



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, June 28

Headlines:

- **Palestinians Divided Over Cyprus Port Proposal**
- **IDF Shoots, Wounds 3 Terrorists Breaching Gaza Border**
- **MKs Reject PM's Compromise for Bill Freezing PA Funds**
- **Liberman Blames Abbas, PA Terror Payments for Gaza Woes**
- **AG Says He Won't Delay PM Probe Even if Elections Called**
- **PA Warns Israel: Turkish Influence Growing in E. Jerusalem**
- **Hate Crimes See Resurgence in West Bank**
- **Prince William Refused to Meet with Barkat in Jerusalem**

Commentary:

- **AI Monitor: "Why is Israel Propping up Hamas in Gaza?"**
 - By Ben Caspit, Analyst, AI Monitor
- **Ha'aretz: "How to Avoid a Gaza War Without Being 'Weak on Terror'"**
 - By Amos Harel, Analyst, Ha'aretz

News Excerpts

June 28, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Palestinians Divided Over Cyprus Port Proposal

Palestinian leaderships in the West Bank and Gaza Strip reacted in contradictory fashion to a reported Israeli offer geared towards alleviating the humanitarian plight in the Hamas-ruled enclave. Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman has reportedly advanced a proposal to build a port in Cyprus that would serve as a hub for the transfer of goods to blockaded Gaza. The plan is contingent on Hamas returning to Israel the bodies of two soldiers killed during the 2014 war, in addition to three living Israelis being held captive by Hamas. For its part, the PA immediately came out against the purported initiative. A Palestinian political analyst who met with Hamas and Islamic Jihad representatives in Gaza, said that Israel's demands for Hamas to disarm and recognize Israel are nonstarters.

Ynet

IDF Shoots, Wounds 3 Terrorists Breaching Gaza Border

Three Palestinians were shot by IDF soldiers on Wednesday evening near the Gaza border after the army "spotted the terrorists damaging the fence and trying to infiltrate into Israeli territory from southern Gaza," according to the IDF Spokesperson's Unit. The incident, which took place, east of Rafah, left the Palestinians wounded. "The forces responded with fire against the terrorists and prevented an infiltration," the IDF statement said. Earlier in the day, the IDF fired at a group of Palestinians who tried to breach the border with Israel near Kibbutz Mefalsim.

Times of Israel

MKs Reject PM's Compromise for Bill Freezing PA Funds

Lawmakers gave the final go-ahead on Wednesday for a decisive vote on a bill that would slash funds to the PA by the amount Ramallah pays out to convicted terrorists, rejecting a request by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to give the top-level security cabinet the final say on whether to "freeze" the payments. Two weeks ago, a Knesset committee gave its approval for a final plenary vote on the bill, but the government filed an emergency motion to amend the text of the law to include a clause that would have given ministers the ability to effectively opt out of it.

Times of Israel

Liberman Blames Abbas, PA Terror Payments for Gaza Woes

Liberman on Wednesday took aim at Mahmoud Abbas, accusing the PA leader of exacerbating the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip by starving the enclave of funds. "Abu Mazen is the problem," Liberman wrote on Twitter. Liberman blamed the PA's policy of paying salaries to Palestinian prisoners convicted of terrorism, as well as its freezing of salaries for tens of thousands of public employees in Gaza.

Ha'aretz

AG Says He Won't Delay PM Probe Even if Elections Called

Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit does not intend to delay the investigation into the corruption cases against Netanyahu, even if early elections are called. Speaking at the Knesset's Constitution Committee on Wednesday, Mendelblit said, "There's no reason to hold up the investigation due to elections. That wouldn't be serious or professional. We're moving on." The attorney general also said there's a feeling that the Knesset is trying to undermine the law enforcement system. "At times it seems the law enforcement system is standing alone," he said, pledging to continue with the struggle against corruption.

