

MOUNTING TENSIONS IN ISRAEL: JEWISH FEDERATIONS UPDATE

May 9, 2018

In the past 24 hours, there has been a considerable escalation of tensions in Israel. While the chances of an imminent outbreak of hostilities remain low, Israel remains on high alert and has stated that it is prepared for all scenarios. The current tensions surround a number of separate, yet often overlapping issues:

- The Iranian nuclear threat and President Trump's announced withdrawal from the nuclear deal
- Iran's growing presence in Syria
- Tensions on the Gaza border
- The opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem
- The 70th anniversary of the creation of Israel

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Yesterday afternoon Prime Minister Netanyahu cut short a state visit to Cyprus and returned to Israel, warning that Iran is striving to deploy advanced weapons in Syria to destroy the Jewish state, and that "it could threaten the entire region." Netanyahu added that Iran "is now seeking to implant very dangerous weapons in Syria to be used against Israel for the specific purpose of our destruction."

Shortly after IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenstock cancelled an appearance at the Herzliya Conference, and the U.S. Government instructed its employees not to visit the Golan Heights. At approximately 9 pm (Israel time), minutes before President Trump's announcement on Iran, the IDF issued the following statement:

Following the identification of irregular activity of Iranian forces in Syria, the IDF has decided to change the civilian protection instructions in the Golan Heights and instructs local authorities to unlock and ready shelters in the area. The Israeli public should remain attentive to IDF instructions that will be given if necessary. Additionally, defense systems have been deployed and IDF troops are on high alert for an attack. The IDF is prepared for various scenarios and warns that any aggression against Israel will be met with a severe response.

The IDF issued an emergency call-up (known as a "Tzav 8") of a limited number of reserve troops from the Air Force, Home Front Commands as well as military intelligence units. CNN then quoted "a Pentagon source" as saying that the "U.S. fears there may be an imminent Iranian attack on Israel." The IDF also published video footage showing security measures taken in the north yesterday, which can be seen [here](#).

An hour later, Syrian media reported that Israel had conducted an airstrike south of Damascus, reportedly causing extensive damage and killing 15 fighters, including 8 Iranians, in an area previously identified as the site of a suspected Iranian military base. The reports said that Syria's air defenses intercepted two Israeli missiles over the el-Kiswah area, but did not specify how many missiles were fired. As always, Israel did not confirm or comment on the strike. Rami Abd el-Rahman, director of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said that the strike targeted an "arms depot belonging to Hezbollah and the Iranians."

IRAN

The latest developments come against the twin backdrops of the U.S. announcement that it is withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) and Iran's presence in Syria.

NUCLEAR DEAL

The Israeli Government has long maintained that Iranian attempts to build a nuclear bomb threaten Israel's existence. Israeli leaders from across the political spectrum were opposed to the nuclear deal with Iran, which they believed was flawed and dangerous. Prime Minister Netanyahu has campaigned globally for the deal to be "fixed or nixed," and the U.S. announcement yesterday that it was withdrawing from the deal and re-imposing sanctions on Iran is widely regarded as a significant diplomatic victory for Israel's prime minister.

Last week, Israel unveiled vast numbers of secret Iranian documents that Prime Minister Netanyahu said proved that Iran has been trying to create a nuclear bomb. The documents seem to show that Iran lied during the time it negotiated the deal, but they do not show that it has abrogated the agreement since its signing. Israel has presented this evidence to a large number of countries, and President Trump mentioned the documents as part of his presentation on why the U.S. was withdrawing from the JCPOA. Details [here](#).

Alongside Israel; Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates also applauded the U.S. pull out from the deal. Iran has predictably acted angrily to the Trump announcement. Earlier today Iranian lawmakers burned an American flag in the Iranian parliament and vowed that the abrogation of the agreement is a move was one that "America and the Zionists will regret."

IRAN IN SYRIA

Recently, Israel has also become increasingly concerned by Iranian expansion, and a seeming attempt to create an Iranian arc of influence from Iran, through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, to the Mediterranean. Of particularly strong concern has been the build-up of a massive Iranian presence in Syria. Israel has repeatedly stated that it will not tolerate this threat on its doorstep. As a result, while never formally confirmed by Israel it is believed that the IDF has struck Iranian and pro-Iranian troops, weapons and infrastructure in Syria dozens of times in recent months. The most significant of these attacks was an alleged Israel Air Force strike two months ago on the Assad regime's T-4 airbase near Homs used by the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guards Corps.

For a number of weeks Iran was thought to be determined to carry out a retaliatory attack on Israel. The country's army chief of staff warned Monday that the regime would respond to Israeli aggression "at an appropriate time." Unusual Iranian troop movements in Syria last night – at the same time as the Trump announcement – are thought to have sparked the latest high tensions.

OTHER MAJOR ISSUES

At the same time as the tensions with Iran mount, a number of other significant events will occur over the coming week that add more layers of complexity and risk.

MAY 13 is Jerusalem Dayⁱ (Yom Yerushalayim), the date when Israel marks its victory in the Six Day War, and specifically the reunification of Jerusalem. For many Palestinians and others, rather than a day of celebration, the date signifies the anniversary of the beginning of "the Occupation."

