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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, June 4

Headlines:

- **Brushfires Rage in the South from Kites Launched from Gaza**
- **PM Heads to Europe for Talks on Nuclear Deal, Syria**
- **Israel Strikes Hamas in Gaza after Rockets Resume**
- **Jordan Rocked by Biggest Protests in Years**
- **Israeli Troops Participate for First Time in NATO War Games**
- **PM Reportedly Asked to Wiretap IDF, Mossad Chiefs**
- **US Lawmakers Push for Israeli Golan Recognition**
- **New York Celebrates Israel's 70th Birthday**

Commentary:

- **Times of Israel: "Gaza Rockets are a Message, But to Who?"**
 - By Avi Issacharoff, Analyst, Times of Israel
- **Ha'aretz: "Renewed Rockets Could Serve Hamas and Test Israel"**
 - By Amos Harel, Analyst, Ha'aretz

News Excerpts

June 4, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Brushfires Rage in the South from Gaza Kites

Teams of firefighters worked throughout [the weekend] putting out large brush fires in fields belonging to communities in southern Israel, after they had been hit by flaming-kites launched from the Hamas-run Gaza Strip. Prime Minister Netanyahu said he instructed National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat to push forward a process that will subtract the amount of money the government must pay to Gaza-area communities for the damages caused by the fires from the tax money Israel [collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority] and transfers to it each month.

Ha'aretz

PM Heads to Europe for Talks on Nuclear Deal, Syria

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to fly Monday morning to Europe, where he will meet with leaders on the future of the Iranian nuclear agreement. These meetings, the first since the United States withdrew from the agreement, are also aimed at soliciting support for Israel's effort to prevent Iranian entrenchment in Syria. Netanyahu will meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron Tuesday; and British Prime Minister Theresa May on Wednesday.

Washington Post

Israel Strikes Hamas in Gaza after Rockets Resume

The Israeli military struck Hamas militant sites in Gaza early Sunday in response to the resumption of rocket fire toward Israel, which threatened to unravel an informal cease-fire that had held since a flare-up of violence last week. The IDF said it hit 15 Hamas targets, including military compounds, munition factories and naval forces. The strikes come after militants broke days of calm along the volatile frontier by firing projectiles toward Israeli communities. Israel's Iron Dome defense system intercepted some and others landed inside Gaza. No one was hurt on either side.

Ha'aretz

Jordan Rocked by Biggest Protests in Years

Tens of thousands of Jordanians took to the street over the weekend in protest of government-led economic reforms and called to depose Jordanian Prime Minister Hani al-Malichi, in the biggest demonstrations the Hashemite kingdom has seen in years. Thousands of protesters took to the streets across the kingdom demanding to cancel the raising of taxes and staple food. Despite the protesters' rage, it seemed in most cases that security forces are showing restraint, and that protesters themselves are trying to avoid physical confrontations with them.

Israeli Troops Participate for First Time in NATO War Games

Some 18,000 troops from 19 mostly NATO countries began annual US-led military exercises in Poland and the Baltic states on Sunday, with non-NATO member Israel taking part in the combat readiness drill for the first time ever. Several dozen soldiers from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Paratroopers Brigade are taking part in the eighth Saber Strike manoeuvres, which run until June 15. The drills aim to boost combat readiness on NATO's eastern flank as it faces an increasingly assertive Russia, and come after it was revealed Poland is considering a proposal to welcome a permanent deployment of US troops to the country.

Ynet

PM Reportedly Asked to Wiretap IDF, Mossad Chiefs

Netanyahu had allegedly ordered then-head of the Shin Bet Yoram Cohen to wiretap former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz and former Mossad director Tamir Pardo, the "Uvda" investigative television program reported Thursday — a claim Netanyahu vehemently denied on Friday. Former Shin Bet head Yoram Cohen reportedly refused the prime minister's request. "The Shin Bet is not supposed to use such extreme measures against leading Mossad and IDF figures," Cohen elucidated.