Ha'aretz

PA Warns Israel: Turkish Influence Growing in E. Jerusalem

Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the PA have all separately warned Israel over the past year about growing Turkish activity in East Jerusalem, which they say is part of an attempt by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to "claim ownership over the Jerusalem issue." Israeli sources pointed to a number of ways in which Turkey is increasing its presence in the city. These include donations to Islamic organizations in Arab neighborhoods; organized tours arranged by Islamist groups in Turkey, which have brought thousands of Turkish citizens to Jerusalem over the past year; and the prominent presence of Turkish activists in demonstrations around the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

Ha'aretz

Hate Crimes See Resurgence in West Bank

Two cars were vandalized and hate graffiti was sprayed on Thursday night at a West Bank village, in a suspected hate crime. According to local residents in Urif, in the Nablus area, some inscriptions on said "Here live enemies, to drive or kill." Elsewhere, some 80 vines were damaged in a suspected hate crime at a Palestinian orchard near Kiryat Arba, adjacent to Hebron. In the past two weeks there have been no reports of hate crimes, after months of several incidents a week. In the middle of the month, Palestinians reported vandalizing 200 vines and olive trees in the village of Beit Sakariya near Elazar in Gush Etzion, shortly after the evacuation of the 15 structures at the Nativ Ha'avot outpost.

Times of Israel

Prince William Refused to Meet with Barkat in Jerusalem

Prince William reportedly refused a request for a meeting in the capital with Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat. According to a Hadashot TV news report Wednesday, Barkat requested a meeting in the city with the royal visitor, who has been staying at Jerusalem's King David Hotel, was the guest of honor at a reception at the British Consulate in East Jerusalem on Wednesday evening, and will be spending much of the final day of his visit, Thursday, in the city. However, British Embassy officials reportedly told Barkat the prince would be pleased meet the mayor at a reception held Tuesday at the British ambassador's residence in Ramat Gan, but that the prince would not meet with him in Jerusalem.

Why is Israel Propping up Hamas in Gaza?

By Ben Caspit, Analyst, AI Monitor

- Over the last two years, Israel has employed two different and even contradictory military strategies: one on its northern front against Syria, Hezbollah and Iran, and the other on its southern front against Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other “recalcitrant” organizations in Gaza. In the north, Israel is constantly on the offensive and — according to foreign reports — quick to threaten, initiate and exact a price from the enemy. In the south, however, Israel has adopted a cautious tone of containment and is on guard to avoid being dragged into a military confrontation. In short, Israel shows a lot less initiative in the south and takes Hamas’ needs into account. In the north, however, Israel uses all its strength to fan the flames of domestic Iranian conflicts and try to undermine the ayatollah-led regime. In the south, Israel uses all its strength to maintain and protect Hamas’ rule.
- Another mysterious aerial assault in Syria was reported on June 25, this time close to the Damascus airport. Several missiles, evidently launched from a fighter jet, struck trucks containing a shipment of weapons and ammunition that a little earlier had been unloaded from a transport plane that had arrived from Tehran. The attack is attributed to Israel, which is keeping quiet on the matter. It is the second attack in a week attributed to the Israeli air force on Syrian soil. No one has even tried to keep count of the strikes allegedly conducted by Israel since the beginning of the year. The attacks are, ostensibly, a direct, determined continuation of Israel's policy of enforcing its redlines on the transfer of weapons and arms from Iran to the Syrian front and of anything that falls under the category of “Iranian consolidation in Syria.” The policy is based on a strategy presented by Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot to the Israeli Cabinet last May: frequent and ongoing use of force, real-time thwarting of all Iranian efforts to base itself in Syria and exacting an immediate price from President Bashar al-Assad's regime if and when the Iranians or Hezbollah retaliate against Israel from Syrian territory.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been uncharacteristically implementing the strategy with all his might and without blinking. Thus far, he hasn't had to pay much of a price. When elements affiliated with Shiite militias in Syria tried to launch rockets at the Israeli-held Golan, Israel's air force immediately responded by destroying a significant percentage of Iranian infrastructure in Syria and eliminating about half of Syria's anti-aircraft deployment on May 10. Netanyahu, who has always distanced himself from military conflicts, “adventures” and provocations, has changed his tune and is now going all the way on the northern front. On June 26, Netanyahu uploaded a video to YouTube in which he speaks to the Iranian people in English to praise Iran's national soccer team for its performance in the FIFA World Cup competition against Portugal and its star player, Ronaldo. Netanyahu then says, “Can you imagine what your money could do if it was not spent promoting terrorism, in Syria and in Yemen?” Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman was even blunter when he posted a message on social media in Persian, blaming the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Gen. Qasem

Soleimani for squandering Iran's resources on terror activities. Liberman also praised the relatively successful Iranian performance in the World Cup.

