Israel and Middle East News Update

Wednesday, August 17

Headlines:

- Ben Gvir Says He’d Seek to Expel Arabs Who Attack IDF
- In Rare Move, Ultra-Orthodox Establish West Bank Outpost
- Israeli Strike Killed 5 Gaza Children, Officials Admit
- Abbas Skirts Apology for Munich Attack
- Israel Allows West Bank Palestinians to Fly Out of Ramon Airport
- Palestinians Aim to Gain Full UN Member State Status
- EU, US Studying Iran’s Response to Nuclear Proposal
- Turkey’s Airstrike on Syrian Border Post Kills 11

Commentary:

- Ha’aretz: “Iran Views the Nuclear File Through the Eyes of North Korea”
  - By Alon Pinkas

- Ma’ariv: “The Gaza Strip Challenge”
  - By Meir Ben-Shabbat
**Ben Gvir Says He’d Seek to Expel Arabs Who Attack IDF**

Far-right lawmaker Itamar Ben Gvir said he wants to introduce a bill providing courts the option to deport Arab citizens who attack soldiers with a nationalistic intent, as well as politicians who are deemed disloyal to Israel. When asked by Army Radio how someone who throws a Molotov cocktail or rocks at IDF troops should be punished, Ben Gvir said: “He should be expelled, he should have his citizenship stripped and leave.” He went on to differentiate between Arab citizens and Jewish Israelis, arguing that Jews guilty of throwing rocks at soldiers should “sit in prison for many years” rather than being deported. Ben Gvir named Joint List MKs Ayman Odeh and Ofer Cassif as individuals he believes should be deported. He claimed they actively work against the State without giving details. Odeh and Cassif are members of the list’s Hadash faction, a left-wing party with a communist agenda. Odeh is Muslim; Cassif is Jewish.

**In Rare Move, Ultra-Orthodox Establish West Bank Outpost**

A group of 15 ultra-Orthodox families announced they have established an illegal outpost in the southern West Bank within walking distance from the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Metzad. The group includes families with children and yeshiva students. The great majority of West Bank wildcat outposts were established in the past two decades by settlers and right-wing activists identifying themselves with the national religious stream, namely Orthodox Jews. The group that established the new outpost named Derech Emunah are ultra-Orthodox Jews. The group said they had set up some 15 wooden structures on the site, including homes for the families to live in, a makeshift synagogue, and a makeshift yeshiva. Israeli nongovernmental organization Peace Now called upon Defense Minister Benny Gantz to dismantle immediately the new West Bank outpost.

**Israeli Strike Killed 5 Gaza Children, Officials Admit**

Israeli defense officials have confirmed that Israel was responsible for the deaths of five minors killed on the last day of the recent hostilities with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) this month. An army inquiry into the incident, which occurred on August 7 in the Al-Faluja Cemetery east of Jabalya, has concluded that the minors were killed by an Israeli airstrike. Immediately after their deaths, senior officers said the five were killed by a misfired PIJ rocket. The IDF Spokesperson’s Unit said that during the fighting, the army was working to defend the country’s security and therefore “attacked Islamic Jihad military targets in the Gaza Strip. During its operations, the IDF made every reasonable effort to minimize, insofar as possible, harm to civilians and civilian property.”
**Abbas Skirts Apology for Munich Attack**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas expressed no regret for the deadly attack by Palestinian militants against Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics half a century ago, countering that Israel had committed "Holocausts" against Palestinians over the years. Eleven Israeli athletes and a German police officer died after members of the Palestinian militant group Black September took hostages at the Olympic Village on Sept. 5, 1972. Asked whether, as Palestinian leader, he planned to apologize to Israel and Germany for the attack ahead of the 50th anniversary, Abbas responded by citing allegations of atrocities committed by Israel since 1947. "If we want to go over the past, go ahead," Abbas said after meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin. "I have 50 slaughters that Israel committed." Abbas explicitly used the word "Holocausts" in his reply, drawing a grimace from Scholz. **Dig Deeper “German Chancellor Rejects Describing Israeli-Palestinian Relations as ‘Apartheid’” (Ynet News)**

**Israel Allows WB Palestinians to Fly Out of Ramon Airport**

The first flight for Palestinian travelers from Ramon Airport near Eilat will depart on Aug. 22 to the Turkish city of Antalya. The pilot flight allows Palestinians to travel through an Israeli airport based on an agreement with Turkey-based airlines. The flight will initially carry passengers from the southern West Bank — in particular Bethlehem and Hebron, given that this area is the closest to the airport. Travelers from this area reach Ramon Airport in a four-hour drive. Israel is trying to promote that it is allowing Palestinians to travel through Ramon Airport as part of the economic easement facilities it is offering Palestinians. However, the step would also be profitable for Israel amid the poor popularity among Israeli travelers of Ramon Airport. Meanwhile, the Palestinian government saw the arrangement as a bypass of Palestinians' rights to have an independent airport.

