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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Times of Israel

Russia Backs Tunnel-Busting Op, Calls for 'Restraint'

Russia expressed tacit support on Wednesday for Israel's operation to expose Hezbollah's cross-border tunnels, while calling on both sides to show restraint. "We do not question Israel's right to ensure its national security, including by preventing anyone from entering the country," a spokesperson said. But she urged parties to respect UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which, after the 2006 Lebanon War, called for a ceasefire and Hezbollah's disarmament. Israel argues that by digging tunnels with the intention to attacks civilians, the group was violating the resolution.

Ynet

Hezbollah's Plan to Conquer the Galilee

Hezbollah's "Conquering the Galilee" plan has made headlines long before the IDF launched Operation Northern Shield on Tuesday morning. The plan entails fighters from Hezbollah's elite Radwan unit infiltrating Israel from Lebanon, entrenching themselves in Israeli communities near the border while taking hostages and using Israeli citizens as human shields. According to the plan, Tehran would aid the operation by sending money, weapons and militia.

Ha'aretz

IDF Applying Gaza Lessons to Foil Hezbollah Tunnels

The breakthrough in Israel's effort to locate Hezbollah's tunnels from Lebanon occurred a little over a year ago, with the army applying some of the lessons it learned on the Gaza border. The army said Tuesday it combined technology with intelligence, adapting the latter to the north's rocky terrain. Since then, efforts to find the tunnels have accelerated; Northern Command officers predict that it will take several weeks to locate and destroy all of the attack tunnels.

Ha'aretz

WH Asks Arab States to Support Anti-Hamas Resolution

The Trump administration reached out to a number of Arab countries with the request to support a UN resolution condemning Hamas, which will come to a vote before the UN General Assembly on Thursday. The administration hopes these countries will support the resolution despite attempts by the Palestinian Authority to impede it. Representative Jason Greenblatt sent a letter to diplomats from Morocco, Oman, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Qatar. A U.S. official said the resolution denounces Hamas for its terrorist acts, but at the same time, calls to support the efforts for Palestinian political unity.

Times of Israel

PM: Shin Bet Thwarted 500 Terror Attacks in 2018

The Shin Bet thwarted 500 terror attacks in 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday at an awards ceremony for the organization's agents. "Hundreds of Israeli citizens owe you their lives," he said. According to a statement from the agency, six operations over the past two years were recognized in the ceremony for their "high level of planning, professional and flawless execution, and a result that contributed significantly to the goals of the service in the fields of disruption [of terror attacks or enemy espionage] and national defense."

Times of Israel

Liberman Met with PA Officials Before Resigning

Two weeks before Avigdor Liberman resigned as defense minister last month, he met two top Palestinian Authority officials, Majed Faraj and Hussein al-Sheikh. According to a senior PA official, "they told him we want to set a date to review the Paris Protocol with the Israeli side." Faraj is the PA General Intelligence Services chief and Sheikh is the PA official responsible for coordination with Israel on civil matters. The Paris Protocol is the economic annex of the Oslo Accords that defines the PA and Israel's economic ties.

Los Angeles Times

Young American Jews Spark Debate About Birthright

Each year, tens of thousands of young people from around the world travel to Israel, paid by Taglit-Birthright Israel, a nonprofit that aims to foster their Jewish identity and a connection to Israel. That ritual met with some controversy this year after a few participants walked off the program to protest what they called a failure to adequately address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Los Angeles Rabbi Sharon Brous said the protest reflects a shift in American Jewish society, in which more people are speaking out against policies they see as unjust.

Times of Israel

In Tel Aviv, 30,000 Protest Violence Against Women

30,000 demonstrators gathered in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square Tuesday evening to protest what they say is the authorities' failure to stem a sharp increase in violence against women. The rally was the culmination of a day of action that saw thousands of women go on strike and participate in rallies across the country. Intersections throughout Israel were blocked Tuesday morning as women went on strike to protest the deaths of 24 women killed since the start of the year by a partner, family member, or someone known to them.

