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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, June 1*

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# News Excerpts

June 1, 2018

## Ha'aretz

### **IDF Officer: Time Is Now for Deal With Hamas**

The Israel Defense Forces believes that now is the time to reach an agreement with Hamas to improve life for Gazans and prevent further rounds of fighting, a senior officer in the IDF's Southern Command said Thursday. "In the past four years since Operation Protective Edge, this is the closest we've come to a war in Gaza. But the reason is the situation and the distress in Gaza rather than Hamas' military ambitions. In this situation, there's an opportunity for various agreements in Gaza," the officer said.

## Times of Israel

### **Israel in Talks with Russia on Iran Pullout from Border**

Israel is holding "advanced talks" with Russia on a potential withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria, Hadashot TV news reported Thursday. Diplomatic sources in Jerusalem said the talks with Russia — conducted with US backing — were heading in the right direction, hours after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed the situation in Syria in a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

## Ynet

### **Israel to Invest in Neglected Palestinian Areas in Jerusalem**

The Israeli government on Thursday unveiled what it billed as a groundbreaking program to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in long-neglected Palestinian neighborhoods of east Jerusalem. The "Leading Change" program aims to reduce the huge social gaps between the Palestinian neighborhoods and the overwhelmingly Jewish western part of the city. Palestinian neighborhoods suffer from poor infrastructure, neglect and subpar public services, and nearly 80 percent of the city's Palestinian families live in poverty. The program will invest \$560 million in education, infrastructure and helping Palestinian women enter the workforce.

## Associated Press

### **Trump Weighs Putting Friedman in Charge of Consulate**

Trump is considering giving US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman more authority over the US outpost that handles Palestinian affairs, five US officials said, a shift that could further dampen Palestinian hopes for an independent state. Any move to downgrade the autonomy of the US Consulate General in Jerusalem — responsible for relations with the Palestinians — could have potent symbolic resonance, suggesting American recognition of Israeli control over East Jerusalem and the West Bank. And while the change might be technical and bureaucratic, it could have potentially significant policy implications.

Associated Press

## **US Vows UNSC Veto of Kuwait Proposal**

The U.S. is vowing to veto an Arab-backed resolution that asks the U.N. chief to propose measures to ensure “international protection” for Palestinian civilians. A vote on the measure — which comes after weeks of urgent discussions but no agreement on any action about escalating violence in Gaza — was at one point expected Thursday evening. Then diplomats said it would be delayed at least until Friday, but it was unclear late Thursday whether an evening vote might still happen. The Kuwait-sponsored draft resolution “deplores” and demands a halt to “the use of any excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate force” by the Israeli military, while it also “deplores the firing of rockets from the Gaza Strip at Israeli civilian areas.” U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley lambasted the proposal for discussing “excessive” Israeli force while making no mention of Hamas, the Islamic militant group that rules Gaza.

AFP

## **EU Blasts New West Bank Settlement Homes**

The European Union on Thursday urged Israel to reconsider its decision to build 2,000 new settlement homes and to demolish a Palestinian Bedouin village in the West Bank, saying it undermines “prospects for a lasting peace.” A statement from the EU denounced the intended destruction of the Khan Al-Ahmar village, which comes at the same time as the construction of more settlement homes. “Building new settlements for Israelis while demolishing Palestinian homes in the same area will only further entrench a one-state reality of unequal rights, perpetual occupation, and conflict,” the statement said.

Ha’aretz

## **Abbas Refused to Meet Pelosi-Led Democratic Delegation**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas refused to meet with a delegation of Democratic members of the US House of Representatives that visited Israel two months ago, in protest of the Trump administration’s policies toward Israel. Abbas’ refusal to meet the delegation caught its members by surprise, because many of them are constant critics of the Trump administration, and they were hoping to hear the Palestinian point of view about Trump’s policies while visiting the region. The delegation, led by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, visited Israel and Jordan in late March.

Fast Company

## **The West Bank Now Has 3G—Can it Boost the Tech Sector?**

It’s the bitter and the sweet of 3G coming to Palestine: There’s so much potential—but old constraints remain. Maher Saleh, who studied business in the United Kingdom, faces barriers that no amount of internet can overcome. He can’t easily extend beyond the West Bank, as his workers need coveted permits from the military to enter Jerusalem and beyond. Periodic flying checkpoints and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers create a level of instability that apps can’t compute.

