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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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May 9, 2018

Ynet

'15 Killed in Syria Strike, Including 8 Iranians'

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said on Wednesday an attack on Iranian military facilities south of Damascus, attributed to Israel, had killed at least 15 people, including eight Iranians. The IDF declined to comment on the reports, which came shortly after it said it had identified "irregular activity" by Iranian forces in Syria and went onto high alert. Israel has repeatedly struck Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, partly to stop any weapons transfers between them.

The New York Times

For PM, Vindication and Risk After Trump's Iran Decision

For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, President Trump's decision on Tuesday to abandon the 2015 Iran agreement was such a vindication that he abruptly cut short a trip to Cyprus to be in Israel when it was announced. Being seen as fiercely taking on Israel's most fearsome adversary while standing shoulder to shoulder with its most critical ally can only help Netanyahu politically as he awaits a likely indictment in a sprawling corruption investigation. Yet Trump's decision also creates a new set of risks for Netanyahu and for Israel. After more than a decade without a major war, the country now faces threats from almost every direction.

See also, [*"Trump Withdraws U.S. From 'One-Sided' Iran Nuclear Deal" \(The New York Times\)*](#)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu Meets Putin in Moscow

Netanyahu stood alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin and Serbian President Alexander Vucic at a parade in Moscow's Red Square commemorating the 73rd anniversary of the Russian victory over Nazi Germany on Wednesday. Putin had personally invited Netanyahu to participate alongside him in the events. Speaking ahead of the trip, Netanyahu said, "In light of what is happening in Syria at this moment, it is necessary to ensure the continued security coordination between the Russian army and the Israel Defense Forces."

Reuters

Gulf Arab Allies Tout Victory Over Iran

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies basked in what they saw as a political victory over Iran, their rival for regional influence, after Trump's announcement. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain swiftly backed the US decision to reimpose sanctions on Tehran, reflecting their concern about Iran's ballistic missile programme and support for militant groups.

Ynet

Kite Terror Continues to Strike Gaza Border Communities

Since Tuesday afternoon several incendiary kites were flown from Gaza into wheat fields across the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council causing wildfires to spread. The main fire broke next to Kibbutz Nahal Oz. In addition, numerous fires also broke out in adjacent kibbutzim. No casualties were reported in any of the fires. Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon announced Sunday during his visit to Gaza border communities that farmers who had been victims of kite terror will be compensated, and assured them the defense establishment will know how to address this new threat.

Reuters

Israel Deports HRW Rep, Says He Pushed Boycott

Israel's interior ministry said on Tuesday it had ordered the representative of Human Rights Watch in the country to leave within 14 days, accusing him of supporting a boycott against Israel. Human Rights Watch said the decision showed that Israel was seeking to suppress criticism of its human rights record, and that it would challenge the decision in court. Omar Shakir, the group's Israel and Palestine Director, holds US citizenship. He has denied the accusation against him. Israel last year initially denied Shakir a work permit, in a move criticized by the United States. It later granted him a one-year work visa.

Jerusalem Post

Gov Report: Israel Ignoring Migrant Rights

Israel might be violating international law and is violating the socioeconomic rights of African migrants who cannot be deported, State Comptroller Joseph Shapira said in his annual report on Tuesday. Although a 2014 report by the comptroller already alerted the government to the issue, he said that those warnings were mostly ignored, which has escalated the crisis confronting the migrants and residents of south Tel Aviv where a majority of the migrants reside. Migrants' health issues, trauma issues from having been tortured or used in the slave trade, and ability to afford basic items such as food have been ignored, Shapira said.

Times of Israel

Palestinians Clash with Border Police

Palestinian rioters threw a pipe bomb at the entrance gate of a Border Police base in the West Bank town of Abu Dis just outside Jerusalem, authorities said Wednesday. Damage was caused to the gate, but no injuries were reported from the explosive. A statement from Border Police said officers were using "nonlethal measures" to disperse the dozens of demonstrators.

