Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, August 8

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**Thousands of Jews Visit Temple Mount to Mark Tisha B’Av**

Over 2,000 Jewish worshippers visited the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif site yesterday, marking Tisha B’Av – the day of mourning the destruction of the ancient Temples in Jerusalem and the subsequent calamities and exile that have befallen the Jewish people. Jewish ascension to the site, which houses the Dome and the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, is severely restricted. Entrance is allowed on Tisha B’Av, which is always mired in security tensions, as the Palestinians object to any Jewish presence on the mount. Operation Breaking Dawn – an extensive Israeli counterterrorism campaign against the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip – has exacerbated tensions in the volatile flashpoint. Dig Deeper “Quiet on Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif Marks Victory for Temple Organizations” (Ha’aretz)

Axios

**Gaza Ceasefire Takes Effect**

An Egypt-mediated ceasefire in Gaza began yesterday, Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) officials said separately. The deal comes after a day of intense negotiations to end the fighting that left more than 40 Palestinians dead and over 300 wounded. Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid said in a meeting with mayors of towns close to Gaza that Israel's operation in Gaza had achieved its goals — including killing two Islamic Jihad commanders — and there was no point in continuing it. As part of the ceasefire agreement, Egypt committed to working for the release of two PIJ members Israel arrested in the occupied West Bank, according to a statement released on Egypt's official news agency. President Biden said in a statement that he welcomed the ceasefire "after three days of hostilities" and following US officials working with those in Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and across the region "to encourage a swift resolution" to the conflict.

Ha’aretz

**Israel: PIJ Rockets Are to Blame for Gaza Children’s Deaths**

Eight children and teenagers were killed in two separate attacks in the Gaza Strip, according to Palestinian reports, but Israel claims they were killed by rockets launched by the PIJ, which has been fighting Israel from the Gaza Strip since Friday. According to reports out of the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, five young Palestinians – aged four, 13, 14, 16, and 17 were killed in an attack on a local cemetery. In a separate attack at the Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza, four Palestinians, a father and his three children were killed, according to reports. Hamas' military wing later identified the father, Yasser al-Nabahin, as its member. Forty-three Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the fighting with Israel began, including 15 children and four women.
Ynet News

IDF Releases Footage of Strike Called Off Over Civilians

The Israeli military released footage of its troops calling off the attack in Gaza in the recent round of cross-border fighting in order to avoid harming uninvolved civilians nearby. The attack in question was set to target Islamic Jihad's southern command chief Khaled Mansour, who was killed but postponed initially after the IDF noticed civilian pretense in the area. According to the IDF, "during the elimination of Khaled Mansour, children were identified on site of the attack and hence it was postponed several times. Later on, when the children were not present in the area, the attack was carried out successfully." Mansour was among senior Islamic Jihad officials planning attacks against Israelis in the past week and was responsible for hundreds of rocket launches throughout the last few years. He was involved in many terror attacks against IDF targets, including the killing of IDF soldier Eliraz Peretz in 2010. Dig Deeper “Gazans Said They Got 15 Minute Warning Before Israeli Strikes Destroyed Homes” (Reuters)

Jerusalem Post

PIJ: If Israel Breaks Agreement, We Will Resume Fighting

PIJ Secretary-General Ziyad al-Nakhala warned that his movement would resume fighting with Israel if its demands for the release of PIJ prisoners were not met during a speech delivered as a ceasefire took effect between Israel and the PIJ. Nakhala, who was in Tehran when Operation Breaking Dawn broke out, thanked Iran for its support of the movement and the Palestinian people. The movement's leader called the operation a “victory” on Islamic Jihad's part, claiming that there was unity between all the Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip despite the Hamas movement not taking part in the conflict. “Hamas did not interfere in the battle, but it is the backbone of the incubator of the resistance, and we will preserve our unity,” said Nakhala. Dig Deeper “Iran ‘Almost Certainly’ to Blame for Escalation - Former Israeli General” (Jerusalem Post)

I24 News

Israel Opening Gaza Crossings for Humanitarian Purposes

Israel will reopen the crossings into Gaza for humanitarian purposes as the Egyptian-mediated ceasefire with PIJ held. The Coordinator of Government Operations in the Territories (COGAT), Major General Rasan Alian, announced the move subject to a situational assessment. COGAT said in a statement that the full reopening of the Israel-Gaza border crossings would be possible later in the day, depending on the security situation. The first oil trucks began arriving at the Kerem Shalom border crossing. The Israeli military said that it would begin to lift restrictions on residents of communities near the Gaza border. Roads in the region will be reopened, and residents of border communities will no longer be required to be close to a protected area. Also, trains will be restarted between Sderot and Ashkelon at noon. Dig Deeper “Israel Starts Rolling Back Security Restrictions as Gaza Ceasefire Holds” (Times of Israel)
**Associated Press**

