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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

June 8, 2018

Times of Israel

IDF Gears Up for Massive Protests in Gaza Amid Peak Tensions

The Israeli military is preparing for massive riots along the Gaza security fence on Friday afternoon, potentially on par with violent clashes that took place on May 14, in which tens of thousands of people participated and some 60 Palestinians were killed, a senior army officer said Thursday. The military had initially anticipated that large protests would be held along the border on Tuesday to coincide with the anniversary of the 1967 Six Day War, which Palestinians refer to as the *naksa*, or setback. Instead, Hamas directed Gazans to riot on Friday, the last Friday of Ramadan, which Iran also designates as Quds Day in support for the Palestinians. Earlier this week, the IDF moved reinforcement forces ahead of the expected violence.

Jerusalem Post

Cabinet to Decide on Gaza Recovery, Including U.N. Offer

Barring any last-minute changes, the cabinet is set to decide on Sunday about a program to improve the situation in the Gaza Strip, easing and preventing the humanitarian crisis there. The cabinet is expected to be presented with a number of options, including MK Israel Katz's "artificial island" proposition, but the biggest proposal is a large reconstruction program prepared by UN Envoy to the Middle East Nikolay Mladenov. In the project, factories and infrastructure to aid the recovery of Gaza would be established in the Sinai Peninsula, and perhaps the Strip itself, using funds raised by the UN and donations by the international community. Mladenov has established good relations with top Israeli leadership and enjoys the confidence of senior officials.

AFP

Netanyahu Warns Assad On Iranian Presence In Syria

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday warned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was "no longer immune" from retaliation, while declaring the Iran nuclear deal over after Washington ditched the accord. Noting that Israel had stayed out of Syria's protracted civil war, in which Tehran backs Assad, Netanyahu said increasing Iranian encroachment required "a new calculus". "He is no longer immune, his regime is no longer immune. If he fires at us, as we've just demonstrated, we will destroy his forces," the Israeli leader said. Last month, Israel launched a large-scale attack on purported Iranian targets in Syria following what it said was a barrage of rockets fired by Iran from the country toward its forces in the occupied Golan Heights.

Al-Monitor

PA Worried by Potential Hamas-Israel Truce

The 24-hour military confrontation May 29 between the Israeli army and the Palestinian factions led by Hamas in the Gaza Strip proved the parties' desire to contain the situation and keep it from escalating into an open confrontation. The desire of the parties to refrain from military escalation indicate that the talks that circulated in Arab and Hebrew media circles in May about Egyptian and

Qatari mediation attempts to conclude a long-term truce between Hamas and Israel to ease the siege on Gaza are likely valid. Ben Caspit reported in late May that “Israel has given Egyptian and Qatari mediators the green light to deliver the goods” when it comes to a Hamas-Israel agreement. A PA source said that “the PA is very concerned about the proposals that encourage the secession of Gaza from the West Bank under humanitarian pretexts.” He argued that the PA’s fear is due to the stance of some unspecified Arab countries that support those proposals in order to pave the way for the deal of the century and obtain favors with the United States.

Times of Israel

Palestinians Hurl Chairs, Stones from Al-Aqsa Mosque, Injuring Tourist, Cop

Two Palestinians were arrested on Thursday after a group of men inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount hurled chairs, stones and other objects from the holy site, lightly hurting a tourist and an Israeli police officer. Muslims are marking the holy month of Ramadan, during which political sensitivities are often particularly volatile. The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism and the third-holiest site in Islam. Under an arrangement in place since the 1967 war, non-Muslims are allowed to visit the site but not pray there. Jews are allowed to enter during limited hours, with police officers guiding them through a predetermined route. The Jewish worshipers are banned from praying, displaying religious symbols or raising the Israeli flag on the mount.

Haaretz

Israel to Face 'Insufferable Losses' after it Bans Indonesian Pilgrims in Retaliatory Move

Indonesia, which has no diplomatic relations with Israel, decided to bar Israelis from visiting the country in the aftermath of last month's killings of Palestinians on the border with Gaza. In response, the Foreign Ministry retaliated by barring tourists from Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, from visiting Israel. The Foreign Ministry's decision will deprive the Israeli tourism sector of the business of an estimated 30,000 Indonesians a year, mostly members of Indonesia's Christian minority. In an effort to head off the loss of business from Indonesian tourists, the Israel Incoming Tour Operators Association is asking the Foreign Ministry to reconsider its decision.