Trump Just Put Israel in Immediate Danger

By Michael Koplow, Policy Director, Israel Policy Forum

- The entire world watched as President Donald Trump announced America's exit from the Iran nuclear deal, and his re-imposition of the full range of sanctions on Iran. While the British, French, and German governments made clear their strong preference that the U.S. maintain the JCPOA, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was not shy in his efforts to convince the White House of the wisdom of his opposite position. Netanyahu's unusual English-language prime time presentation on Israeli television last week of the intelligence collected by Israel about Iran's previous efforts to build a nuclear weapon was almost certainly aimed at Trump, either in an effort to convince him to exit the deal, or to provide cover for him to do so.
- But while Netanyahu is as certain as ever in his opposition to the JCPOA, convinced that it is paving Iran's eventual path to a bomb while providing oxygen to the Tehran regime for its continued survival, he may be ignoring an overlooked aspect of the Iran deal's dynamics - and the way in which it has, until now, prevented a full-on Israeli-Iranian war in Syria. The Iran deal met with intense opposition in Israel from the moment of its conception through to its negotiation and implementation in the summer of 2015. Israeli politicians and security officials across the board believed it to be a naïve and ill-conceived idea, and Israeli opposition to the agreement reached an apex with Netanyahu's controversial March 2015 speech before the U.S. Congress.
- The debate currently taking place in Israel over whether it would be better for Israel's security for the deal to remain in place – notwithstanding the original opposition to it – or for the U.S. to reimpose sanctions and risk Iran restarting its nuclear program, while trying to force Iran into better terms, has focused entirely on Iranian nuclear activities. Yet there is another dimension to this calculus that must be taken into consideration and that is ancillary to Iran's nuclear program itself. The largest and most imminent threat to Israel's security right now is not a nuclear Iran, but Iranian activity in Syria.
- In recent months, Israel and Iran for the first time in their history engaged in direct hostilities, rather than Israel responding to attacks from Iranian proxies. In February, Israel shot down an armed Iranian drone that had penetrated Israeli airspace and attacked Iran's drone command center at the T-4 airbase in Syria in response. In early April, Israel again struck the airbase, killing seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps soldiers, and on April 29 missile strikes believed to have been carried out by Israel destroyed weapons depots at two more Iranian-controlled bases in Syria. These strikes have come amidst unswerving statements by the Israeli government that it will continue to enforce its two red lines in Syria, and escalating concern over the possibility of an Iranian response igniting a war on Israel's northern front.
- Yet for all of the warnings about Iranian retaliation in the face of Israel's larger and more public strikes on Iranian positions, Israel is still waiting with bated breath for an Iranian response. While

part of Iran's reticence is undoubtedly a result of Israeli military superiority and successful deterrence, part is also due to the looming nuclear deal deadline. The Iranian government has been crystal clear that it wants the Iran deal to remain in place, for obvious reasons. It has been a lifeline for a faltering Iranian economy and allowed the regime some escape from its diplomatic isolation.

- So long as Iran itself remains in the deal and no evidence exists that it is violating the core provisions that prevent it from pursuing a nuclear weapons program – and the evidence Israel revealed last week pertained to Iran lying about its previous activities but was silent on whether it is doing so now – the Iranian government will be able to continue on its current path. The one thing that could upset this balance is Iran launching a war against Israel, either directly or by activating Hezbollah and its hundreds of thousands of guided missiles pointed at Israeli targets from Lebanon. Should this happen, it will certainly provoke a severe diplomatic response from the U.S. but will also make it eminently more difficult for the E3 powers – Britain, France, and Germany – to argue that Iran is behaving responsibly and that it is worth continuing to engage with the regime.
- Iran does not want to give any of the countries on the other side of the Iran deal an excuse to exit it. The best excuse it could provide would be a war that targets Israeli population centers and infrastructure, decimating the north and sending millions of Israelis into bomb shelters. Israel has been making a consistent case that the Iran deal is bad for its security on the nuclear front, but there is a risk that if the Iran deal collapses entirely, it will create a more immediate and proximate threat for Israel to deal with. The Iran deal is keeping Iran in check from responding to repeated Israeli strikes on its interests in Syria.
- Trump took on Netanyahu's exhortations to rectify what the prime minister views as a grave American mistake that made Israel more vulnerable. But the U.S. president may just have ended up creating a new vulnerability for Israel, by removing a key restraint on Iran's conventional forces. The Iran deal was singularly focused on Iran's nuclear program, but it unleashed a set of other incentives impacting Iran's regional behavior, creating space for Iranian adventurism in some ways and constraining it in others. Netanyahu's concern now will be the downstream effects of America's exit from the deal. He was concerned about Iran's nuclear variable, a threat that will only impact sometime in the future, but that will have to be set aside; Trump's exit could have escalated a far more immediate impact on Israel's security - conventional conflict with Iran in Syria.

What's Behind Hamas' Offer of Ceasefire to Israel?