Israel Hayom

US Lawmakers Push for Israeli Golan Recognition

An American plan to bring the U.S. closer to recognizing the Golan Heights was laid out for Israeli and American officials in Washington last week. The plan includes six points: channeling funds into joint Israeli-American projects on the Golan Heights; expanding U.S.-Israeli agreements, such as the free trade agreement between the two nations, to apply to the Golan Heights and labeling products manufactured or grown on the Golan as "Made in Israel"; formulating a congressional document declaring that Syria will not return to the Israeli Golan Heights; sending congressional delegations to the Golan Heights; and formulating congressional documents that recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

Times of Israel

New York Celebrates Israel's 70th Birthday

Tens of thousands of Israel supporters clad in blue and white and waving Israeli flags marched down Fifth Avenue on Sunday for the annual Celebrate Israel parade, this year marked as a gala event to honor the Jewish state's 70th birthday. The march was led by New York Mayor Bill De Blasio, Governor Andrew Cuomo, with Israeli officials and lawmakers also attending. But it was the 40,000 marchers and masses of spectators who were the main focus. Close to 40,000 marchers representing different American Jewish organizations strolled down the route with large shiny floats, customized t-shirts, signs, and big smiles on their faces. "Seventy years of great achievements," one hand held banner said.

Gaza Rockets are a Message, But to Who?

By Avi Issacharoff, Analyst, Times of Israel

- As of Sunday afternoon, the identity of those responsible for breaking the unofficial ceasefire agreement and firing a series of rockets at Israel from the Gaza Strip overnight was not yet clear. Six projectiles were fired overnight at southern Israel by Palestinian terror groups in the coastal enclave. The Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted four, with another apparently landing in Israeli territory and one not clearing the border. A number of Gaza pundits said that the most likely suspects were quasi-rogue factions, sometimes subcontracted by Hamas. This means that Hamas officials would have had to turn a blind eye, giving a green light to the splinter groups to launch attacks at Israel.
- If that is true, it would mean that Hamas is trying to convey a new message to Israel: If Palestinians are killed during the weekly Gaza border protests, the group will respond with rocket fire. There was a resonant fatality at the border over the weekend. On the Palestinian side of the fence Saturday, thousands attended a funeral for a young female volunteer medic who Palestinians say was shot and killed by the IDF while she was tending to the injured during violent protests on the Gaza border on Friday. The Israeli army is investigating the incident. But it could also be that the rocket fire was actually an effort by rogue Salafist groups to embarrass Hamas and escalate tensions with Israel. The situation is still opaque. The first of the Saturday night rockets were launched during Iftar, the evening Ramadan fast-breaking meal.
- A few hours later, in posts on social media, the Shahid Abu Rish Brigades and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (both affiliated with Hamas's archrival, Fatah) simultaneously took responsibility for the fire. But neither group has been active in the Gaza Strip for many years, suggesting that the real perpetrators were seeking to hide their true identity. From there, rumors began to spread in Gaza that Hamas had given its blessing to rogue groups to launch the rockets, but did not want to admit openly that it had broken the fragile ceasefire in place since Wednesday morning.
- And events of recent months certainly indicate that when Hamas wants there to be rocket fire, there is — and when it doesn't, there isn't. The renewed rocket fire followed significant clashes on the Gaza border on Friday and a massive flareup last week, in which Palestinian terror groups launched over 100 rockets and mortar shells into southern Israel and the military responded by striking more than 65 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad sites in the Strip.
- As expected, the Saturday-Sunday rocket fire drew a response from Israel, which bombed a number of Hamas military targets in the Strip without causing any casualties. If you're wondering how that's possible, it's a technique that was developed in previous rounds of conflict. First, pilots drop a nonexplosive device on a building, which warns the occupants of an imminent airstrike and allows them to escape unharmed. Only about a minute later does a real

missile destroy the building. The IDF uses this technique to convey its own message to Hamas: Israel does not intend to escalate tensions.

- But this message hasn't made an impression on the Hamas leadership, which has its own considerations to worry about. The economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza is so dire that the people there are calling for change, even at the cost of war, but change never comes. Last week, the Palestinian Authority promised to resume paying salaries for its staff in Gaza, but that didn't happen. Israel, Egypt and others constantly talk about change in the Gaza Strip, but there have been no dramatic developments. As of this writing, since 3 a.m. Sunday morning, there has been a lull in the rocket and mortar shell fire from Gaza. But unfortunately, at least for now, there is one thing that Israel and Gaza can agree on: this quiet is fragile, and it won't be long before we witness another escalation.