Jerusalem Post

Giuliani: PA a 'Renegade Group' of 'Terrorists and Thieves'

The Argentinian national team’s decision to succumb to threats and cancel its exhibition match in Israel Saturday night is “outrageous,” Rudy Giuliani said on Thursday. Giuliani, in Israel for speaking appearances, said: “You should never succumb to fear induced by terrorists.” Giuliani was withering in his criticism of the Palestinian Authority, which pushed hard for the cancellation of the match, calling it a “renegade group; terrorists and thieves.” The PA, he said, “has to show it can get control of terrorism. It has to end. It has to show that it can put together a responsible government that will act on behalf of the people, and not steal them blind.”

Chief Rabbi to be Given Veto for Choice of Conversion Head

In a significant change to the recommendations made earlier this week to reshape the conversion system, the prime minister will now require consent from the chief rabbi before nominating the head of the conversion authority, essentially giving the rabbi the ability to veto the choice. The original draft required the prime minister merely to receive advice from the chief rabbi serving as president of the Supreme Rabbinical Court, and was thus seen as revolutionary since it removed conversion from the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate.

Israel Has to Talk to Hamas. Otherwise, It's War

Israel can fight Hamas but it can't retake Gaza militarily; the human cost would be appalling. The PA can't retake Gaza politically. For the sake of both Gaza and Israel's south, we can no longer bypass Hamas

By Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Peter Lerner, crisis communications consultant

"Is there going to be another war with Gaza?"

That's the question I'm asked, after another nerve-wracking week in Israel. My initial answer is, "I hope not." But after 25 years in the IDF, I know that hope is not a method.

History has taught us that there can be no decisive victory in conflicts like this. Asymmetrical warfare waged in civilian arenas extract a huge human cost, and bloodshed won't change the minds of people with entrenched opposing ideologies.

However, what is clear with Hamas is that while the organization carries the banner of Holy Jihad, it still wishes to maintain its control over the Gaza Strip and to seek power beyond, into the West Bank. Every attempt, by persuasion or force, to make Hamas relinquish its powers and responsibilities in favor of the PLO-ruled Palestinian Authority has failed.

Hamas has ruled Gaza for 12 years and has utterly failed the people of Gaza. The territory's problems, both internal and external, have multiplied. Gaza under Hamas has a huge energy crisis. Water quality is at a record low, with 97% of the coastal aquifer water unfit for human consumption. Cash flow is at an all-time low, illustrated by the steep decline in truck loads going into Gaza. All of these are a huge burden on the leadership, and on the street - a pressure cooker waiting to explode.

The nature of Gaza's problems historically suggest that all problems eventually spill over into Israel.

Over the last two months particularly human complexities have been spilling over into Israel. The Gaza Return March, that began as a grassroots movement, was hijacked by Hamas - who seized the opportunity to channel the internal frustrations away from their failures.

Israel was faced with waves of rioters, violence - real security challenges. Israel's forceful response has amassed over 100 dead Palestinians, many of them terrorists, some of them innocents including medics, journalists and youngsters.

These violent events caused a wave of global criticism of Israel, and to a lesser extent, the Palestinians. The most frequent statement heard has been calls for restraint from all parties.

What was absent from the majority of the statements by the UN Security Council members was one word: Hamas. The U.S., Europe and of course Israel mentioned, or blamed, Hamas. The other world powers at the table tiptoed around Gaza's ruling power as if the Palestinian Ambassador at the table, Riyad Mansour, actually represents that power. He doesn't.

Hamas controls Gaza. As such, Israel and the world need to engage Hamas, not ignore them.

Back in 2007, I participated in discussions about how Israel should relate to Hamas. Then, the government declared that Hamas-controlled Gaza was a "hostile entity." The main idea was not to

reward its rocket terrorism with a beneficial relationship; and, at the same time, to proactively create favorable conditions to build a relationship with Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank - partly by locking Hamas out.

Israel's relationship with Abbas has been fruitful. It has led to the distinction between three political territories: Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Israel's capacity to maintain security in the West Bank, and thwart Hamas' attempts to reestablish terror infrastructure with suicide bombers and abductions, has rested on its security coordination with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The same Abbas, 83 years old, has been in and out of hospital recently, sparking repeated premature rumors about his death.

Abbas has no clear successor, and his policy of combatting Hamas in the West Bank is not guaranteed once he's out of the game. The possibility of chaos is a real risk. The question mark around Abbas' successor is key to knowing how Israel will deal with the West Bank in the near future.

