Israel and Middle East News Update

Thursday, May 20

Headlines:

- Fears of "Third Intifada" as Violence Spreads to West Bank
- Ashdod, Sderot Hit, as Rocket Barrage Continues From Gaza
- US Opposes UN Resolution for Gaza Cease-Fire
- Blinken: US Backing on Gaza Won't Last Much Longer
- House Dems Move to Block Israel Arms Sale Amid Conflict
- Kuwaiti Protesters Burn Israeli Flag, Reject Normalization
- PM Drawing Out Gaza Operation Due to Lapid Mandate
- Hamas Resumes Rocket Fire, Fires Anti-Tank Missile

Commentary:

- Yedioth Ahronoth: “Biden is All Israel Has Left”
  - By Nadav Eyal

  - By Yossi Klein Halevi
Axios

**Fears of "Third Intifada" as Violence Spreads to West Bank**

As the Gaza crisis has raged on, the most serious clashes in years between Palestinian demonstrators and the Israeli military in the West Bank have broken out. Israel is concerned that further escalation in the West Bank could turn into a third intifada. Thousands of Palestinian protesters clashed with Israeli soldiers in several locations. Hamas leaders have called on the Palestinian public to join the demonstrations in an apparent attempt to boost the group's standing. While fueled by the events in Gaza, the latest escalation is also part of a decades-long resistance to Israel’s military presence in the West Bank. Hamas had been inactive for more than a decade, during which time many of its members joined the Palestinian Authority security forces or got jobs in civilian government ministries. **Dig Deeper “Abbas Accuses Israel of ‘War Crimes,’ Calls Gaza Operation ‘State Terror’” (Times of Israel)**

Jerusalem Post

**Ashdod, Sderot Hit, as Rocket Barrage Continues From Gaza**

Rocket barrages targeted central and southern Israel, hitting homes and wounding several people, on the 10th day of fighting between Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza and the IDF. S200 rockets were launched Wednesday, setting off sirens in the Shfela region, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Beersheba and neighboring communities. So far, more than 4,000 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip, with some 500 falling inside Gaza. Twelve people in Israel have died since the beginning of the fighting, and more than 330 have been wounded, Magen David Adom reported. The Gaza Health Ministry said 245 people have died since the beginning of the fighting, including 68 children and 37 women. Another 1,500 people have been wounded. **Dig Deeper “Netanyahu Determined to Continue Gaza Operation Despite Pressure From Biden” (Jerusalem Post)**

Associated Press

**US Opposes UN Resolution for Gaza Cease-Fire**

The United States opposed a draft UN Security Council resolution calling for a cease-fire in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. The US says it could interfere with the Biden administration’s efforts to end the hostilities. France drafted the resolution after the US earlier blocked at least four attempts to have the council issue a press statement calling for an end to hostilities. A press statement requires agreement by all 15 council members. A resolution only requires at least nine “yes” votes and no veto by the US or any of the four other permanent members. A French spokesman had said “very intense discussions” were taking place with the US on the proposed resolution. But the US Mission to the UN said later “that we will not support actions that we believe undermine efforts to de-escalate.” **Dig Deeper “French-US Tensions at UN Over Middle East Violence” (I24 News)**
Axios

**Blinken: US Backing on Gaza Won't Last Much Longer**

Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi told Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Israel needs another few days to complete its Gaza operation, but Blinken stressed that the US expects the operation to end soon, according to an Israeli official. The call between Blinken and Ashkenazi was part of the intensifying diplomatic squeeze to move toward a ceasefire in Gaza, which Israel is still fending off for now. Israeli officials said on the call, the issue of domestic political pressure from Congress for a ceasefire was mentioned. Egyptian intelligence officials and UN envoy Tor Wennesland have held talks with Hamas officials and Israeli national security adviser Meir Ben Shabbat regarding a possible ceasefire. Ben Shabbat hasn't received authorization from Netanyahu to enter into negotiations, Israeli officials say. Meanwhile, Hamas official Musa Abu Marzouk said that he expects the talks to produce a ceasefire within a day or two. **Dig Deeper “Israel Must Talk to Hamas to Improve the Situation in Gaza – Opinion” (Jerusalem Post)**

