule, since he succeeded PLO leader Yasser Arafat in November 2004, Abbas made sure to sideline any prominent Palestinian figure in his movement out of fear for his exclusive leadership. He expelled Mohammed Dahlan from the movement, exiled him from the West Bank and pursued his loyalists, who went underground. A few of them preferred to move to the Gaza Strip and live under Hamas rule, such as Sufian Abu Zaida, a former minister of prisoner affairs, so as not to live in constant fear that Abbas' people would come knocking. Abbas also made sure to limit the power of Jibril Rajoub, who had claim to the throne. He demoted him from national security adviser to chairman of a sports association, so that he would not deal with the really big issues. Even Yasser Abed Rabbo, not a Fatah man but a loyal associate who was considered Abbas' close adviser until three years ago, was humiliatingly dismissed from his role as the secretary general of the PLO Executive Committee.
- When pressure mounted on Abbas within his movement to appoint a successor, he lobbied for Mahmoud al-Aloul — a controversial figure — as his deputy. Aloul was responsible for Fatah's militant faction Tanzim and is not the man to unify Fatah, shake up the PA or ensure a realistic diplomatic vision for West Bank residents. He could give in to factionalism and turn the succession battle between Dahlan and Rajoub and their people into a bloody struggle. His opponents in Fatah argue that even now there are militant groups under his command, mostly young people who served under him and are still loyal. Senior Fatah leaders, wishing to prevent succession battles between the camps, have already started to seek a compromise candidate who could fill the role of chairman temporarily until Fatah decides on a mechanism for choosing a new chairman that would be acceptable to everyone.

- A compromise proposal being considered is Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, a former university president who has served in his position for the five years since his predecessor Salem Fayyad was ousted by Abbas. Fayyad, who fought corruption in the PA and succeeded in eradicating a large part of it, said in an interview with The New York Times after his firing: “It is incredible that the fate of the Palestinian people has been in the hands of leaders so entirely casual, so guided by spur-of-the-moment decisions, without seriousness.” These remarks have rung all the more true as Abbas has led the PA. Fayyad found the way to fix PA institutions and manage its budgets with transparency, refraining from funneling money or granting jobs to associates and central activists in Fatah. Hamdallah, his successor, continued in this direction.
- Two weeks after his appointment to the job, Hamdallah submitted his resignation to Abbas because he thought that Abbas and senior leaders of the Fatah movement (of which Hamdallah is not a member) were trying to rein him in and to prevent the proper conduct of the government, especially control over the PA’s budget. The threat worked. Abbas promised not to interfere and Hamdallah stabilized a Palestinian government comprised of technocrats that survived despite all the difficulties and obstacles placed in its way. From an Israeli perspective, Hamdallah is remarkable for establishing good relations with Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon. In the last year, the two met in Ramallah and Tel Aviv at least four times to advance joint economic projects.
- His quiet character, his professionalism and the seriousness with which he takes his job give the sense to most of the Palestinian public in the West Bank that he holds the position with responsibility and devotion and is driven by national patriotic motivations. It's all earned him great popularity, much more than Abbas, who according to all the polls the public wants to see vacate his seat. Still, it seems that most of his potential opponents still fear to challenge Abbas, who was re-elected as chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee on Friday. He was the only candidate.
- Hamdallah is not a Fatah man. He doesn't have his own corps or a group of supporters to get him appointed. But he will prevent fratricide. Hamdallah has not been asked whether he wants the job, but the middle generation of Fatah leaders believes that if he is asked to take it to help his people, he will answer the call — on the condition, of course, that Fatah leaders who see themselves as also suited to the job don't make his work bitter. But Hamdallah survived an assassination attempt two months ago in Gaza. We can assume that he would not want to risk his life for a task that on paper, at least, seems impossible: leading the PA and somehow pleasing the whole world.