## Israel and Hamas: Negotiating With Rockets and Bombs

By Neri Zilber, Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

- Israeli villages bordering the Gaza Strip were awakened early Tuesday morning to a familiar sound: “Code Red” incoming rocket sirens. This first opening salvo fired by Gaza-based militants was just the start of a 24 hours that, when the dust settled, marked the largest military escalation in and around Gaza since the 2014 war. In contrast to the bloody border marches inside Gaza that peaked two weeks ago, Tuesday’s events were a decidedly two-way affair. As in years past, Israeli civilians were ordered to remain close to their bomb shelters while barrage after barrage of mortars and rockets—more than 100 projectiles in all—thundered down throughout the day and into the small hours of the night.
- Israel’s Iron Dome rocket defense system was kept busy, with interceptor missiles shooting into the clear blue sky in search of their prey. The entire course of the day’s events would have looked different had the system not been updated to handle these shorter-range mortars, so deadly in Gaza’s immediate environs in the later stages of the last war. “It wasn’t clear to anyone that Iron Dome could handle these mortars,” Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman, admitted to The Daily Beast. Going the other way, Israeli jets pounded military sites belonging to both Hamas, the Islamist group that rules Gaza, as well as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a smaller Palestinian militant group allied with Iran and responsible for the initial mortar salvo.
- All told, over 60 targets were struck inside Gaza in two separate waves, including a massive cross-border attack tunnel from Gaza into Israel that passed underneath Egypt, and what the IDF claimed were other high-value military assets. For all the fusillades flying back and forth over the Gazan frontier, however, only a few Israelis were wounded by shrapnel and no Palestinians were reported injured or killed. This was, many on both sides admitted, nothing short of remarkable: a reflection of the Iron Dome’s improved capabilities, the early evacuation (as is customary) by Palestinian militants of their positions, and the extremely precise nature—what one veteran Israeli military columnist called “the tweezers”—of the IDF’s response.
- Since the 50-day war four years ago, the axiom governing Israel-Gaza relations, repeated ad nauseam even in the middle of yesterday’s violence, was that neither side really wants a war. And yet here they both were, engaged in a live-fire exchange that ended, if reports are to be believed, only through behind-the-scenes Egyptian mediation. While the quiet has held since early Wednesday morning, tensions remain high, and both sides are at least rhetorically not backing down. “Hamas got hit very hard last night and he knows it,” one senior IDF official responsible for Gaza told The Daily Beast. “He will have to calculate his next steps very carefully...and the IDF is prepared for any scenario.”

- For their part, the Gaza-based militant factions issued a joint statement, declaring their “readiness to stop by force any aggression or stupid act by the enemy. We won’t sit with arms folded given the hooliganism of the Zionist occupation and we won’t stay silent given its crimes.” These kinds of threats are, of course, to be expected. Yet the politics behind Tuesday’s exchange of fire is what will dictate where things go from here.
- The proximate cause for Tuesday’s escalation occurred earlier in the week, when Islamic Jihad militants fired toward an IDF patrol on the other side of the border. Israel responded with tank fire against two of the group’s positions, killing three of their fighters. This, in and of itself, wasn’t all that new or out of the ordinary for Gaza. Islamic Jihad had already vowed revenge late last year when 10 of its people were killed inside a cross-border attack tunnel blown up by the IDF. And of course, no similar escalation took place over the last two months when over 100 Palestinians, including many militants, were killed on the Gaza border fence during the various “marches of return.” But this, in truth, brings us closer to the real reason for the recent hostilities.
- Since May 14, when the border marches peaked along with the death toll inside Gaza, the demonstrations have ebbed. Almost at the same time (in fact a day later), reports increased of more traditional offensive actions by Gazan militant groups against Israel over the last two weeks: heavy-caliber machine-gun fire on border communities, sophisticated improvised explosive devices on the fence, and successful cross-border infiltrations. Yesterday’s events “weren’t that big of a surprise, we saw it coming,” Conricus said. What was arguably surprising for many is that Hamas let it happen.
- For all those arrayed on the Israeli side of the Gaza border during the weeks-long marches—IDF, journalists, and civilians alike—it’s difficult to overstate just how low the rocket and mortar threats were perceived to be. Hamas kept a tight leash on its own personnel as well as the other militant groups; not one projectile was fired, showing that Hamas’s writ over Gaza, as in years past, was nearly complete. With the marches reaching their bloody denouement, however, Hamas had difficulty explaining to its own public what precisely had been gained for all those killed and the thousands maimed and injured.
- True, world attention had, for a time, focused on Gaza, with Israel suffering some international opprobrium and a diplomatic crisis with Turkey. And Egypt had re-opened its long-shuttered border crossing with Gaza for the month of Ramadan. Also true, Israel quickly repaired damage to its own border crossing with the territory, allowing the resumption of gas and fuel supplies, humanitarian aid, and other goods. Israel even expedited the medical evacuation of several dozen wounded to Jordan. But taken as a whole, all this fell well short of the vaunted “breaking of the siege” that Hamas, and the people of Gaza, both demanded and required.
- The admission by one senior Hamas leader that 50 of the group’s men were among those killed during the May 14 protests wasn’t so much done out of pride, but due to pressure: the television interviewer questioned him on why the group was letting so many Gazan civilians march into likely harm, if not death. According to Ohad Hemo, the Palestinian affairs correspondent for