**Negotiators Optimistic About Progress on Iran Nuclear Deal**

Top negotiators in renewed talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal indicated that they are optimistic about the possibility of reaching an agreement to impose limits on Tehran’s uranium enrichment. “We stand 5 minutes or 5 seconds from the finish line,” Russian Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov told reporters outside Vienna’s Palais Coburg, four days into the talks. He said there are “3 or 4 issues” left to be resolved. “They are sensitive, especially for Iranians and Americans,” Ulyanov said. “I cannot guarantee, but the impression is that we are moving in the right direction.” Enrique Mora, the European Union’s (EU) top negotiator, also said he is “absolutely” optimistic about the talks’ progress. “We are advancing, and I expect we will close the negotiations soon,” he told Iranian media. Negotiators from Iran, the US, and the EU resumed indirect talks over Tehran’s tattered nuclear deal Thursday after a months-long standstill in negotiations. Dig Deeper “Iran Says Success of Vienna Nuclear Talks Depends on Washington’s Flexibility” (Reuters)

**Reuters**

**Two Grain Ships Sail From Ukraine as Third Port Opens**

Two more ships carrying corn and soybeans departed from Ukrainian Black Sea ports on, Turkey and Ukraine said, taking the total to ten since the first ship sailed last week under a deal with Russia to unblock Ukrainian grain exports. The United Nations and Turkey brokered the agreement last month after warnings that the halt in grain shipments caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could lead to severe food shortages and even outbreaks of famine in parts of the world. In peacetime, Ukraine exported up to six million tonnes of grain a month from its ports on the Black Sea and Sea of Azov coast. The resumption of grain exports is being overseen by a Joint Coordination Centre (JCC) in Istanbul, where Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish, and UN personnel are working. Dig Deeper “Ukraine Grain Shipments Offer Hope, Not Fix to Food Crisis” (Associated Press)
Israel Must Talk to Hamas to Break the Cycle of Bloodshed

By Noa Landau

- A popular joke, paraphrasing playwright Hanoch Levin, says that Israel only has three seasons: summer, elections, and war. And like clockwork, before we could say “next year in an apartment with a reinforced room” – the seasonal round of fighting erupted against the Gaza Strip. It’s hard not to feel trapped in despair by the vicious cycle of bloodshed – when we all already know not only what to do when an air-raid siren sounds but also exactly how the broadcasts will look, what the newspapers will say, and even how the phases of the battle will look and what will happen in the end. The main difference between those who despair and those who despair more is between those who still hope the cycle can be broken by purely military means, by the magical force of arms – as the ever-changing politicians promise us from time to time – and those who are prepared to concede that diplomacy (or, in whitewashed contemporary language, an “arrangement”) is also needed in an attempt to break the toxic pattern.

- In this debate, if one wants to hold on to any optimism, the former seems to be losing. Israel has been trying it their way for years: pounding, assassinating, smashing, and the Gaza Strip just keeps going on. Commanders come and go, but the desire for national independence stays put. Because any rational person realizes that you can’t “disappear” the Gazans and Gaza – along with the use of military means, it seems that the realization is growing in Israel that a partner needs to be prepared in Gaza. And so, between one “round” and another, and despite the feeling that the “governments of change” continue to give us more and more of the same, something is changing in the undercurrents: Israel is adopting and reinforcing the understanding that Hamas is the responsible adult in the Strip – vis-à-vis the violent “rogue” Islamic Jihad, which is actually a kind of common enemy.

