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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, June 11*

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# News Excerpts

June 11, 2018

Times of Israel

## **No Decision to Ease Gaza Woes After Cabinet Meets**

Israeli ministers met for over three hours to discuss a worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza Sunday, but failed to agree on any concrete steps to ease dire conditions in the Strip. Ministers were presented with a series of plans previously proposed by defense officials who see easing conditions -- bringing clean water, electricity and other basic needs -- as a key to stability. Ahead of the meeting, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman and Education Minister Naftali Bennett expressed reservations, so long as the territory is ruled by Hamas and before a deal to return Israeli captives, including the remains of two soldiers.

Ha'aretz

## **US and Palestinian Envoys Trade Barbs in Haaretz**

Three weeks ago, the top Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, published an article in Haaretz slamming the Trump administration for its Jerusalem decision and for its broader Middle East policy. On Sunday, Trump's special envoy, Jason Greenblatt, responded in his own article, in which he accused Erekat of letting down the Palestinian people. On Monday, Erekat provided an immediate response to Greenblatt's rebuttal in which he dismisses an upcoming US peace plan as "dictating illegal policies and further violations of international law," and the US envoys as "spokespeople for the Israeli occupation." Greenblatt hit back, accusing the Palestinian Authority of stifling other voices within Palestinian society who disagree with Erekat.

Times of Israel

## **Poll Shows Deep Divisions Between Israeli and US Jews**

An opinion poll published Sunday by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) shows deep divisions between Israeli and American Jews, particularly in relation to Trump. The survey showed 77 percent of Israeli Jews approved of the president's handling of US-Israel relations, while only 34 percent of American Jews did. Concerning the relocation of the US embassy to the Jerusalem, 85% of Israeli Jews approved, compared to just 46% of US Jews.

Associated Press

## **Israel Says it Destroys Land-to-Sea Hamas Tunnel**

Israel destroyed a tunnel dug by Hamas leading from Gaza into the Mediterranean Sea intended for carrying out attacks, the IDF said Sunday. It said that last week aircraft struck a position belonging to Hamas' naval forces in northern Gaza that incapacitated its first-of-a-kind tunnel to the sea. He said it was designed to allow divers to slip out of Gaza and attack Israeli targets. The tunnel was dug about 3 kilometers south of the border with Israel and stretched dozens of meters into the sea.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Admits: Land Given to Settlers Without Proper Checks**

Israeli government lawyers admitted Sunday that a Justice Ministry unit failed to investigate significant issues before issuing a title deed for East Jerusalem land to a Jewish trust — a move that would mean the eviction of the local Palestinians. The case involves 1.4 acres of land in the Silwan neighborhood where about 700 Palestinians live. The deed was issued to a trust which encourages Jews to move to predominantly Palestinian neighborhoods. At the High Court of Justice, the government acknowledged that it had not investigated the nature of the trust, the Ottoman-era law that applies in the case, or the condition of the buildings now on the land before issuing the title deed in 2002. The government's lawyers have urged the court to dismiss the petition challenging the eviction, citing technical grounds.

Ma'ariv

## **Ten Fires in Gaza Perimeter in Less than an Hour**

Ten fires broke out on Sunday in the Gaza periphery communities over the course of an hour that were caused by incendiary kites. Fire-fighting teams worked for hours to gain control of the fires. The Karmeit Katif community in the Lachish Regional Council had to be evacuated because of a fire. So far, the government has not formulated a plan for coping with the kite terrorism. Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan (Likud) called last week to carry out targeted killings of people who flew them. On Saturday, the IDF attacked explosive balloon launchers as a warning to the terrorists in Gaza.

Ha'aretz

## **Israeli Army Launches Surprise Drill Near Syria Border**

The Israeli army launched a surprise drill in the Golan Heights on Sunday, scheduled to take place over several days. Last week, the Israel Air Force conducted a four-day drill in bases across Israel. Tensions have been high on the Golan Heights in the wake of several strikes in Syria attributed to Israel, as well as a diplomatic effort spearheaded by Prime Minister Netanyahu to expel Iranian forces from Syria. Last week, Netanyahu embarked on a four-day European tour which was aimed, in his own words, to "bring about an international agreement" about an exit of Iranian forces from Syria.