**Palestinians Aim to Gain Full UN Member State Status**

Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour is once again seeking full member state status at the UN, but Ramallah faces an uphill battle without support from the US, which has passed laws aimed at thwarting such an effort. In an interview with The Times of Israel, Mansour argued that the new initiative would “save the two-state solution” and serve as a counterweight to unilateral steps taken by Israel in East Jerusalem and the West Bank that have damaged prospects that the framework could eventually be implemented. The Palestinian envoy maintained that granting the State of Palestine full member status would also be consistent with the Biden administration’s policy to advance “practical measures” aimed at creating more fertile ground for a two-state solution in the absence of negotiations between the parties on final status issues. PA President Mahmoud Abbas submitted an application to obtain the status in 2011, but the effort didn’t get past the Security Council, largely due to opposition from the Barack Obama administration.
EU, US Studying Iran’s Response to Nuclear Proposal

The European Union and the United States said on Thursday they were studying Iran's response to what the EU has called its "final" proposal to save a 2015 nuclear deal after Tehran called on Washington to show flexibility. A US State Department spokesperson said the US was sharing its views on Iran's response with the EU after receiving Tehran's comments from the bloc. After 16 months of fitful, indirect US-Iranian talks, with the EU shuttling between the parties, a senior EU official said on Aug. 8 that the bloc had laid down a "final" offer and expected a response within a "very, very few weeks." Iran responded to the proposal, but none of the parties provided any details. Washington has said it is ready to quickly seal a deal to restore the 2015 accord on the basis of the EU proposals. Diplomats and officials have told Reuters that whether or not Tehran and Washington accept the EU's "final" offer, neither is likely to declare the pact dead because keeping it alive serves both sides' interests. Dig Deeper “Does Iran Want a Nuclear Deal Revival or to Make It Look Like It Does?” (Jerusalem Post)

Turkey’s Airstrike on Syrian Border Post Kills 11

A Turkish airstrike on Syria's border post killed 11 people following an overnight flareup between Ankara's forces and Kurdish fighters that control the area, a war monitor said. Syrian state media said three soldiers were killed and six others were wounded in an attack by Turkish forces in the Aleppo countryside. They didn’t specify whether the victims were affiliated with the Damascus government or Kurdish forces. The airstrike targeted a position of regime forces in the village of Jarqali, west of the border town of Kobani, according to the monitor. Heavy fighting broke out between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by Kurdish fighters, and Turkish forces, who intensified their shelling of Kurdish positions after one of their positions on the Turkish side of the border was attacked, the statement added. Regime forces in recent years have been deployed to areas controlled by Kurdish forces near the border with Turkey under agreements designed to stem Ankara's cross-border offensives targeting Kurdish fighters they see as "terrorists.” Dig Deeper ‘‘Normalization’’ with Assad Is the New Normal in Turkey” (Al-Monitor)
Two seemingly unrelated announcements were made on Monday. First, in Seoul and Washington, South Korea and the United States announced that they had conducted a ballistic missile defense exercise, with Japan, off the coast of Hawaii. They also revealed the resumption of Ulchi Freedom Shield – a joint US-South Korean military drill that will begin on August 22. Since 1976, this large-scale exercise was held annually but was suspended in 2018 to give a chance to Great President Trump’s “love letters diplomacy” with Great Leader Kim Jong Un. The exercise had never resumed because of the coronavirus pandemic’s obvious limitations and Donald Trump’s general distaste and aversion to alliances. “Ulchi” is named after Korean general Eulji Mundeok, the seventh-century ruler of Goguryeo – one of the three kingdoms comprising the Korean Peninsula. At its peak, Goguryeo controlled most of modern Korea, eastern Manchuria, and Inner Mongolia. Eulji’s claim to fame was that he saved Korea from China, and the exercise was named after him since China was perceived as the main future challenge as far back as the 1970s.

The historical symbolism never impressed the constantly-agitated North Korea, which sees every US-South Korean exercise and military cooperation as a telling sign of an imminent threat of invasion and forced unification. This has served as North Korea’s rationale for its nuclear program, and predictably, Pyongyang is now threatening a new nuclear test. The United States can honestly and legitimately claim it is strengthening an existing alliance with South Korea and Japan and drafting a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy and that, as the recent Taiwan crisis proved, this is about China. North Korea isn’t convinced and quickly made some hyperbolic statements of eternal friendship toward China. On the same day, 5,400 miles from Seoul in Brussels, the European Union announced it had received Iran’s response to a paper the EU ceremoniously described as “the final” draft text for the renewal of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (aka the Iran nuclear deal).

