Israel and the Middle East
News Update

Thursday, February 6

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15 Soldiers Wounded in Jerusalem Terror Attack, 1 Critical

Fifteen soldiers were injured in a suspected car ramming attack near Jerusalem's First Station, Channel 13 reported on Thursday, adding that security forces found the suspect's vehicle in a driveway in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem. The incident is being investigated as a terror attack, according to the Israel Police Foreign Press Spokesperson. One person was critically injured and one was moderately injured. Two of the people injured in the attack were evacuated in an IDF ambulance. Magen David Adom (MDA) reported 12 lightly injured.

See also, “Suspected car ramming in Jerusalem wounds 14 soldiers” (Ynet News)

Ha’aretz

Israeli Troops Shoot Teen Dead in West Bank Clashes, Palestinians Say

Israeli troops shot and killed a Palestinian teenager in clashes in the West Bank city of Hebron on Wednesday, the Palestinian Health Ministry said. Seventeen-year-old Mohammad Salman Toameh Al-Hadad was shot in the chest with live fire and died after being evacuated to the city hospital, according to the ministry. According to witnesses, Al-Hadad was wounded during clashes in the neighborhood of Bab al-Zawiyah. Troops fired both live fire and rubber bullets, witnesses said. The Israeli army said in a statement that Al-Hadad was shot during "a violent riot in the city of Hebron," after he had thrown Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers. See also, “Palestinian teen shot dead as he threw firebomb at troops” (TOI)

Times of Israel


Syrian state media said early Thursday that Israel launched strikes against several targets near Damascus and claimed the country’s air defenses downed a number of missiles. “Our air defenses confronted an Israeli attack” west of the capital, said state news agency SANA, adding that the attack was carried out from airspace in the Israeli Golan Heights. They “were able to shoot down most of the enemy missiles before they reached their targets,” SANA said. AFP correspondents in several districts of Damascus heard loud explosions around 1:15 am (2315 GMT). State television broadcast images showing explosions in the sky. See also, “Israel strikes in Gaza, Syria says downed Israeli missiles aimed at Iranian targets” (i24 News)

Reuters

Sudan Gives Israel Initial Okay for Overflights: Official

Sudan has agreed to allow flights heading to Israel to cross its airspace, a military spokesman said on Wednesday, two days after Sudan’s military head of state held a surprise meeting with Israel’s prime minister. The meeting in Uganda between Sudan’s Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu stirred controversy in Sudan after Israeli officials said it would lead to normalizing relations between the two former foes. Tensions have risen between the military and civilian groups sharing power after last year's overthrow of former president Omar al-Bashir. The cabinet has held two emergency meetings over the Uganda trip, about which it says it was not informed. See also, “The price of Israel’s new African adventure” (Ynet News)
**Ha’aretz**

**After Week of Escalation, Israel Limits Gaza Fishing Zone**

Israel has reduced Gaza's fishing zone from 10 to 15 nautical miles after a week of escalation sparked by the unveiling of the Trump administration's peace plan in Washington, the Defense Ministry said Wednesday. The move, which came into effect on Wednesday at 4 P.M. and is said to last "until further notice," comes after rockets and explosive-laden balloons were launched from the coastal enclave at southern Israel. The Israeli army has responded with airstrikes. Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Maj. Gen. Kamil said in a statement that the decision to limit Gaza's fishing zone "was taken after repeated terror activities were carried out from within the Strip against Israel's citizens over the past several weeks, which constitute a violation of Israeli sovereignty." See also, “Israel restricts Gaza fishing zone as cross-border attacks persist” (i24 News)

**Ynet News**

**Trump Aide Ties Israeli Settlements to Rising Anti-Semitism**

President Trump's national security adviser warned Palestinians on Wednesday that Israeli settlements will continue to expand because rising anti-Semitism around the world means more. Addressing many hot-button global issues in a speech and discussion with foreign diplomats to the United States, Robert O'Brien also said the president hoped to go to Beijing to talk to the Chinese about a three-way nuclear arms control pact with the U.S. and Russia. He said the president still hopes that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will resume nuclear talks with the U.S. O'Brien defended Trump's Mideast peace plan, which was embraced by Israel but rejected by the Palestinians. O'Brien said the plan is not "perfect," but urged the Palestinians to negotiate terms of the proposed deal. According to him, the deal offers economic benefits that would allow Palestine to become the ‘Singapore’. See also, “Trump National Security Adviser claims antisemitism will drive new settlements in Gaza” (Independent)

**Ynet News**

**Rabbi Who Called LGBT 'Disabled' to Receive Israel Prize**

Rabbi Yakov Ariel, who in the past has described members of the LGBT community as "disabled people requiring psychological treatment", will be awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for Rabbinic Literature, Education Minister Rafi Peretz announced on Tuesday. "Rabbi Ariel is one of this generation's greatest scholars," Peretz said. "He had educated many students over the years and deserves the prize for the scope and depth of his work." The 82-year-old Ariel, a pillar of the religious Zionist community, is the former chief town rabbi of Ramat Gan and was one of the most important students of Rabbi Kook, a prominent leader of the religious Zionist movement, during his time studying at Mercaz HaRav yeshiva.