AFP

## **Gulf Offers \$2.5 Billion to Bail Out Jordan**

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have offered \$2.5 billion in aid for Jordan to ease its economic crisis following a wave of anti-austerity protests, the Saudi state media announced early Monday. The package, announced at a summit of the four nations in the holy city of Mecca, will include a deposit in the Jordanian central bank, World Bank guarantees, budgetary support over five years and financing for development projects, SPA said. Mass protests against price rises and a proposed tax hike have rocked Jordan in recent days as the government pushes austerity measures to slash the country's debt in the face of an economic crisis.

## Interview of Amos Yadlin

By Eyal Levy, Ma'ariv

- When experts at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) were in the process of preparing a strategic forecast for 2018 last year, they cited the possibilities of a military conflagration in the north with the Iranians and in the south with Hamas. Regrettably, there hasn't been a "happy end" here.
- "To a certain extent, there's a paradox here," said Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin, the director of the INSS. "Israel, in its seventy-year existence, is currently at one of its strongest points. It has a military advantage. It has an alliance unlike any before with the White House. It has good relations with the other world powers, two stable peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and informal relations with the Sunni Arab world. A firm geopolitical strategic status. On the other hand, it hasn't solved its central security problems: the threat from Iran, a regional power that calls for our destruction, and the bleeding conflict with the Palestinians. We pointed to the fact that the chances of conflict on those fronts is higher than it was in previous years, despite our strength. We saw that with the victory in the civil war in Syria, Iran has begun to allocate budgets and troops to building advanced military capabilities against us. That resoluteness has encountered an Israeli resoluteness that does not intend to let that happen. When you see strategic trends act against one another, that is a potential clash."
- Yadlin has a long security record. As a combat pilot he amassed more than 4,200 flight hours, carried out some 250 operational sorties over enemy territory, commanded elite flight squadrons and served in a number of senior capacities in the Israel Air Force. His last position in the army was director of the IDF Intelligence Branch. The Second Lebanon War, the operation in which the Syrian nuclear reactor was bombed and Operation Cast Lead were all prosecuted while he was the director of the IDF Intelligence Branch. He was party to the intensive discussions about stopping the Iranian nuclear program. "I don't intend to discuss the details of the discussions, but an attack was one of the options that were examined," said Maj. Gen. (res.) Yadlin. "The strategic objective, the paramount [objective], was stopping Iran from going nuclear. Had that been possible either by means of a better agreement than the one that was reached or by means of changing the Iranians' calculations, such as painful sanctions that prove that there is a price to [acquiring] a nuclear bomb, or by means of regime change over there—that would have been better. There are a lot of strategies that should be adopted before attacking. Israel prepared itself for the military option. The army and the security branches presented a plan that allowed a [military] course of action but, to the best of my knowledge, that issue never was put to a cabinet discussion."
- **Q: How is an assessment about the likelihood of war prepared?** "When you stand at the head of an intelligence organization, there are questions that you can answer with a high degree of certainty. Questions that pertain to troop numbers and the performance of weapons systems:

what is the missile's range, what is the weight of the explosives it carries, and how many centrifuges are spinning at a specific site in Iran. If you have good sources you can present an accurate assessment to the political echelon—what's known as a 'capabilities assessment.' There is another issue in intelligence that's known as an 'intentions assessment.' What will a future leader decide to do in a certain situation. Here you need to be more cautious. After the Yom Kippur War there were intelligence officials who argued that intelligence [organizations] must not deal with intentions, only capabilities. In my opinion, that is a mistaken approach. If we deal only in capabilities, we'll need to deploy the entire army, including the reserves, on all the borders and to raise the Arrow missiles so that they're ready to fire at any given moment. The intelligence [services] have to assess intentions in order to allow for normal life here."