Since the Biden administration was inaugurated in January 2021, it has tried to negotiate the US’ reentry into the agreement from which Trump unilaterally withdrew in May 2018 – a month before Trump met Kim in Singapore – and which Iran began violating in June 2019. It is unclear whether Iran, which, thanks to the Trump’s withdrawal, is closer than it has ever been to military nuclear capability, actually accepted the EU’s draft, with various sources claiming it amounted to a qualified “Yes, but...” rather than acceptance. While Iran may end up refusing “the final” draft and reportedly asked for a resolution to several issues, it does look as if a deal is within reach – provided that both Washington and Tehran actually want one. There are nine (military) nuclear powers in the world. Eight are declared: the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain, India, Pakistan and North Korea. One is undeclared: Israel, maintaining a long-standing policy of opaqueness over whether it does or does not possess nuclear weapons and the types of delivery systems.
There are seven “nuclear threshold” countries, meaning they possess the technology, critical components, scientific knowledge, and technical capability to produce a weapons-grade nuclear device/bomb, but have chosen not to do so for various, often indigenous, reasons: Japan, South Korea, Germany, Canada, Australia, South Africa and, arguably, Iran. The conventional wisdom is that whether nuclear weapons were developed as a deterrent or as an active defense, nuclear countries enjoy immunity from invasions. The exception is Israel, which was attacked by Egypt and Syria in 1973; and, to a lesser extent, the skirmishes between India and Pakistan and, less frequently, sporadic local clashes between India and China. Overall, though, nuclear countries feel safer possessing a nuclear deterrent, and none has been invaded. In the case of North Korea and Iran, it is more of a shield against regime change.

Despite the vast differences in geopolitical conditions and circumstances, both the hermit paradise of North Korea and the God’s Republic-theocracy in Iran have developed a nuclear capability as a result of looking at the experiences of others. North Korea, fearing a US-South Korean invasion ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953, regards its southern neighbor as a de facto nuclear power by virtue of the US’ support, military umbrella, and nuclear weapons stationed very close to the peninsula. In 1991, then-President George H.W. Bush removed all US tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea, but that hardly makes a difference to Pyongyang. The North Koreans looked at China’s path: an underdeveloped, regressive, not-taken-seriously dormant giant in the ’50s that gained international respect only when it developed nuclear power.

The China model, therefore, should be emulated if North Korea is to avert invasion. They then looked at Iraq: Had it developed a nuclear arsenal, would the Americans have invaded not once but twice? Iran’s nuclear program goes back to the era of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, preceding the Islamic Republic of 1979. It has to do with regional hegemony almost as much as it is intended as an equalizer to Israel’s power. But Tehran also looked at Iraq, as well as Libya. Most recently, it watched Ukraine closely. Had Ukraine not relinquished 1,900 nuclear warheads in 1994, would Russia have dared invade Crimea in 2014, not to mention the 2022 invasion?

And this brings us to the common denominator that Iran and North Korea share. Ostensibly and fundamentally, they are different: North Korea is a functioning nuclear power with an arsenal estimated at 40 warheads, although they are not yet mountable on a ballistic missile. Iran is a nuclear threshold state, but conceivably with nearly enough fissile material to produce one or two “Hiroshima-type” bombs. But neither will denuclearize. North Korea will never agree to any type of disarmament that includes foreign supervision. Iran may ultimately agree to a new nuclear deal and the curtailment of its military nuclear program. But most assuredly, it will continue to prepare for the opportunity to advance on the threshold spectrum and get closer to the so-called “breakout” – where capability is converted to a device. You can’t really denuclearize a state unless it willingly acquiesces. Only three times in history did a country do that voluntarily: post-apartheid South Africa, post-Soviet Union Ukraine, and post-Soviet Union Kazakhstan. Don’t expect North Korea and Iran to follow suit.
The Gaza Strip Challenge
By Meir Ben-Shabbat

- Israel needs to make every effort so that in the long term, the Gaza Strip is demilitarized and controlled by a legitimate entity that recognizes Israel and doesn’t perpetrate violence against it. Given its fundamental outlook and position vis-à-vis Israel, it is clear that Hamas not only cannot be a partner for a political solution but is also clearly an enemy of Israel.

- Conquering the Gaza Strip or Stabilizing Hamas: In dealing with the challenges Israel faces regarding the Gaza Strip, it has two options, neither of which are particularly enticing. The first is to conquer the Gaza Strip and to make regime change by means of a broad and deep military operation, which would have high direct and indirect costs, and which would produce results that may or may not last in the absence of another group that might want or would even be capable of seizing the reins of power. The second option is to stabilize and “maintain” the quiet of the ceasefire, coupled with the political and security efforts—to maintain the deterrence, prolong Hamas’s political isolation, stymie its efforts to export terrorism from the Gaza Strip, and entrench itself in Judea and Samaria, and to stop its military buildup.