**Times of Israel**

**Legendary Jewish Actor and Hollywood Icon Kirk Douglas Dead at 103**

US silver screen legend Kirk Douglas, the son of Jewish Russian immigrants who rose through the ranks to become one of Hollywood’s biggest-ever stars in “Spartacus,” “Lust for Life” and dozens of other films, died Wednesday, his family said. He was 103. “It is with tremendous sadness that my brothers and I announce that Kirk Douglas left us today at the age of 103,” his son Michael said in a statement on his Instagram account. “To the world, he was a legend, an actor from the golden age of movies who lived well into his golden years, a humanitarian whose commitment to justice and the causes he believed in set a standard for all of us to aspire to.” See also, “Kirk Douglas, a Star of Hollywood’s Golden Age, Dies at 103” (New York Times)
• Despite the resumption of rocket fire and balloon terrorism, the convergence of a number of political and geo-strategic factors is paving the way, in practice, to a truce arrangement between Israel and Hamas and is improving its chances of success. Paradoxically and ironically, this right-wing government, which used to be riven by internal disagreements over the correct intensity of Israel’s retaliation for Gazan terrorism, now hopes to achieve a truce arrangement that will dull the political impact of its failure to keep its promise to deliver a swift and clear military solution.

• Hamas, in contrast, has begun to realize that time is not necessarily on its side. The dire economic situation, the impossibility of defeating Israel militarily, the difficulty faced by Iran and its supporters in intensifying the armed struggle, the PA’s geopolitical weakness and, above all, the public’s weariness, have made Hamas come to realize that it needs a truce arrangement that will enable it to maintain its status as the ruler of the Gaza Strip state.

• This happened for several reasons: The decision to give the defense portfolio to Naftali Bennett, who publicly championed taking an aggressive policy toward the Gaza Strip, dramatically defused the right wing’s “no compromise” strategy, and now Israel is willing to pay a high price in return for quiet.

• The governmental instability in Israel, along with Netanyahu and the right-wing government’s willingness to pay a high price for psychological gains (Shalit, Issachar) is perceived by Hamas as weakness, and based on this, Hamas believes that it can demand a high price from the Israeli government when reaching a truce arrangement. Hamas does not expect that a government headed by Blue and White would be any different.

• The deal of the century and its surprising acceptance by some of the Arab states reflect the reduced interest in the Palestinian issue in the international and Arab communities, and is a signal to Hamas that there is less legitimacy for its battle against Israel.

• Abu Mazen’s weakness, coupled with the Gaza Strip having become a separate territorial and geopolitical, entity, signifies a practical solution of three states for two peoples, has spurred Hamas into trying to work out a solution of its own, as an independent and legitimate player.

• It also appears that the convergence of a number of geo-political trends have created a real opportunity for the sides to reach a truce arrangement that will be based on the good, old formula of security in exchange for economic prosperity. These trends are linked to the Americans’ show of resolve against Iran and the radical axis, as well as to the Arab and Sunni states’ desire to agree to a diplomatic solution between Israel and the Palestinians.

• All of the above, coupled with Hamas’s weaker fortitude and the more muted debate in Israel over the strategy that should be adopted toward the Gaza Strip—now serve to improve the chances of reaching a truce arrangement.
The South is at the Bottom of the Government’s List of Priorities

By Matan Tzuri, contributor to Yedioth Ahronoth

- The use of explosive balloon terrorism against us and against the residents of the Gaza periphery communities and further afield in southern Israel, has been renewed on a far larger scale and with greater lethality. The balloon-borne bombs have been significantly upgraded to contain larger quantities of explosives, which are packed with ball bearings so as to increase their impact. Yet the more pervasive balloon terrorism becomes, the more our leadership chooses to ignore it. The balloon terrorism of 2020 has yet to elicit any response. The decision has been to contain it, to take it in stride, to bury our heads in the sand. Barrages of balloon-borne explosives are sent sailing towards the Gaza periphery communities every single evening, but our leadership has remained preoccupied with the upcoming elections. The IDF retaliates only to rocket fire, whereas the balloon terrorism has been met with silence.

- The politicians’ cynicism has also proved to be boundless. Defense Minister Naftali Bennett is on tour in America, and has made sure to report on Twitter about every meeting he has held with every American official. Netanyahu is busy with his election campaign; after weeks of terrorism in the south, the prime minister decided yesterday to meet yesterday with local leaders—but only with those who are Likud members, and not with any of the others. That combination of terrorism, partisan politics and the looming elections—where does it leave us, the residents of the Gaza periphery communities? “Efforts are being made to bring about complete quiet, without the use of force, and the IDF is prepared to launch a military operation if need be. We would prefer to reach a solution without a conflagration,” said Prime Minister Netanyahu yesterday in his meeting with local leaders who hail from his own party.

- When considering the threats from the north, Netanyahu’s indictment and elections in another three weeks—the fate of southern Israel appears to be at the bottom of the [government’s] list of priorities. The 60,000 residents of the Gaza periphery communities are waiting for someone to advance them a rung on the State of Israel’s set of priorities. But that hasn’t happened and nothing has changed for far too long. The residents of the Gaza periphery feel neglected and frustrated. They are frustrated by the fact that they have no one to talk to—there’s no government and no leadership. Hamas has continued to dictate what the residents’ days look like, and it has continued to decide when things are calm and when they aren’t.

- The defense minister is going to return to Israel at some point soon to begin his election campaign. Presumably, he will comment on the south and will make a few threatening statements against Hamas. Those statements are going to sound very clear and unequivocal, and they might even sound logical, but we residents of southern Israel are unlikely to see them yield any results, and all we’ll be left with at the end of the day is his tweet, which will disappear in time. The defense minister will bank on everyone’s short memory. But our memory isn’t short. Because every time a bomb explodes or the Red Color alert sounds, that is going to remind us residents of the Gaza periphery communities just how unsafe life here is and just how much no one gives a hoot about us. Nowadays political considerations clearly trump the safety and security of Israel’s citizens.