The Battle Over the Timing of the Anti-Hezbollah Operation

By Amos Harel, Senior Columnist

- The events of Tuesday morning make it possible to say out loud what could only be hinted at recently due to the military censor's heavy restrictions: The Israel Defense Forces has embarked on a wide-scale operation to find and destroy attack tunnels that Hezbollah has dug under Lebanon's border with Israel. This is the immediate backdrop to the growing nervousness on the northern front in recent weeks. This includes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's lightning visit to Brussels on Monday, where he met with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. It also apparently includes the hints that Netanyahu scattered about two weeks ago about an emergency security situation he said required the Habayit Hayehudi party to remain in his faltering coalition government.
- Another battle is brewing for Netanyahu in the political arena, where the opposing positions on the importance of the anti-tunnel operation stem – as usual – from the question of how it will reflect on Netanyahu. The somewhat bombastic word “operation” reflects the scale of the forces deployed in the north and the major involvement of politicians and the General Staff. But despite the name chosen for the effort – Operation Northern Shield – Israel's steps are far from a harbinger of war. Israel is carrying out legitimate defensive activity to foil preparations that Hezbollah has carried out for a possible incursion. All the engineering work is being done on the Israeli side of the border and is addressing the violation of Israeli sovereignty by Hezbollah, which has dug tunnels into Israel territory. (And of course Israel is still taking action that violates Lebanese and Syrian sovereignty. In recent years, the Israel Air Force has attacked Syrian territory hundreds of times and frequently flown over Lebanon to collect intelligence information, and as deterrence.)
- The Israeli move now deprives Hezbollah of an important offensive card that the group had been saving if war broke out. From its standpoint, Tuesday's news is a major operational disappointment, but it's far from a reason to start a war at this time. According to assessments in Israel, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, despite his frequent public threats, isn't interested in a war and actually serves as a restraining force in decision-making among Tehran, Damascus and Beirut. Hezbollah apparently remembers the bombings of southern Beirut suburb Dahieh during the Second Lebanon War, just as Israel is aware of the potential destruction by Hezbollah's tens of thousands of missiles and rockets.
- Tuesday's news puts in new light Avigdor Lieberman's decision to step down as defense minister in the middle of last month. In Netanyahu's speech on November 18, following Lieberman's departure and Education Minister Naftali Bennett's demand for the defense portfolio, the prime minister said that the country was facing a period of security challenges – and that a “sacrifice” would be required of the public. Lieberman played down Netanyahu's

remarks, and apparently so did the Habayit Hayehudi ministers, who decided the next day to remain in the government and weren't persuaded by the talk of a danger of war.

- Is Operation Northern Shield major or minor? Apparently neither. But on Tuesday someone energetically briefed journalists on the events of the past few months. According to that version, there's a close link between the latest developments in Gaza and in the north. Netanyahu and IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, it is claimed, have exaggerated the tunnel threat in the north as way to postpone necessary action in Gaza. People involved in the discussions told Haaretz that the security cabinet and a few other forums have been receiving intelligence updates on the tunnels in the north in recent months. On November 7, the engineering operation on the Lebanese border came up for discussion in the security cabinet, which voted to approve it, with the exception of one minister, Lieberman. The defense minister believed that a ground operation in Gaza was more urgent.
- The engineering operation in the north was to begin a week later. But on the night of November 11, Israeli special forces near Khan Yunis in Gaza got into trouble and a lieutenant colonel was killed. The next day the Palestinians responded with a barrage of 500 rockets and mortar shells. On November 13, the security cabinet held a dramatic meeting where it was decided to consent to Egyptian efforts toward a cease-fire and go back to seeking an agreement with Hamas. On November 14, Lieberman announced his resignation and sharply criticized what he described as defeatist Israeli policy in Gaza. In the security cabinet meeting of November 13, Eisenkot led the argument against a ground operation in Gaza, backed by Netanyahu (some would say the prime minister did so at a rather low pitch). Some of the ministers recall that the tunnel issue in the north was mentioned briefly.
- But as far as is known, this wasn't the main argument. The main reason for the decision to stop was that Netanyahu and Eisenkot were against an operation in Gaza and the army didn't have enough quality targets for an assault because the escalation didn't begin with a surprise Israeli move and Hamas leaders had already hidden deep underground. The argument that comes up in retrospect is that Netanyahu and Eisenkot were leery about a Gaza operation, so they provided a relatively safe operation, but less essential, in the north. Such an operation serves the prime minister in two ways: It distracts the public's attention only two days after the police recommended indicting him in the Bezeq-Walla case, and it once again presents him as an uber-statesman, the only politician who can meet the complex and changing challenges that Israel faces in the region.
- Also, Eisenkot gets his operation, a moment before his term ends on January 15. The chief of staff thus clears his desk of the tunnel problem in the north, though his successor, Aviv Kochavi, will apparently have to address the threat from Gaza and the developing crisis around the Iranian missile factories in Lebanon. This is also the source of the charges, coming from both the right and left, of a PR operation that needlessly frightens the public. The army is responding by releasing details on the threat (the tunnel uncovered extended 40 meters [131 feet] into Israel, under the bicycle trail in Metula). But it seems the whole discussion is being held based