- **Q: Lessons of the Second Lebanon War?** "Lessons of the ten years since the war in which we haven't operated against Hizbullah's buildup. Since 2006 we have experienced 12 years of quiet that was achieved as a result of a war that came under harsh criticism, but which achieved a strategic deterrence that had not been achieved in any [other] war in the country's history."
- **Q: Are we dealing correctly with the Iranian threat?** "Israel has the most advanced defensive array against ballistic missiles and rockets in the world, but there is no hermetic response to the threat. The Iranians are liable to try their hand at building an array of accurate missiles in Lebanon as well, and that is a challenge that we might encounter later this year. There will be a dilemma then: do we allow that array to be built or do we apply the Begin doctrine?"
- **Q: Just how much more complicated is an attack in Iran than the operations that were carried out in Iraq and Syria?** "The challenge of stopping Iran is far more complex. It is farther away, and a larger country. The Iranians learned the lessons of the previous Israeli attacks, spread out their nuclear program in a number of sites and they defend them better. It is important to be coordinated with the United States, which shares with us the same goal: for Iran not to obtain nuclear weapons. That is an objective that we had with Obama's administration and certainly with the Trump administration."
- When one discusses the northern and southern fronts with Yadlin, he immediately asks that a distinction be drawn between them. "The north is tens of times more dangerous," he said. "Without diminishing the fact that Hamas and other terror organizations can disrupt daily life in the Gaza area, Israel has found good solutions to the strategic threats. Most of the rockets are intercepted by the best defense system in the world and, while you and I are talking, the IDF is discovering and demolishing tunnels. Will Hamas nevertheless decide to opt for conflagration? Israel has capabilities. If we decide to bring about its collapse, we know how to do that."
- **Q: By conquering the Gaza Strip?** "We always tend to opt for the extreme solutions. Either we operate only from the air or we have to conquer the entire Gaza Strip. There are many military actions that can be used to bring about the collapse of Hamas's regime without conquering the Gaza Strip. The problem, in my opinion, is the government's decision not to bring about the collapse of Hamas[']s regime]. That declaration has given that organization a lot of leverage

against us. I proposed in 2014, and I propose today, to opt for powerful and painful actions that are likely to bring about the organization's collapse. There's no reason to be frightened of doing that. Air and ground operations that will exact a painful price from Hamas and will jeopardize its rule. A combination of targeted killing operations and a serious blow to its military wing and command posts. A ground operation to central Hamas strongholds. A long list of measures that were not taken in the past. We implemented an important decision when we disengaged from the Gaza Strip, but the mistake that was made by the government was that even in Operation Protective Edge and in discussions that are held today they say: we want a responsible address in Gaza and we want a weakened and deterred Hamas. And if it weren't sufficiently weakened? Then it operates against us in a way that mandates another round [of fighting]. Hamas needs to know that if it crosses red lines we will act and we won't regret it if it falls [from power]."

- **Q: Could we have finished the job in Operation Protective Edge?** "I described Operation Protective Edge back in 2014 as a strategic tie. Hamas is a relatively weak terror organization that held the country under fire for weeks on end. That happened because of mistaken assumptions. That Hamas wanted a cease-fire at any given moment, no matter what. And a second assumption, that we mustn't make it fall [from power]. We didn't use our aerial and ground strength and capabilities to make it beg for a cease-fire much earlier."
- **Q: Is a dialogue possible with Hamas?** "Anything that can be achieved by means of political dialogue is always preferable to a dialogue between cannons. But in the past Hamas demanded more concessions for a hudna than Abu Mazen wanted for a final status arrangement. We can hold indirect negotiations with it, but once we reach the parameters of an agreement I anticipate that the negotiations will quickly become derailed. The issue of the Israeli civilians and the bodies of the missing soldiers that are in its possession will be the first to come up. Israel is demanding their release and is prepared to pay a price, but not what Hamas is demanding. That gap will be hard to bridge, and that's why the chances of an agreement are low. Israel is prepared to give a lot for Gaza's rehabilitation, provided the organization demilitarizes the Gaza Strip. I assess that there is no chance that Hamas will agree to disarm. And even if we assume that Israel only demands that it not build up [its military strength] further, here too I don't see any chance that it will agree. I'm not against a hudna, but if one gets into the details one realizes that the chance is low."
- **Q: The situation in Gaza is catastrophic.** "The humanitarian situation is problematic, and we need to address it first and foremost from a moral position. There is a large public in Gaza that isn't to blame for the fact that Hamas controls it. It is important to do so morally, but also for utilitarian reasons. What happens in Gaza doesn't stay there. Diseases, sewage and a despairing public that makes its way to the border in the end. We have to find a way to help without that effort strengthening Hamas. Today any support for the civilians in Gaza serves Hamas to build its [military] strength. Israel won't tolerate over time a situation in which, on the one hand, it helps the civilians while, on the other, there are kites that are burning its fields. Perhaps a 'small hudna' that is instated by the Egyptians and the Europeans will be possible. It's our obligation to examine it, but without any illusions and with open eyes."