- The latter has been the stance that the State of Israel has typically taken. The weaknesses of this choice stem from the fact that the quiet it offers is always going to be fragile and temporary. It only endures between one round of fighting and the next. The challenge is to extend its duration as much as possible, and when a military conflagration does erupt—to take maximum advantage of it to strengthen deterrence, weaken Hamas, and review whether conditions have been created for a move that might bring us closer to our strategic goal. In the current situation, the primary problem that Israel has to overcome lies in the question of how to ensure quiet and, at the same time, prevent Hamas from moving forward with a military buildup.

- This Way, We'll Achieve Temporary and Fragile Quiet: The newly eased restrictions that are a feature of Israel’s policy vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip will make it more difficult for Hamas’s leaders when they find themselves tempted to enter into a military conflagration with Israel. The Israeli policies also strengthen the credibility of people in Gaza who support temporary restraint in operations against Israel. However, they are liable to provide Hamas with additional resources and opportunities to accelerate Hamas’s military buildup, which will greatly impact its strength and possibly also the timing of the next military conflagration. In view of this, and as a lesson from various rounds of fighting we have been through to date, the correct risk management vis-à-vis Gaza would be for Israel to ascribe greater importance to the issue of Hamas’s military buildup. The security establishment should be instructed to define reining in and attacking Hamas’s high-quality weapons as a key objective in the war-between-wars and to create tracking mechanisms that will counter the inherent tendency to ignore processes such as the “military buildup,” which is something that tends to happen below the surface under the cover of long-term quiet, and which are not felt on ordinary days.
In the meantime, it is essential that Israel maintain its policy of restricting the imports to Gaza of dual-purpose raw materials and devices, which might be used by Hamas in its efforts to stockpile weapons and become more sophisticated. This policy must be adopted as a basic component in the strategy for reining in Hamas’s military buildup. A week after the end of Operation Breaking Dawn, it was reported on Sunday that Israel intends to offer new relief measures to the Gaza Strip. Among others, the idea is to increase the volume of exports and imports out and into the Gaza Strip, to increase the amount of water and fertilizers that can be brought in for agriculture, to permit the entry of lathes for use in factories, to increase the number of work permits in Israel and to make things easier in other areas.

Ostensibly, building new neighborhoods in Gaza is not supposed to arouse the security establishment’s suspicion, and neither should proposed solutions to Gaza’s problems with electricity and water and/or efforts that are undertaken to improve agriculture. But the years since Hamas seized control over the Gaza Strip have proven that that organization’s long arm can be found everywhere. There is almost nothing that enters or leaves the Gaza Strip that happens against its will, and it has displayed endless creativity in its efforts to enjoy the profits of this—financial and otherwise. Over the years, Israel has taken risks on that front, trying only to prevent the development of a humanitarian crisis, and has allowed the supply of basic necessities for the population.

The population was viewed as being hostages held by Hamas and crying out for food. Obviously, they have to be given what to eat, even if their captors are the first to enjoy it. But there is no similarity between increasing the water quota and allowing in lathes and fertilizers, not only in their essentialness to the population but also in terms of the security damage that is liable to be caused to Israel. There is no need to explain what use Hamas can make of advanced lathing machines and what can be produced from high-quality fertilizer, even if it says on the package “for agricultural purposes only.” Building new neighborhoods in Gaza can be a humanitarian issue with no security implications only when it is ensured that that won’t serve as cover for bringing in heavy machinery and high-quality raw materials that might then be used for tunneling. It is unlikely this can be guaranteed under the current reality in the Gaza Strip.

Not Fantasy Scenarios: Anyone who thinks the above are either misplaced suspicions or fantasy scenarios is welcome to read the annual summaries that are posted on the GSS website. For example, the 2015 report—the year after Operation Protective Edge—reads: “One of the prominent [achievements] this year was foiled smuggling via the Kerem Shalom crossing, [of items] intended to serve the military buildup of terror entities in the Gaza Strip, in particular Hamas. These are materials and devices that require special approval, given that they are used, among other things, to manufacture weapons, such as graphite and silver nitrate, or devices required by Hamas to build power such as winches, engines, and compressors used to dig tunnels, various types of batteries (alternative form of energy), communications cables, and steel fittings. As part of the smuggling prevention, 70 people were arrested, among them merchants, truckers, warehouse operators, drivers, and suppliers, and there were more than 100 interdictions of prohibited goods.”
Hamas has not changed its ways in the interim and has only adopted more sophisticated methods. In a reality in which Hamas needs quiet to facilitate a military buildup so that it can threaten and hurt Israel, the right course of action is to take a cautious approach with respect to anything it can use for its advancement.