Renewed Rockets Could Serve Hamas and Test Israel

By Amos Harel, Analyst, Ha'aretz

- The unofficial cease-fire between Israel and the Gaza Strip came into force (also unofficially) on Wednesday morning, but the firing from Gaza has actually resumed. Between Saturday evening and early Sunday morning, rockets have been fired intermittently from the coastal enclave. Six rockets were fired, the Israeli military spokesman's office reported. Four of them were intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defense system. In response to the rocket fire, the Israel Air Force attacked targets at three Hamas compounds in Gaza. Neither side reported casualties.
- The Israeli explanation for the Palestinian weapons fire, which is a violation of the agreement reached under Egyptian mediation, is that "renegade organizations" are currently behind it, meaning jihadi Palestinian factions that are not subject to Hamas' authority. The sudden problem regarding the control of Gaza by Hamas needs to be taken with a measure of skepticism. For close to two months, during which more than 100 Palestinians demonstrating along the Israeli border with Gaza have been killed by Israeli army fire, not a single rocket was fired from Gaza. The firing only began last Tuesday, when Islamic Jihad fired barrages of rockets in reaction to the killing of three of its members by the Israeli army two days before. Then Hamas joined in firing. Israel attacked in response and a cease-fire only came following Egyptian intervention.
- How did the shift come about from Hamas having complete control over the firing as well as over the intensity of the friction in the border demonstrations to its difficulty in reining things in? It at least raises the question as to whether the renewal of the rocket fire currently serves the interests of Hamas' leadership. There could be two aspects to this: one as an additional element in the confrontation with Israel, in addition to the demonstrations and the dispatch of Molotov cocktails on kites over the border into Israel, which have set large expanses of Israeli fields near the Gaza border on fire. The second aspect is as part of a new balance of deterrence, which has it that if Israel deploys weapons fire against the organizations' military targets (Hamas bases deep in the territory, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad positions along the Israeli border), it will respond with rocket and mortar fire at Israeli communities.
- Talk of an Israeli victory in the round of blows last Tuesday were baseless, just as claims of a humiliating defeat were. In practice, the Israeli government and the army general staff headquarters don't currently want a war in Gaza out of concern that toppling the Hamas regime there would not lead to a better alternative in the territory and would cost Israel heavily. In addition, these Israeli officials are now focused on efforts at arrangements to have Iran and Shi'ite militia forces withdraw from southern Syria. It is also reasonable that Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with Iranian encouragement, would actually be interested in friction in Gaza. It hard to believe, on the other hand, that the groups in Gaza would currently want an overall

confrontation. The constellation of forces between the sides is known and it appears that Hamas' first priority is easing Gaza's economic situation. Responsibility for the dismal reality there also falls on Hamas, as the group in control of the enclave.

- But the tangle of these considerations and aims is rather difficult to maneuver. The risk entailed in the continued fire is that sooner or later one of the sides will incur real losses. And then the leadership's ability to control the height of the flames will face a greater challenge. A window of opportunity has opened for the Netanyahu government to come to an arrangement with Hamas that may make a long-term cease-fire possible in return for a significant easing of the economic siege on Gaza. That is an achievable goal, the Israeli army believes, as noted by a senior officer in a talk to journalists on Thursday. In the absence of an arrangement, continued firing could lead to an eruption, contrary to the Israeli government's goal.
- In the north, contacts on an arrangement to have Iran and the Shi'ite militias withdraw from the border with Israel in the Golan Heights have not yet seen success, despite a series of reports in the Arab media (and to a lesser extent in Israel). But the outlines of a plan for an arrangement are taking shape and becoming clearer: Russia is prepared to remove the Iranians and their militias from the border, perhaps even as far as the Damascus-Suwayda highway, about 70 kilometers (44 miles) from the Israeli Golan Heights. But Moscow is interested to have Israel agree to the return of Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces to the border with Israel in return for the Iranian pullback. Israel has doubts when it comes to its new-old neighbors. In addition, Prime Minister Netanyahu recently repeated the demand that Iran and the militia forces be removed from anywhere in Syria. That is a demand that the Kremlin has not responded to at this point and it is doubtful that the Russians would accept because it could involve them in a direct confrontation with Tehran. In the meantime, Syrian President Assad is creating deliberate confusion himself with his claim that Iran has only "advisers" in Syria, but no soldiers at all.
- After reviewing the range of reports and after consulting with several Israeli sources, it appears that an opportunity has been created here to remove the Iranians from southern Syria in the near future. A total withdrawal from all of Syria would be a lot more difficult to achieve. One possibility is that a partial arrangement be obtained, as it was last November, through an agreement among Russia, the United States and Jordan – and for Israel to be able to declare that it is not a party to it and therefore is not bound by its provisions. Then too, it remains to be seen if Israel will act against Iranian targets deep in Syria after Iran's presence there receives a renewed stamp of approval of sorts from the Russians. On Sunday, at the beginning of the cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said: "Israel will continue to retain its freedom of action against Iran establishing itself in any area in Syria."