on who's for Netanyahu and who's against him. One can only guess what will happen if he decides to stay on as prime minister and defense minister if he's indicted in the corruption cases against him.

- Netanyahu's trip to Brussels apparently had two components: coordinating with the Americans regarding action against the tunnels in the north, and conveying another sharp warning to the Lebanese government – try to rein in Hezbollah and avoid an escalation on the border. The question now preoccupying Israel's leaders is how Iran will respond and whether it will seek a way to make Israel pay, perhaps on another border, for thwarting its plans. The tunnel project is a costly, secret matter of critical importance to Iran and Hezbollah. Clearly the Iranians were in the picture, and part of the insights relied on know-how gained by Hamas in its Gaza tunnels over the past decade. The IDF made a technological and intelligence breakthrough in locating the Gaza tunnels about a year ago, and since then has found and demolished 17 attack tunnels on both sides of the border fence. But this success also gradually contributed to the deterioration with Hamas and spurred the group to heat things up at the fence via the March of the Return starting on March 30.
- On the northern border, digging tunnels, like discovering them, is an incomparably tougher task. The IDF shared three key details Tuesday: The realization in 2012 that when Hezbollah talks about a plan to “conquer the Galilee” this includes a surprise attack through tunnels, the establishment in 2014 of a special team to study the problem, and frequent efforts to discover tunnels in recent years. The army doesn't care how many years passed between the time the tunnels were dug and when they were discovered (the tunnel made public Tuesday was dug over two years). Nor does it say whether it suspects there are more tunnels and whether this operation should have been launched a few months ago.
- Still, a significant security challenge has been uncovered that will require close management by Netanyahu, Eisenkot and the head of the Northern Command, Maj. Gen. Yoel Strick. The effort to find more tunnels is expected to take weeks, if not months. And the tunnels aren't the only urgent issue. Israel is also warning about Iran's plan to establish factories in Lebanon to produce precision weapons – and is getting used to the change dictated by Russia's presence in the region. Moscow has largely closed the skies over Syria to offensive action by the IAF but has forced Iran to cut back on its weapons-smuggling convoys.