- According to a senior Israeli Cabinet member who spoke to Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity, "The prime minister and defense minister are implementing a specific policy, the main foundation of which is to enforce Israel's redlines in Syria." "These redlines are backed up by direct, spoken messages aimed at the Iranian people with the goal of speeding up the fall of the Tehran regime," the source added. The policy is also based on intelligence reporting that new sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran are having a dramatically negative impact on the Iranian economy. This, in turn, is causing internal Iranian agitation. What about Israel's south? It is exactly the opposite. Despite Hamas being viewed as the long arm of the Iranian Revolution, Israel is extremely careful not to rock the Gaza boat too much or do anything that might, including accidentally, cause Hamas to fall.
- "Netanyahu and Liberman are going to great pains to protect Hamas," a former highly placed security source told Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity. "They do not want to overthrow the Hamas regime, and they block the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Strip because the present situation is convenient for them. So long as Hamas rules Gaza, the Palestinian people are fragmented, and Israel has no real partner for any kind of negotiations. In addition, Israel is doing everything possible to avert another round of violence between itself and Gaza during the summer. There are two reasons for this: The first is because Israel's efforts are concentrated on the northern front, and Liberman-Netanyahu do not have the energy to invest in Gaza now. Second, because the two realize that another round of fighting in Gaza has no purpose and would only cause more damage. Both sides would return to the starting point without achieving anything." A former senior military source told Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity, "It is better to wait another year or year and a half before marching into Gaza when the underground obstacles [constructed by Israel] will be in place and the tunnel threat will be totally neutralized."
- Given the current situation, the Cabinet agreed to the Israel Defense Forces policy of not directly thwarting the cells of Gaza residents releasing burning kites and helium balloons containing flammable substances or explosives. The air force finds itself firing "near the launcher cells" and not directly at them and hindering the cars and other vehicles of the launchers but not the launchers themselves, as happened June 26. This was also the reason that Liberman offered an upgraded deal to Hamas earlier this week: construction of a special platform at a Cypriot port that would function as a seaport for Gaza. Israel would oversee the merchandise unloaded there and transferred directly to Gaza by boat. In exchange, Israel is demanding the return of the bodies of the soldiers Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul as well as two Israeli citizens held by Hamas in Gaza. At this stage, Hamas has declined the offer, which will now serve as the basis for continued, indirect contacts between the sides.
- In any event, the proposal achieved its purpose. It demonstrates an Israeli initiative to improve the harsh circumstances in Gaza. Israel is doing all this in the south to gain time to advance

efforts on the major playing field in the north. Its goals with regard to Iran are to distance it from the border, prevent Iranian consolidation in Syria and support the Iranian civil protest movement in Iran. In addition to these goals, Israel will also have to decide in the next few days what to do about a new offensive by the Syrian army and its partners in the south. The offensive threatens to even retake the part of the Golan held by Syrian rebels. Israeli policies have turned the Golan into a focus of Israeli interests. Will Israel close its eyes, clench its teeth and reluctantly accept Assad's return to Quneitra? The next few days will provide an answer to this question.

How to Avoid a Gaza War Without Being 'Weak on Terror'