In any case, I suggest, based on Israel's interests, we must deal with the two political territories separately. The reality for the foreseeable future is that the West Bank is led by Fatah and Gaza is run by Hamas. All of the attempts to push Fatah to retake Gaza have failed - and eventually blown up on our doorstep. To embrace the reality on the ground is an Israeli national security interest, not least for Israelis living within reach of the mortars, rockets, incendiary kites and tunnels.

With even more unpredictability in the foreseeable future, now is the time to create a new dynamic - not of escalation but a dynamic of endurance. Hamas have proven time and time again that they can control and prevent rocket fire. That self-control must be bolstered by the international community, regional powers and western powers taking concrete steps to give Gaza hope, security and a better future.

Every attempt at a political option to stabilize Gaza above the heads of Hamas, or bypassing them, have failed. Hamas, too, are watching Abbas' health, and considering how to take advantage of expected future unrest. That makes the timing of engaging with them more critical.

Hamas needs to be engaged on two levels. One level is directly, through professional technocratic Israeli components, to alleviate the most immediately pressing humanitarian and infrastructure issues. The other level is contact on the diplomatic level - at first through mediators - in order to create the prospect of a long-term cessation of hostilities.

Egypt is a key factor to any process. The Gaza Strip has only one place to expand, and that is towards the Sinai peninsula. It's enough to look at night-time aerial satellite photographs to see how the peninsula is dark and under-developed.

Israel lacks vision regarding Gaza. All of the options appear to be military force, but even those have been tried and exhausted. The human cost of Israel retaking Gaza from Hamas by military means would be heavy, and would have no guarantee of success in terms of defeating the idea of Hamas - not to mention the possibility of creating a vacuum that could well be filled by a more radical and violent organization.

Senior Israeli military officials made statements this week that made clear the solution to Gaza isn't a military one, but rather a political and diplomatic one. The three wars fought against Hamas haven't changed the strategic reality, or the situation of a million Israelis living in southern Israel who, only this week, faced over 100 incoming rockets and mortars.

The sooner Israel embraces ideas like an offshore artificial island, or a Cypriot port to Gaza, and a comprehensive regional and international road map to alleviate the energy, water and unemployment challenges Gaza under Hamas face the better. Addressing these issues could generate a new type of dialogue to managing the conflict with Hamas.

As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu headed to Europe to meet with Merkel, Macron and May, he announced that he had two issues to talk to them about: Iran and Iran. It would've been better if he had broadened the linkage issue: not only Iran's nuclear aspirations, and Iran's regional agitator status, but also Iran's involvement in destabilizing Gaza, with its \$80 million funding spout to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

In engaging with Hamas, it would be essential to bring Israeli popular support onside. The government would have to show good reasons for any change to its existing hardline policy. One step would be for Hamas to offer a humanitarian confidence-building measure such as the return of Avera Mengisto and Hisham al-Sayed, Israeli civilians held under duress by Hamas.

But even without that, Israelis have lived under rocket and mortar fire for 17 years from Hamas. That stagnant reality calls for something new and positive to be interjected into the relationship with our neighbors.

The military option is always there. But it's time for something else, for the people of Gaza and for southern Israel alike.

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Israel and Saudi Arabia: from Foes to Potential Friends

The need to eradicate radical elements and stabilize the Middle East has brought Riyadh and Jerusalem closer; but normalization between the two countries carries a price, and Israel must do whatever it can to avoid missing this unique window of opportunity.

By Dr. Michal Yaari, an expert on Saudi foreign policy

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has had enough of the Palestinian leadership. "In the past 40 years, the Palestinian leadership has repeatedly missed opportunities and rejected all proposals," he said during a meeting with several leaders of Jewish organizations in late March. "It's time the Palestinians accept the proposals... or shut up and stop complaining."

This isn't the first time Saudi officials have harshly criticized the Palestinian leadership for consistently missing historic opportunities to solve the conflict, but up until now they have kept it behind closed doors.

The ties between Riyadh and Jerusalem are perceived by some of the Saudi public as a betrayal of the Palestinian interest and serve as a weapon in the hands of the regime's opponents. The royal

family in Riyadh is required, therefore, to prove that it isn't "selling" out the Palestinian struggle to advance a normalization with Israel.

The Palestinian issue has never been a top priority in Saudi Arabia, but it has served and still serves as a restraining and limiting factor in the Saudi regime's attitude towards Israel.

Over the years, there have been historical crossroads in which shared interests were formed between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but they failed to develop into a dramatic change in the status of the relations due to the Saudi regime's fear of profound criticism in the Arab world that would sabotage its public image and religious status as the protector of Islam's holy sites.