The Obsolete Palestinian Authority

By Paul Pillar, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

- The unique entity known as the Palestinian Authority (PA), created twenty-five years ago as a supposedly transitional structure, is well past its sell-by date. The anniversary earlier this year of the Oslo Accords, which established the PA, was an occasion to take stock of the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The next twenty-five years are unlikely to see any more change in the state of this conflict than in the past twenty-five years, as long as the existing “peace process” edifice, of which the PA is a part, remains. The PA receives tokens of diplomatic support from its sympathizers from time to time by being treated in some international organizations as if it were a state. During the most recent session of the United Nations General Assembly, for example, the Palestinian ambassador was elected president of the Group of 77, the largest bloc of less developed nations. But the PA plainly is not a state, and Palestine can never be a state as long as some other state occupies the territory where its would-be citizens live and exercises the most important functions of sovereignty in that territory.
- Palestinians no doubt appreciate gestures such as the one the G-77 made, but that’s all they are: gestures. The Israeli government’s usual complaints about “unilateral” Palestinian moves are, of course, ridiculous when the moves involve actions by large multilateral bodies such as the General Assembly or G-77. But Israel will continue to complain while it makes its own genuinely unilateral moves to establish new facts on the ground in the West Bank. Pretending that a goal such as self-determination has been achieved does not bring the accomplishment of the goal any closer. It may instead only sustain a rhetorical basis for preventing the goal from ever being realized.
- The president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, occasionally has threatened to dissolve the PA if the peace process continues to make no progress. But Abbas has never actually carried through on the threat and pulled the plug. Part of the reason is that the PA has evolved into a self-sustaining organization whose main day-to-day significance is as a source of employment for Palestinians. Meanwhile, with each passing year the PA has less of a claim to being representative of the Palestinian people. Abbas is now in the fourteenth year of a four-year term to which he was elected in 2005. The most recent Palestinian legislative election—in which Hamas defeated Fatah—was in 2006.
- The Palestinian Authority made sense as a temporary, transitional mechanism as the Oslo Accords envisioned. It does not make sense as a lingering monument to the failure of Oslo to lead to a real peace settlement. Dissolution of the PA would be appropriate. The Palestine Liberation Organization—the Palestinian player at Oslo—would have to do the dissolving, and Abbas wears an additional hat as chairman of the PLO. His reluctance in the past to abolish one of the organizations he heads may endure. But dissolution would serve several useful purposes. ADVERTISING It would remove a false façade of the Israeli occupation, and one of the bases

for pretending it is not an occupation. In areas in which the PA supposedly is the principal local authority, it does not exercise the full functions of a sovereign. Even those areas are limited in size. In Oslo's threefold division of the West Bank, Area A, which is supposed to be under PA administration, constitutes 18 percent of the West Bank. Area B, designated for joint Israel-Palestinian administration, is another 22 percent. In the remaining 60 percent, labeled Area C, Palestinians have no governing role at all.

- Dissolution would distinguish what is temporary from what is justifiably permanent. It would give Palestinians an opportunity to retire old leadership. It would eliminate the technique—useful to the Israeli government and its supporters in kicking the can of Palestinian self-determination down the road indefinitely—of demanding “performance” from the Palestinians as a precondition for any progress toward statehood. Most important, dissolving the Palestinian Authority would make Israelis feel more fully the costs of continued occupation. Such feeling is probably necessary for any breakthroughs toward peace. To the extent the PA performs real administration, it functions as an auxiliary to the occupation. If the full burden of occupation were instead to fall on Israel, indefinite occupation would no longer seem as comfortable and sustainable as it evidently seems to many Israelis now.
- Subcontracting the burdens of maintaining dominance over Palestinian-inhabited territory is part of the strategy of the right-wing Israeli government for maintaining that dominance indefinitely. What the PA does in part of the West Bank, Hamas does in the Gaza Strip. The strategy helps to explain the recent decision by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not to bomb Hamas into oblivion after a clandestine Israeli foray into Gaza went awry and led to an exchange of fire, even though right-wingers such as Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who resigned over the issue, tried to score political points by accusing Netanyahu of being soft on Hamas. Netanyahu was willing to lose some points to avoid the burden of Israel having to administer the Gaza Strip directly. It is far easier to blockade it and to blame Hamas for the miserable conditions there. Whatever practical challenges might ensue from dissolution of the Palestinian Authority would be surmountable, as illustrated by the twenty-six years that Israel administered the occupied West Bank before there even was a Palestinian Authority. It remains to be seen what effect the Trump administration's “peace plan,” if it ever is announced, will have on any of this. If the plan is as heavily slanted against Palestinian interests as most every other decision the administration has made on this subject, then possibly it will provide Abbas with enough of a nudge finally to pull the plug on the existence of the PA.