- These days, Israel now seeks to differentiate Hamas more clearly than ever before. Officials at every level are talking about this openly now, both to the camera and off the record. Someone in the Israel Defense Forces even took the trouble to brief Army Radio reporters that the name of the current operation, “Breaking Dawn,” was chosen because of the similarity between the Hebrew word for dawn (shahar) and the word for black (shahor) – an allusion to the black flag of Islamic Jihad. But in complete contrast to the conspiracy that MK Benjamin Netanyahu’s supporters are attempting to foment at present, that this is some kind of innovation that serves Prime Minister Yair Lapid, this process did not begin during the latter’s tenure. Israel’s efforts to differentiate between Hamas and Islamic Jihad started many years ago and reached their peak in 2019 when Netanyahu, as prime minister, authorized Operation Black Belt. That operation was clearly aimed at Islamic Jihad targets and was accompanied by similar statements to the effect that the intent was to cool Hamas down. This process of preparing Hamas as a partner for dialogue was accompanied at the end of Netanyahu’s tenure not only by aiming fire and press briefings at Islamic Jihad, but also by establishing the Qatari financial support pipeline to the Strip.
While it is convenient for Israel to present Egypt as the mediator – in fact, the conversation over the economic and civil rebuilding of Gaza is being conducted with Hamas. Some of the money transferred as part of earlier arrangements was also specifically conditioned on Hamas’ pledge to “restrain” Islamic Jihad. There are some center-left voters who, in their political battle against Netanyahu, excoriate Likud from the right, of all places, because of this conduct. But people who realize that in the end, the solution to the conflict is diplomatic, not military, should welcome the understanding that whether we want it or not, Hamas is the only partner for dialogue in the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu’s problem was that he was afraid to admit that he had abandoned the childish promise to “bring down the Hamas government.” His opponent from the center-left bloc should spur this path onward.
Changing Policy Vis-à-Vis Hamas
By Oded Eran

- Operation Breaking Dawn removed the last vestiges that concealed Israel’s de facto recognition of Hamas as the sole ruler of Gaza—a development that opens up the possibility for a change in Israeli policy on the Palestinian issue. Ever since Hamas seized power in Gaza more than 15 years ago, Israel has deliberated on three issues: how to deal with the Gaza Strip, how to engage with the “government” in Gaza, and, more recently, how to prepare for the possibility that Hamas might win the next Palestinian election that gets held. Israel started out with an absolute boycott of Hamas. It enlisted the international community to dictate conditions to Hamas that would have to be met before dialogue with it would become possible, and it prosecuted a series of military operations with the goal of eroding Hamas’s military capabilities and weakening its grip on the Gazan public.

- At a later stage, Israel held indirect negotiations with Hamas on several issues; it recognized Hamas as the party responsible for the turn of events in Gaza; and it gradually began to modify its policy on economic aid to the Gaza Strip—so much so that it has resumed issuing work permits to Gazans, which indirectly helps Hamas by easing its economic strain. In Operation Breaking Dawn, the process of recognition reached another significant threshold: beyond its de facto recognition of Hamas, Israel essentially offered Hamas a deal in which both sides would refrain from using force. If the operation did in fact end as it was scheduled to as of this writing, one might reasonably say that Hamas accepted that offer, even though it knows that this could cost it lost popularity. Even if this was not Israel’s intention, it has created a new equation in its relationship with Hamas.

- True, a pre-election period is not the best time for far-reaching changes in foreign and defense policy, but a debate on the issue—including a public debate—must be held. It is true that, on the one hand, Hamas has never accepted the Oslo Accords in either spirit or practice. It is also true that it has stockpiled an arsenal of rockets, has dug tunnels into Israeli territory, holds Israeli MIAs and living hostages, and causes suffering to the Israeli civilian population—but, on the other, it is also true that Hamas is the ruler in Gaza and has significant sway over the Palestinian population in Judea and Samaria (West Bank). Even if we would prefer to avoid spouting clichés such as “one cannot choose one’s enemies,” our political leadership, hourly, daily, and weekly, is forced to choose among the alternatives. The question after Operation Breaking Dawn is: can Israel ignore the fact that Hamas remained outside the fighting and adhere to its ambiguous policy of recognizing/not-recognizing the party that governs Gaza? It may have to consider demands that will be presented by Hamas to the Egyptian mediator and will haggle over them. That said, Israel should also ask itself whether an opportunity has been created for a major change in the relationship, one that might end the current situation in which violent conflagrations erupt every few months or years and whether Israel might now show willingness to strategically contemplate formats that include political, security and
economic components with an enemy that does not formally recognize Israel, but which is familiar with Israel (and its limitations) and recognizes its power (and its limitations).

- This is also an opportunity to review whether Israeli policy of separating Gaza from Judea and Samaria, which is sometimes not in Israel’s interest but which is done to accede to requests from the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah, has achieved its goals. The result, in that case, would be an arrangement, not a formal peace. It would be a construct of understandings, one that isn’t even put in writing, and certainly one that cannot be photographed at a ceremony at the White House. But it is an arrangement whose lifespan would be longer than the lifespan of the deterrence that Israel achieves after every operation in Gaza. It is an arrangement that, under changed circumstances in the internal Palestinian situation in Judea and Samaria (West Bank), could then be expanded.