Al-Monitor

**House Dems Move to Block Israel Arms Sale Amid Conflict**

A group of progressive Democrats in the US House of Representatives is planning to introduce a joint resolution to block the Biden administration’s planned $735m sale of bombs and JDAM guidance kits to Israel amid the ongoing conflict with Gaza. The move is unlikely to pass, and the window to consider the measure has largely closed. But it marks a major milestone in rising opposition among progressive lawmakers to US military support for Israel amid Netanyahu government’s policies toward the Palestinians. The so-called joint resolution of disapproval will be put to the committee for consideration by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, but time has run largely out. So far there is little sign of opposition to the sale in the Senate, where a similar resolution would force a vote in the upper chamber. The resolution comes amid mounting criticism of President Biden’s tiptoe approach to stemming the violence. **Dig Deeper “Bernie Sanders Introduces Resolution Calling for Gaza Ceasefire” (Axios)**

Reuters

**Kuwaiti Protesters Burn Israeli Flag, Reject Normalization**

Hundreds of Kuwaitis demonstrated in support of Palestinians and burned an Israeli flag to protest at the bombardment of Gaza after authorities allowed the rally to proceed despite coronavirus restrictions. Protesters chanted "Death to Israel" and held banners rejecting normalization accords struck by the UAE and Bahrain to forge ties with Israel. In neighboring states such as the UAE, some citizens have criticized Hamas for provoking Israeli air strikes. Kuwait, which launched a relief campaign for Palestinians this week, prevented a similar rally, citing COVID-19 concerns. Protests are rare in the Gulf region, where governments keep a lid on dissent and political parties are not allowed. Qatar has also permitted a pro-Palestinian protest. Gulf states have condemned what they called flagrant Israeli violations of Palestinian rights and called for a halt to hostilities. **Dig Deeper “No Longer Silent, Gulf Arab Citizens Express Anger at Israel” (Associated Press)**
Jerusalem Post

PM Drawing Out Gaza Operation Due to Lapid Mandate

After ten days of confrontation with Gaza, there are also voices in the Likud Party that are casting doubt on the direction in which the party's chairman Netanyahu is leading them. A senior political adviser who is a member of the party said "Netanyahu is playing on the operation in Gaza to extend the days given to Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid for the mandate to form a government, without any real plan. Nor does he seem to have a real desire to eradicate Hamas. He is leaving ruins in the relations between Arab Israelis and the Jews. Netanyahu is galloping toward a fifth election and taking the country hostage. The collapse of Yamina head Naftali Bennett is giving him a boost, but support for him within the Likud is weakening." Other elements in the right-wing bloc say that Netanyahu is aiming for further elections, in which, he believes, he will enjoy an improved image following the current confrontation with Hamas. "He is building on the fact that Yamina will be erased," said party officials. Dig Deeper “Likud Minister Says Israel Should End Gaza Fighting Unilaterally” (Ynet News)

Times of Israel

Hamas Resumes Rocket Fire, Fires Anti-Tank Missile

Rocket fire from Gaza abated overnight Wednesday-Thursday with no alarms sounding in Israeli communities from 1 a.m. until after 9 a.m., when the tense calm was broken with multiple waves of attacks on Israeli communities near the Gaza border, including an anti-tank missile fired by Hamas operatives at an empty military bus north of the enclave. A soldier standing nearby the bus was lightly injured by shrapnel in the attack, the IDF said. The lull came as the IDF kept up airstrikes against the Hamas terror group, which has launched the majority of thousands of rockets fired at Israel since the fighting erupted 11 days ago. However, the number and intensity of the Israeli strikes were lower than in previous nights. In the Thursday morning attacks, multiple rounds of mortar and rocket fire were directed at Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip beginning just before 9:30 a.m., with a mortar attack on the communities of Nirm and Ein Hashlosha. This was the second successful anti-tank guided missile attack directed against IDF soldiers on the border so far in this campaign. In the first such strike last Tuesday, IDF soldier Staff Sgt. Omer Tabib was killed when the missile struck his jeep and two other servicemen were injured, one seriously and one moderately. Dig Deeper “The Next Round Will Be Worse, Unless Israel Reasserts Control of Its Destiny” (Times of Israel)
Biden is All Israel Has Left