Israel's Channel Two, a demonstration by the families of those wounded took place last week in front of Gaza City's main hospital. Hamas's internal security force, according to Hemo's report, dispersed the protest. Hamas was, and remains, in the same strategic cul de sac it was prior to the last two months, with one remaining lifeline: indirect negotiations with Israel mediated by Egypt, Qatar, and possibly the U.S. for a longer-term truce, or hudna.

- The thinking behind this arrangement is that a prolonged period of calm will relieve the humanitarian, economic and social pressure from Gaza, which at this point, as the IDF repeatedly tells the Israeli government, is on the verge of exploding. If reports are to be believed, Israel is demanding from Hamas and the other militant groups not just non-belligerence but a halt to their force buildup, primarily attack tunnels and rockets, in addition to the return of two Israeli civilians and the remains of two IDF soldiers held ransom by Hamas. (The civilians, thought to suffer from mental health issues, independently crossed into Gaza.)
- It's unclear what the state of these negotiations is at present. Yet it was indicative that in the midst of the barrages on his civilian population yesterday, and despite calls by some in his cabinet for a "full reconquest" of Gaza, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu showed restraint. The IDF for much of the day didn't immediately respond, let alone try to pre-empt, the firing of mortars and rockets. Moreover, Netanyahu gathered his security chiefs and defense minister in the evening—not his entire security cabinet. "When they test us, they pay immediately. And if they continue testing us, they will pay dearly," Netanyahu vowed Wednesday, yet his actions showed both a desire to keep the crisis contained and a preference for a political solution to Gaza's many problems, both immediate and long-term.
- The problem is that since the Israeli government isn't demanding full demilitarization (from Hamas) for full reconstruction (for Gaza), as it has in the past, then in all likelihood the easing measures it's offering fall short of both Hamas's demands and expectations. Hence the reminder yesterday by Hamas that it retains, however improbably, a military option. In the Middle East, negotiations are often conducted not around a table, but via rocket.

## Israel Lets Jews Protest, But Not Palestinians

By Mairav Zonszein, Freelance Journalist

- The images and video of Israeli soldiers shooting live ammunition into masses of mostly unarmed Palestinians on the other side of the Gaza border fence over the past several weeks horrified observers around the world. Starting March 30, Israeli troops suppressing protests in Gaza killed 118 people and wounded more than 13,000, including 1,136 children. The deaths and injuries, Israel Defense Forces international spokesman Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus lamented recently, have “done us a tremendous disservice, unfortunately, and it has been very difficult to tell our story.” Now Israel’s government is moving to make sure there are no more videos of mass shootings in the future — not by ordering a stop to the shootings, but by considering a law that would ban anyone from filming or photographing any military operations “with the intention of undermining the spirit of IDF soldiers and Israel’s residents.”
- Even if that bill never becomes law, the fact that the Knesset is contemplating it underscores the current state of freedoms in Israel: Maintaining its decades-long occupation depends on systematic suppression of dissent on both sides of the boundary fences. Just as Israel exercises varying levels of control between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, it also permits varying levels of dissent and criticism depending on who you are, what you are protesting and where.
- Within Israel’s 1948 borders, for the most part, when Jewish citizens protest, it’s tolerated; when Palestinian citizens protest, it’s “disturbing the peace” or worse. Days after the events in Gaza, for instance, Israeli police violently arrested 21 protesters — most of them Palestinian citizens — as they demonstrated in the northern Israeli city of Haifa against the mass shootings. Video, images and testimonies from the protest show police using barricades to herd people into one spot and then shoving them, punching them and rounding them up. Seven of those arrested had to be hospitalized after being beaten by police, reportedly most while in custody . Jafar Farah, a prominent civil-society activist and director of an organization that promotes equal rights for Palestinian citizens, had his knee broken by an officer at the police station. One detainee testified that an officer called him a “terrorist” and told him: “Go to Gaza. This is a Jewish state.” The arrestees, two of whom were Jewish, were all released by a district judge after spending more than 48 hours in detention. This was effectively extrajudicial punishment for exercising their freedom to protest.
- Meanwhile, several hundred Israelis, predominantly Jews, had gathered in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv a couple of days earlier, also to protest Israeli military tactics in Gaza. Not a single arrest was made, and no police brutality was reported. They even blocked roads, but police did not interfere. There has always been police violence against Palestinian demonstrations in Israel. The most notorious came when protests nationwide in October 2000 (some of which turned into rioting) ended with an incident in which police killed 12 Palestinian citizens and one Gaza