MAY 14 marks the 70th anniversary of the creation of the State, according to the Gregorian calendar and will see the official opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem. The embassy move is an unprecedented development for which Israel has been campaigning for its entire 70 year existence. The Palestinians – and by extension much of the Arab and Muslim world – are extremely angered by the opening and by the fact that it signifies an extremely close relationship between Israel and the United States. See the Israel Action Network Fact Sheet on the Israeli Embassy move [here](#).

MAY 15 is known by the Palestinians as Nakba (or Catastrophe) Day, marking Israel's creation as a national disaster. It has often been a day of rioting and protests which are expected to be significant this year.

Any of these dates and events could easily further inflame tensions in the region.

GAZA

Tensions continue to flare along Israel's border with Gaza. In recent years, "escalation" in the south has usually meant rocket fire on Israeli towns. In the past few weeks we have seen a different type of "escalation," namely, attacks along the border fence. This has included shootings, and, more commonly, explosive devices placed along the fence and detonated when Israeli troops or civilians pass by. So far, there have not been Israeli casualties. As the attacks continue the chances of a more successful Palestinian attempt mount. Should this occur we may see a substantial escalation.

Alongside these incidents, Hamas authorities in Gaza have been launching mass marches to the border. Although Hamas refers to these as "peaceful protests," some demonstrators have acted in a violent matter, hurling rocks, fire and other objects, and have attempted to illegally cross the fence into Israel. Israel has tried to show restraint, but has been clear that it will stop people threatening to harm Israel or cross the border, leading to a number of casualties (photos [here](#)). In some incidents, the protestors have rioted and set fire to border crossings and other installations (see video [here](#) and photos [here](#)). A new Hamas tactic has seen kites set on fire

and then launched towards Israel. When these kites land across the border they have caused significant brush and other fires. Further details [here](#).

WEDNESDAY

As of this morning, tensions seemed to have eased and Prime Minister Netanyahu has departed for Moscow to engage in important talks with President Putin regarding the Iranian presence in Syria.

The IDF's Home Front command has allowed the opening of schools in the Golan Heights though it is not permitting school trips and hikes in the region. It has closed a number of tourist sites that are close to the Syrian border. Bomb shelters remain open and the IDF has deployed additional missile defense batteries across northern Israel.

Israelis remain resilient and are going about their normal lives and daily routines as usual. Perhaps a significant sign of normalcy was the fact that more Israelis watched the Eurovision Song Contest semi-finals on television last night (where Israeli Netta Barzilai made it through to the finals) than watched President Trump's dramatic announcement on Iran.

Despite this, the IDF remains on high alert, and Israeli citizens are taking the threats seriously. JFNA's Israel office has updated its emergency preparedness protocols and is in close contact with the country's National Emergency Authority as well as The Jewish Agency, JDC and the Israel Trauma Coalition. JFNA's President and CEO, Jerry Silverman, is currently on the ground in Israel.

SECURITY

The Secure Community Network (SCN) has been coordinating closely with federal partners and law enforcement organizations regarding any domestic impacts to yesterday's announcement and ongoing events. Although there are currently no known threats to Jewish interests in North America, past geo-political events have, at times, served as a trigger point for heightened tension and unrest – including protests and demonstrations – as well as increases in anti-Semitic incidents, including threats of violence. Institutions, organizations and individuals should also be vigilant regarding suspicious activity, including activity directed at computer systems and networks.

If suspicious activity is observed near institutions, organizations should follow their protocols and then contact the SCN Duty Desk at DutyDesk@securecommunitynetwork.org or by calling 212-284-6940. Cyber incidents should be reported directly to SCN's Duty Desk, which will coordinate with the appropriate federal authorities.

PROTEST ACTIVITY

Any time there are heightened tensions regarding Israel, we can expect an uptick in BDS and delegitimization activity, especially in social media. Campuses are winding down for the semester but churches and some academic associations are moving into their conference season. The Israel Action Network is closely tracking several BDS campaigns and is in touch with your communities regarding these matters. The Israel Action Network will send alerts/fact

sheets to the field in coordination with the JFNA Israel office throughout the next couple of weeks as events unfold. If you have questions or need additional information, IAN staff can be contacted through Stephanie Hausner (Stephanie.Hausner@jewishfederations.org).

We are monitoring the situation very carefully. As always, Jewish Federations stand together with Israel.

Sources: Israel Government Press Office, Israel Channel 2 News, Galei Tzahal Radio, Times of Israel, Ha'aretz, The Jerusalem Post, Walla! News, IDF Spokesperson, Office of the Prime Minister

Additional reading and analysis can be found here:

- [Analysis: Israel and Iran Prepare for Conflict, \(Geopolitical Futures\)](#)
 - [Can the Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis Prevent All-out War Between Israel and Iran? \(Ha'aretz\)](#)
 - [Brookings experts discuss the implications of President Trump's Iran nuclear deal announcement](#)
 - [Klein Halevi: How Israelis See the World \(New York Times\)](#)
 - [Israel-Iran War Unlikely \(Asia Times\)](#)
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¹ Israel marks Jerusalem Day and Independence Day according to the Hebrew calendar.