- **Q: What is our strategy at present? Do we even have one?** “The point of departure is that Gaza is a hostile entity that we disengaged from and which we formally are not responsible for the turn of events in it. The only strategy that I can discern in the government is ‘quiet in exchange for quiet.’ That doesn’t solve the fundamental problems, and that’s why at the very least efforts need to be made to reduce the chance of a round of belligerence every three years. In the long term, a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs to be sought by means of linking Gaza to the West Bank. The government today isn’t eager about that linkage. It’s convenient for it to handle the two parts of the Palestinian problem separately.”
- **Q: Do you see a solution on the horizon?** “With the current leadership on both sides it’s going to be hard to bridge the gaps. The conflict is going to be with us for another generation. We need to define the Israel that we want, even if the Palestinians aren’t partners to an arrangement. We want a Jewish, democratic, secure and just country. Let’s assume that we could define the borders in a way that would create, on the one hand, a Jewish majority and, on the other, everyone who isn’t a Jew would have equal rights. A country that emphasizes security and justice. The two significant efforts to reach an agreement with the Palestinians ended badly from a security standpoint. Oslo led to the second Intifada with more than 1,000 [Israelis] killed. The withdrawal from Gaza led to rockets and tunnels. That’s why we need to make sure that the process for establishing borders doesn’t worsen the positive security conditions that the citizens of Israel enjoy at present. “The last component is to return to being the just and moral party in the conflict. In order to regain the internal and international recognition we need to reduce to a minimum the [Israeli] control over the Palestinians. It’s important to achieve all the components, preferably in an agreement and, if not, then by independent means that are coordinated with the United States, the international community and the Sunni Arab world. In that case the Palestinian veto over our future will cease dictating the march of history. We will mold our future ourselves. The Institute for National Security Studies is going to publish a plan on that issue this summer.”