resident. An Israeli commission investigated and found there was no justification for live fire, but not a single officer was indicted. It also censured the government for systematic discrimination against Palestinian citizens. But Fady Khoury, a lawyer with the rights group Adalah who recently represented the detainees in Haifa, told me that the beatings in the station were extreme.

- While Farah was in the hospital, Knesset member Ayman Odeh, who heads the Joint List (a political alliance comprising Israel's Arab parties and one Arab-Jewish party) was barred from visiting him. Israel Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman tweeted at the time: "Every day that Ayman Odeh and his partners are roaming free and cursing police is a failure of law enforcement. These terrorists belong in jail, not in the Knesset. It's time they paid a price for their actions." Such nonchalant incitement against Palestinian members of parliament mirrors the government's attitude toward the civil rights of Palestinian citizens. In the occupied West Bank, it is essentially illegal for Palestinians to protest. Under a military order issued shortly after Israeli forces occupied the area during the 1967 Six-Day War, any protest, march or even vigil of 10 or more Palestinians requires a military permit — which, like most other permits for Palestinians, is rarely issued. Most nonviolent resistance by Palestinians is quashed; the leaders of their movements shot at (sometimes killed), jailed and their families harassed. Jewish Israeli activists who have joined this struggle over the years have also been arrested.
- In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Israeli security forces typically use what they categorize as "nonlethal" weapons (primarily tear gas and rubber bullets, which, when shot at the upper body, sometimes prove lethal) to quell protests. But in Gaza, lately they have used live bullets, shot in very high numbers at men, women, children, journalists and paramedics. Israeli officials and their supporters just utter the magic word "Hamas" to justify the mass shooting of thousands of people who are attempting to call attention to the fact they live in an open-air prison. (Israel's High Court of Justice has sided with the military, sanctioning the use of live ammunition because the IDF says it acts only in self-defense.) Hamas's attempt to piggyback off the recent Great Return March, as its organizers — who demanded nonviolent resistance — called it, does not absolve Israel of its responsibility to treat protesters fairly. Nor does the fact that dozens out of tens of thousands of demonstrators were armed (and many of them only with wire cutters).
- Israel also tries to bully foreign nationals who document and monitor its human rights record. Human Rights Watch's director for the Palestinian territories, Omar Shakir, is fighting in court to stay in the country, in the first legal challenge to Israel's 2017 amendment barring entry to those who call for boycotts. In recent weeks, Israel has also denied entry to four leading American civil rights activists, among them the director of the Center for Constitutional Rights and a Columbia University professor. Whether in Gaza or Haifa, in Bethlehem or at Ben Gurion International Airport, the message Israel is sending is the same: It can do whatever it wants, and people need to shut up about it.
- So far the tactic is mostly succeeding in undermining dissent. According to an Israel Democracy Institute Peace Index poll from April, 83 percent of Jewish Israelis found the military's open-fire

policy in Gaza “appropriate.” (Just hours after 60 Palestinians were killed on May 14, thousands of Israelis went out into the streets of Tel Aviv — but they were there to celebrate Eurovision winner Netta Barzilai, not to protest the violence.) As a longtime activist and journalist in Israel, including for the grass-roots news and commentary site +972 Magazine, I have been arrested for documenting and trying to prevent human rights violations in the West Bank. I have reported for years on how Israel silences dissent, even among its Jewish citizens, and how it is moving to outlaw human rights organizations it deems traitors. With time, these artificial divisions between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” protest will probably collapse. The question is, what will it take for other privileged Jewish Israelis to wake up?

- In a statement responding to the incidents in Haifa, the police said that they “will continue to allow the public to exercise the right to protest and freedom of expression, but will prevent any attempt to disrupt public order and endanger public peace and security.” But who is going to stop Israel from committing its own disruptions of the public order and endangering public peace and security?