By Shlomi Eldar, Columnist, AI Monitor

- The Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip recently suggested holding indirect negotiations with Israel regarding a long-term cease-fire — known in Arabic as a “hudna” — Haaretz reported. According to the May 6 report, Hamas used various channels to convey the message on several occasions in recent months. Two days later, Hamas' military wing — the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades — tweeted a denial in Hebrew, saying, “Hamas denies reports of a long-term cease-fire with the Zionist occupation.” Nonetheless, a Hamas source confirmed to AI-Monitor that such a proposal exists, similar to the one it had conveyed at the end of the 2014 Israel-Gaza war codenamed Operation Protective Edge. The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the 2014 proposal was amended in light of the changed circumstances, but declined to elaborate. Hamas has never made a secret of the fact that its leadership would adopt “significant decisions” if Israel were to lift the siege it imposed on Gaza in 2007, the source added.
- The recent failure of the reconciliation talks with the rival Fatah movement and the Palestinian Authority (PA) that runs the West Bank dashed Hamas' hopes of easing the economic crisis in Gaza. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas officially “buried” the reconciliation in a harsh speech he delivered after the failed March 13 assassination attempt against Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and PA intelligence chief Majid Faraj in Gaza. Meanwhile, the economic situation in the Strip continues to decline. Hamas leaders' hopes that Egypt would open its Rafah border crossing with Gaza and thereby ease the effects of the siege are no longer relevant. Egypt had urged the two major Palestinian movements to end their protracted conflict as a condition to opening the crossing. It is currently unwilling to budge from the terms of reconciliation and the demand that PA forces assume control of the Gaza border crossing. This stance by Cairo obviously expresses its distrust in Hamas, and the organization's leadership fully realizes that.
- Paradoxically, Israel remains the only default option — the only lifeline left to Hamas. Only Israel can save Hamas and the Gaza Strip it rules from a total system collapse. According to Haaretz defense affairs analyst Amos Harel, the Hamas leadership is suggesting a significant relaxation of the Israeli siege as part of the hudna deal, as well as Israeli approval of major infrastructure projects in Gaza and probably an exchange of prisoners and return of Israeli soldiers' bodies. “We said so clearly more than once and not in any secret talks that if the siege is lifted from Gaza, we are willing to discuss a cease-fire — all the [Palestinian] factions are willing to discuss it,” the Hamas source told AI-Monitor. He confirmed that Egypt has served as a conduit for messages between the sides involved “because it places supreme importance on finding a worthy humanitarian solution for the residents of Gaza.”

- This is not the first hudna Hamas has offered Israel. The first was conveyed in 1997 by then-King Hussein of Jordan, but Israel did not respond. Former Mossad agency chief Efraim Halevy found out about it (ex post facto) when he went to Jordan that year to handle the fallout from Israel's attempted assassination of Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal. In his book "Man in the Shadows," Halevy writes that he first heard the suggestion from the monarch, who wondered why Israel had failed to respond. In 2005, a European intermediary conveyed another hudna proposal via then-Mossad head Yuval Diskin. The document was headlined, "Offer of a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Israel" and was addressed to Ehud Olmert, Israel's prime minister at the time. Israel did not respond to this deal, the existence of which I revealed in my 2012 book, "Getting to Know Hamas."
- Hamas made an additional attempt, as mentioned, after Operation Protective Edge, but an Israeli defense official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that Israel did not respond either "because there was no reason to conduct a dialogue with a bruised and beaten movement." Israel would rather maintain its position of deterrence, threatening Hamas with a harsh response should it fire missiles at Israeli targets. Israel regards the Hamas fear of an additional round of violence as a guarantee of the cease-fire deal reached in Cairo in 2014, to which Hamas has studiously adhered for almost four years. Hamas offers truce deals whenever it runs into serious trouble. In 1997, the movement felt isolated after being left out of the Palestinian institution-building that appeared a preparation for the establishment of a Palestinian state under the terms of the Oslo peace agreements with Israel. In 2005, the hudna suggestion was born of the fear that Israel would continue its policy of taking out the Hamas leadership after it assassinated Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and his successor, Abdel Aziz Rantisi.
- The Hamas political leadership has been aware for a while that absent a significant easing of the siege, the organization will no longer be able to run the Strip since the popular protests by desperate residents would not only be directed at Israel but would also turn against Hamas. One of the main hudna advocates pushing for understandings with Israel is Hamas leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar, but he too is only suggesting a cease-fire and is unwilling to entertain the idea of disarming Hamas and demilitarizing Gaza. In fact, despite the cease-fire agreed upon after the 2014 Gaza war, Hamas continued to enlarge its army and is trying to rebuild the attack tunnel project. For Hamas, the cease-fire actually means that it is careful not to fire rockets at Israel so that it does not retaliate.
- Hamas will quickly discover that the obstacles that eventually derailed reconciliation with Abbas are also those that will prevent any understandings with Israel. Abbas demanded that Hamas give up its weapons as a condition for any deal, and Israel has posed similar conditions in return for a significant easing of its siege. In his vision of Gaza that he presented to reporters at the beginning of the year, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said a disarmed Hamas was a precondition for rehabilitation of the devastated enclave.

- The latest Hamas truce proposal is born of weakness. The leadership does not hold any significant bargaining chips that would entice Israel to consider the offer seriously. In other words, the long-term cease-fire proposal that Hamas is presenting does not include disarming its military forces. The violent Palestinian demonstrations along the Gaza border with Israel in recent weeks are a major headache for Israeli security forces, but they do not constitute a substantial security threat to Israel. Hamas post-2014 is a weak, rundown organization, and the hudna it is now offering has already been in force for nearly four years. The only question is how long the Protective Edge deterrence and the siege of the Gaza Strip can last.