By Nadav Eyal

Many Israelis may have a hard time understanding the American pressure on Israel, which last night became an unequivocal demand, to stop the operation. That demand stems, simply put, from the fact that they don’t know the Gazan party to the conflict and the news reports out of Gaza. It isn’t only the destruction of the media building in Gaza City, which used to house some of the most prominent news agencies in the world, including the AP and AFP. It is also the story of the 17 members of the al-Kawalek family, including a one-year-old baby, who, according to the Washington Post, were killed in an air strike that affected two four-story buildings on al-Wihda in Gaza City on Sunday. According to Palestinian reports, ten children were killed in those attacks. It is also the story of Dr. Ayman Abu al-Ouf, the 51-year-old head of the internal medicine department at Shifa Hospital, who was killed in an air strike on Gaza City’s Rimal neighborhood, an attack that was designed to damage Hamas’s “metro.”

In addition to those stories, there was the IDF’s ruse about a ground incursion; there was also video footage of Israeli security officials, either IDF or Border Police troops, shoving and dealing rudely with CNN’s veteran correspondent in Jerusalem, Ben Wedeman. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib didn’t need any of the above to mount vigorous opposition to and criticism of the [Democratic Party’s] traditional support for Israel; they were there even before Operation Guardian of the Walls.

But those stories provided them and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party with additional ammunition to argue that the United States must not continue to extend Israel credit. Last night, after the unequivocal [demand that was made by President Biden in the] conversation between Biden and Netanyahu, Democratic Members of Congress headed by Ocasio-Cortez began a coordinated effort to introduce a resolution to block a large arms deal with Israel. The chances of that resolution being approved and of actually preventing the deal from going through are scant, but this is the first time that something of that kind has happened in the House of Representatives in many years.

What has changed? Two things principally. The first is Netanyahu and his relations with the Republicans, Trump and others. In the politics of the Democratic Party—which currently controls both houses of Congress and the White House—Trump is not a legitimate figure and, therefore, the alliance that Netanyahu formed with him, which included billboards featuring pictures of the two men together, turned into a double-edged sword. Netanyahu is perceived in large parts of the Democratic Party—and not only among Ilhan Omar and her group—as a dangerous and racist leader. His support for Mitt Romney’s presidential bid, his clash with President Obama over the nuclear agreement with Iran, his insistence on speaking out against the president’s policy in an address to Congress and his personal friendship with Donald Trump—none of that has been forgotten. Israel is now paying a painful price for having pulverized its traditional supra-partisan policy, which is something that Netanyahu and the Republicans’ ambassador, Ron Dermer, worked hard to achieve.
• The second development has nothing to do with Israel or Netanyahu. Large parts of the Democratic Party do not view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a national-ethnic conflict but rather as a racist event. J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami said to me last week that power in the Democratic Party in Congress is shifting towards the progressives. He said that for them the conflict is perceived as if it were a clash in which a white, colonialist, occupying and heavily-armed state, along with all of its institutions, is crushing non-white people who have been dispossessed of their natural rights. The central bulwark against radical views of that kind about the conflict is President Biden. That is why, when he asks or demands something, we would do well to listen.
Israel’s Real Existential Threat
By Yossi Klein Halevi

- Israelis are adept at the pretense of normalcy. We move with seeming ease between daily life and life-threatening crisis. Our home front has endured assaults from Saddam Hussein’s Scud missiles, Hezbollah’s Katyushas and precision missiles, Hamas’s homemade rockets and the more lethal Iranian models currently falling on our neighborhoods, along with suicide bombing and car ramming and stabbing sprees. The Israeli ethos of coping is summed up in an ironic but heartfelt phrase, Lo na’im, lo norah, “not so pleasant but not so terrible.” Even when it is terrible, as it is now, with half the country forced into air raid shelters and “safe rooms,” we know there is a morning after.

- But now it is the morning after that I worry about most. Even as the missiles fall, Arab citizens and Jewish citizens are violently attacking one another. More than the missiles, I worry about the terror we have internalized. How will we overcome the hatred and fear? The epicenter of the unrest is Lod, a mixed Arab-Jewish working-class town minutes from Ben Gurion Airport. Young Arab men firebombed Jewish homes and burned five synagogues, chanting slogans calling for Israel’s destruction; Jewish extremists counterattacked. The violence quickly spread, even to Haifa, our showcase of coexistence. Arab mobs and Jewish mobs roamed the streets, beating and lynching, destroying “Jewish” shops and “Arab” shops, destroying a fragile but enduring equilibrium.