By Amos Harel, Analyst, Ha'aretz

- The exchange of fire on the Gaza-Israel border on Wednesday morning followed the same pattern as in recent weeks: Israeli forces attempting to combat Palestinians sending kites and helium balloons with flaming tails into Israel bombed the car of a Hamas officer whom Israel says is involved in the attacks. In response, Hamas fired rockets and mortars at Israeli towns in the southern Negev. Israel no longer has any doubt that Hamas, not “rebel” organizations, is responsible for the ballistics, and that the group wants to establish a new formula of deterrence: Every Israeli attack on the Strip will carry an immediate price. Meanwhile, the frequent incidents along the border are disturbing Israeli politicians’ equilibrium. They were especially unsettled by a poll broadcast on Israeli TV news this week that revealed that in the space of less than a month, public opinion on how well Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet are handling the Gaza problem has flipped. In a previous survey, 62 percent of Israelis thought their functioning was good, while 28 percent said “Not good.” Now, though, 64 percent are dissatisfied, while 27 percent say they are pleased.
- That is the backdrop for the onslaught of trial balloons that have been floated toward the media in recent days, including the announcement of an agreement with Cyprus (which Cyprus denies) to build a seaport terminal there for Gaza’s use; and the recycled plan to build a solar farm initiative in Israel that would supply energy to the Strip. For months, these projects were discussed with the United States, Egypt and the Gulf nations – which U.S. President Donald Trump hopes will finance them – but the obstacles remain legion. The Arab nations are proving slow to respond. The Palestinian camp, meanwhile, is split between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which refuse to cooperate and somehow help improve the Gazans’ sorry lot. The most immediate stumbling block is the matter of Israelis and Israeli soldiers’ bodies being held by Hamas in Gaza. The Hamas leadership still seems to believe it can wring a major prisoner release from Netanyahu in exchange.
- If that’s the case, Netanyahu finds himself stymied. Humanitarian relief for Gaza without a prisoner exchange deal would be bitterly opposed by the families of the missing and deceased Israelis. In the meantime, his own ministers and other would-be “advisers” in the media and on social media have slammed him for being weak on terrorism. The longer the Israeli leadership remains in the quagmire, the more it sinks. Back when the army brass was mulling the meaning of victory in an era of asymmetrical fighting against terror and guerrilla organizations, Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot defined another target for military campaigns: significant improvement in the political and military situation.
- The question Netanyahu, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and the army brass must face when thinking about the options in Gaza is how a campaign in the Strip would achieve that goal. Can a campaign constrained in time and cost achieve that end? Ultimately, Israel still perceives

Hamas' government in Gaza as the lesser evil compared to the alternatives – Israeli conquest (expensive over time); re-anointing the PA (unlikely); conquest by Islamic extremists like ISIS or protracted anarchy (God spare us). Ergo, the political leadership is stumbling over its own lies – to itself and to the public.

- The leadership promises firmness and strength, when all it really wants is for the mass border protests, rocket fire and flaming kites to go away. It feels the military cost of achieving that would be too high. But it also feels that making humanitarian gestures will exact a political price. Meanwhile, a dispute in the Israeli intelligence community is coming back to life. As Yaniv Kubovich reported earlier this week, some intel sources feel Hamas is losing its fear of a military confrontation in the Strip and is thinking of provoking Israel with that aim in mind, to ultimately gain an arrangement over the Gazan infrastructure and its economy.
- In another Gaza-related event, the annual Israel Defense Prize ceremony was held at the President's Residence in Jerusalem on Tuesday night. The winners were IDF units, the Defense Ministry and defense contractors that have worked together to create solutions to locate and destroy "attack tunnels" emanating from Gaza into Israel. That project only ensued after Operation Protective Edge in 2014, when Israel felt the consequences of sidetracking the problem for 10-plus years. The army calls that the "lost decade": they didn't know where all the tunnels were or how to technologically handle them. Israel may be approaching a solution for the attack tunnels, but it isn't even close when it comes to political processes: The state has hardly managed to advance anything on the Palestinian front.
- The arrogance characterizing the government on the security front, after its impressive successes elsewhere in May, have been replaced with concern over the simple but harmful challenge presented by people sending incendiary drones, kites and balloons into Israel from the Strip, causing millions of shekels-worth of damage to crop fields and nature. It makes sense to assess that Hamas doesn't want any kind of political agreement with Israel. It is even reasonable to assume that the chances of any such deal with the PA in the West Bank are also remote at this time. But sitting back and waiting for the Trump administration's peace plan to bring relief to Gaza cannot be a substitute for policy.
- With all due sympathy to the families of missing Israeli soldiers and civilians in Gaza, the fact that negotiations about their fate have stalled should not result in zero progress on other burning issues. Even before the last major blowup in Gaza in 2014, the cabinet and defense officials knew perfectly well that without change to the economic state of the Strip, another collision would eventually come. Yet they did nothing, even though back then Hamas didn't hold a single Israeli in captivity.