## **Why Israel Refuses to Complete the Security Fence**

By Mazal Mualem, Analyst, AI Monitor

- On June 6, the Knesset voted down for the third time a proposed bill by opposition lawmaker Omer Barlev of the Zionist Camp mandating completion of the barrier between Israel and the West Bank, which he views as vital for terrorism prevention. Opposition to the bill was led by the three main coalition parties: Likud, HaBayit HaYehudi and Yisrael Beitenu. In explaining the bill he authored, Barlev said it was designed to force the government and the Defense Ministry to complete construction of the barrier within 18 months as a “national priority.” Although the bill specifically states that the sections of the barrier that would be built along some 100 kilometers (62 miles), as well as those already built, would only serve as a counterterrorism measure and “are not an expression of a different diplomatic border line,” the political right is convinced the bill has diplomatic and political significance. In other words, the right is concerned that an Israeli initiative of putting up a fence that separates West Bank settlements from Palestinian villages around them would constitute an official endorsement of a future border between Israel and a Palestinian state.
- Israel started building the barrier in June 2002, at the height of the second intifada (2000-2005) in which hundreds of Israelis were killed in Palestinian terror attacks. Until then, the absence of a fence between sovereign Israel and the area it conquered in the 1967 war allowed terrorists to reach the heart of Israeli towns and villages in a matter of minutes or hours. Then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and some of his ministers objected to the proposed barrier for a long time. However, they were forced to give in to public pressure that grew with every deadly terror attack, and massive budgets were allocated for the project. Within a few years, several hundred kilometers of a “smart” security barrier went up, and in some parts, including the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, a high cement wall was erected to protect against sniper fire.
- The waning of the second intifada was attributed in large measure to construction of the barrier, which resulted in a significant decline of terror attacks within Israel. Nonetheless, despite the barrier’s successful results, opposition by Jewish settlers has prevented completion of the project in some sections. The settlers argue that completion of the barrier promotes the left wing’s “separation idea” to create a permanent border with the West Bank. The settlers are not the barrier’s only opponents. Palestinian residents of the West Bank and environmental groups are also opposed for different reasons, and a number of petitions have been submitted against the project to the Supreme Court over the years. The Palestinians argue that the proposed route of the barrier annexes some of their lands to Israel, while green groups claim the construction causes grave environmental damage. The tangled array of interests and political pressure has prevented the completion of the barrier up to now.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a fervent proponent of separation barriers along Israel’s borders, but he also understands the political and diplomatic sensitivity of erecting them in

central areas of the West Bank where most of the settlements are located. In 2013, for example, on a tour of the Etzion settlement bloc south of Jerusalem, settlement leaders expressed to the prime minister vehement objections, arguing that completion of the barrier in their area would also separate some settlements from each other and erode the fabric of community life. Their efforts and pressure, also brought to bear by the rightist HaBayit HaYehudi party in the government, bore fruit. In August 2017, Netanyahu and members of the defense Cabinet toured the Etzion bloc to examine the planned barrier area, but the blueprints readied by the Defense Ministry have since lain dormant.

- Barlev, a reserve colonel and former commander of the elite Sayeret Matkal commando unit, has been trying in recent years to force the government to complete the barrier. He argues that while the country's security experts are in no doubt about its necessity to avert terrorism, the government is dragging its feet for political reasons. He is referring to the powerful pro-settlement lobby, which fears that the barrier would determine the future border if an agreement is reached with the Palestinians granting them a state, whereas the settlers are seeking an annexation of their communities to Israel. On June 7, after the Knesset rejected Barlev's proposed bill, members of his Labor Party faction in the Zionist Camp toured areas in the West Bank where the barrier has yet to be built. Their intent was to mobilize public opinion and media pressure against what they dubbed "a severe security failure" on the part of the government.
- A video clip posted on Twitter by Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay shows Barlev against the backdrop of the settlement town of Maale Adumim, population 37,000 as of 2016. The only reason there is no fence protecting the town, Barlev insists, "is political." Barlev further argues that some one-third of the terrorists who carried out attacks within Israel in recent years exploited the absence of a barrier, making its necessity as a counterterrorism measure abundantly clear — an opinion with which military and Shin Bet security agency professionals concur. During the tour, Gabbay blamed the Netanyahu government and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman for torpedoing the bill. Using a map, he pointed to three main exposed areas along the route of the barrier, which he called "ticking time bombs" — around Maale Adumim, the Etzion settlement bloc and the southern Hebron Hills.
- To underscore the extent of the danger, Gabbay explained that the absence of a fence in the Etzion bloc enabled terrorists to kidnap and murder three Israeli youths there in 2014, whereas lack of a barrier in the southern Hebron Hills allowed terrorists to enter Israel and carry out a deadly attack in Tel Aviv's Saron market in 2016. Like Barlev, Gabbay also argues that political pressure from the right is the main cause of government inaction on the barrier. "These [political] considerations by [HaBayit HaYehudi Chair Naftali] Bennett and Liberman and Netanyahu are at the expense of our security," Gabbay stated. Particularly absurd is the fact that the settlement residents are always the first to complain that authorities do not care about their security, demanding additional budgets and security measures after each terror attack in their communities. At the same time, they are preventing the erection of a barrier, which as all security experts agree would upgrade the level of their security.