- Ironically, the worst interethnic violence since the 1948 War follows the most promising year in the fraught history of the Arab-Jewish relationship. The coronavirus pandemic, Israel’s first lethal crisis that wasn’t about its conflict with the Arab world, brought Arab citizens closer than ever to the mainstream. The Israeli health system is one of the most integrated areas in our society: According to government estimates about 17 percent of doctors and 24 percent of nurses are Arab. The Israeli news media’s coverage of coronavirus focused on doctors in hijabs and coexistence in the respirator wards. One story that became iconic told of an Arab nurse who recited deathbed prayers with an ultra-Orthodox Jew. Meanwhile, Israel was in political lockdown. After four inconclusive elections in two years, Jewish Israel was stalemated. Until this year, it was a given that Arab parties don’t participate in helping to form governing coalitions. Arab politicians didn’t want to risk supporting a government at war with Gaza or Lebanon; Jewish politicians didn’t want to legitimize Arab politicians who sometimes supported terror attacks against Jews.

- Arab voters, though, were demanding that their representatives become players, even if that meant downplaying a Palestinian nationalist agenda in favor of pressing local issues like rising violent crime in Arab towns. The deadlock provided an opening. Then came the fighting in Gaza and in Israel’s streets, and the historic partnership unraveled. Israel’s ability to fashion a common civic identity for Arabs and Jews is confounded by the security situation.
• Jews wonder how they can trust a minority that is culturally and emotionally aligned with their enemies, and whose politicians reject the country’s identity as a Jewish state. For Arabs, a history of government land confiscation and budgetary discrimination, as well as the seemingly endless occupation of the Palestinians, have left deep wounds and distrust. The message Arabs take from the country’s Jewish identity and symbols is that they don’t quite belong.

• That message was reinforced in 2018 with the Nation-State Law, passed by the right over the objections of the center and the left, which defines Israel as a Jewish state but ignores its democratic identity. Right-wing defenders of the law insist that affirming Israel as a democracy was unnecessary, since the Knesset had already passed laws ensuring equal rights for all. Yet those laws refer to individual rights, while the Nation-State Law defines the country’s identity. Editors’ Picks ‘S.N.L.’ Is Just as Confused About the New Mask Guidelines as You Are

• The framers of Israel’s Declaration of Independence defined Israel as both Jewish and democratic: the homeland of all Jews, whether or not they were Israeli citizens; the state of all its citizens, whether or not they were Jews. An Israel that would no longer regard itself as a continuity of the Jewish story and protector of the world’s vulnerable Jews would lose its soul; an Israel that would no longer aspire to fulfill democratic values would lose its mind.

• Balancing those two increasingly contentious but foundational elements of our national identity defines my Israeli commitment. There are voices on the left and the right who call for abolishing either Israel’s Jewish identity or its democratic identity. I stand with the large, if embattled, camp of political centrists that insists on holding both. We know that Israel’s long-term viability depends on managing the tensions inherent in our identity and reality. For Israelis to form a shared civic identity, Jews need to fulfill Israel’s founding promise to grant full equality to all citizens and reassure Arabs that “Israeli” is not a synonym for “Jew.” Arabs need to come to terms with the fact that Israel will not abandon its Jewish identity and commitments.

• In my building in Jerusalem’s French Hill neighborhood, nearly half the families are Arab Israeli. They are lawyers, doctors, civil servants, who bought apartments here because they want their share of the Israeli dream. The violence that erupted in the poor mixed neighborhoods would be unthinkable in middle-class French Hill. When Arabs and Jews meet in the parking lot, we sigh and reassure each other that things will get better because they always do and we have no choice. Most Israelis — Arabs and Jews — are practiced in the habit of decency. But we are also practiced in self-justification. We know the routines of neighborliness, but rarely consider the other’s reality. We avoid the hard questions that threaten our certainties, our insistence on the absolute justice of our side. What is it like to be a Palestinian citizen of a Jewish state that occupies your family? What is it like to be a Jew who has finally come home, only to live under constant siege?

• The current violence wasn’t triggered by any one event but, in part, by our inability to ask those questions. Perhaps we can begin building a better Israel from that place of shared brokenness.