Key player in changing regional balance of power

Recently, however, as the Iranian enemy and the Islamic State (ISIS) grew stronger, Israel turned from an enemy into a potential ally in the Saudis' eyes. Not only do the two countries share an identical perception as to the need to eradicate radical elements and stabilize the Middle East, but Israel is the only country in the world with the intentions and military ability to act against the joint enemies.

Over the years, Saudi Arabia has largely relied on its strategic alliance with the United States, but the American administration's willingness to get involved in the Middle East's bloody conflicts has dropped in recent years, and Saudi Arabia has basically been left without any support for its attempts to efficiently curb the Iranian influence. Under these circumstances, Israel has become a key player in changing the regional balance of power.

In addition to its intelligence and strategic abilities, Saudi Arabia sees Israel as an economic role model. As the Saudi economy undergoes a real revolution from an economy relying on oil to a productive and advanced economy, the Israeli knowledge and technology are becoming more and more attractive.

The potential hidden in Israeli-Saudi normalization is huge. While the relations aren't symmetrical on the strategic level, in light of Israel's clear military advantage, this does not lessen their importance. Saudi Arabia's strategic location and seniority in the Arab world could help Israel improve the fighting against Iran and deepen its security cooperation with other Arab countries. At the same time, Israel is concerned about the advanced arms deals between Saudi Arabia and the US and the possibility of a Saudi nuclear weapon being developed in response to an Iranian nuclear weapon.

Saudi pressure on PA

On the diplomatic level, Israeli-Saudi cooperation could help moderate and soften explosive events, like Temple Mount riots. In addition, it would pave the way to advance economic, energy and agricultural projects between Israel and Arab states, which hardly exist in the current reality.

The Saudi palace is already pressuring the Palestinian Authority to moderate its demands from Israel. Unlike in the past, Saudi Arabia has withdrawn its demand for a just solution to the Palestinian problem and is now talking about a logical solution. The Saudis, for example, no longer support the Palestinian demand for a right of return; rather, they are pursuing a solution that Israel would find acceptable too.

Furthermore, Riyadh isn't stipulating that the Israeli-Arab conflict must be solved before Saudi Arabia's relations with Israel are normalized, but is settling for a breakthrough in the negotiations. As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, if Israel makes gestures that convey to the Arab world that "there's something to talk about," like freezing settlement construction and lifting the siege on Gaza (even

partially), it would be possible to reward Israel by increasing the Saudi gestures, in addition to the ones that have been made so far.

On the economic level, if the regime in Riyadh removes the economic barriers and allows the integration of Israeli components and workforce into the Saudi economy, it would have a huge contribution to the Israeli economy, especially if other Arab countries open their gates to Israeli products.

Saudi Arabia and Israel are interested in normalizing their relations. That's indisputable. But despite the mutual desire, there is still a long and winding road to normalization. In the current reality, Saudi Arabia could perhaps drag the Palestinian leadership to the negotiating table, but it can't force the Palestinians to sign a document waiving its historical demands from Israel. Israel, for its part, isn't showing any willingness to comply with the Saudis' basic demands either. In the current coalition composition, Israeli gestures towards the Palestinians are perceived as a deviation from the government's ideological stand. Such gestures, therefore, are nowhere on the horizon.

The way things look now, the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are unable to bridge the differences of opinion between them, despite American and Western pressures, which makes the chances of a Saudi-Israeli normalization unclear. Despite the recent dramatic change in the Saudi discourse concerning Israel, it's unlikely that the conditions have matured for the Saudi leadership to jump over the Palestinian hurdle on its way to normalization with the Zionist enemy.

Israel should do whatever it can to avoid missing the unique window of opportunity that has been opened in its relations with Saudi Arabia. Opportunities are a deluding and passing thing in the Middle Eastern arena, and the similar interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia could fade away if the current circumstances change.

The Israeli government's most important mission is to restore its credibility in the Saudi regime's eyes. Normalization with Saudi Arabia won't be given for free. It has a price. The question is whether Israel is willing to pay that price. The worst thing an Israeli prime minister could do is give the Saudis the feeling that he is willing to make concessions, and then back out of his statement. Saudi Arabia has experienced many disappointments with the Israeli leadership. It mustn't happen again.

Dr. Michal Yaari is an expert on Saudi foreign policy at Tel Aviv University and the Open University and a think tank member at Mitvim—The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies .

This article is based on a research paper about Israel-Saudi relations written as part of the Mitvim Institute's project on "Israel's relations with Arab states: The unfulfilled potential."