

Ynet-News, May 23, 2021 – Sunday

05.23.21 – Su- - - News

UAE, Egypt and Qatar ready to facilitate Israel-Palestinian peace efforts

05.23.21 – Su- - - News Placed in May 23 spot – Sunday

Heritage Foundation reopened Temple Mount & call to end Jordan Waqf control

05.23.21 – Su- - - News Placed in May 22 spot – Saturday

IDF to Keep money from Hamas & send foreign aid direct to PA civilians

05.23.21 – Su- - - News

Israel's Gaza challenge: Stopping metal pipes turning into rockets

05.23.21 – Su- - - News

Wuhan Virology Lab Staff were sick in autumn 2019, reviving the lab leak theory

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UAE says it is ready to facilitate Israel-Palestinian peace efforts

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan says Gulf state willing to 'explore new paths' to reduce escalation and achieve 'peace' and stresses, however, that additional efforts must be made by Israeli and Palestinian leaders

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The United Arab Emirates stands ready to facilitate peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians, the de facto ruler of the Gulf state said in remarks carried on state media on Sunday.

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan made the comments in a telephone call with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whose country — with U.S. support — brokered a ceasefire on Friday that ended the fiercest fighting in years between Israel and Islamist terror group Hamas.

The UAE, which last year normalized ties with Israel, "is ready to work with all parties to maintain the ceasefire and explore new paths to reduce escalation and achieve peace", state news agency WAM cited Sheikh Mohammed as saying.

The Crown Prince stressed however the need for "additional efforts, especially by Israeli and Palestinian leaders".

Last year's normalization deals signed by the UAE and Bahrain, followed by Sudan and Morocco, were denounced by the Palestinians as abandoning a unified position under which Arab states would make peace only under a two-state solution, negotiations for which have been deadlocked for years.

The UAE, which distrusts political Islamist groups like Hamas, has said the "Abraham Accords" would ultimately benefit the Palestinians.

UAE ambassador to Washington Yousef al-Otaiba said last month that the establishment of formal channels under the accords would allow the Gulf state to play a similar diplomatic role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Egypt and Jordan, which have peace deals with Israel.

Egypt and Qatar, which has ties with Hamas, led regional efforts for the cease fire that ended 11 days of fighting in which aerial bombardment of Gaza killed 232 Palestinians and rocket attacks killed 12 people in Israel.

05.23.21

Heritage Foundation reopened Temple Mount & call to end Jordan Waqf control

05.23.21

Israel reopens Temple Mount to Jewish visitors after 20 days

Decision comes as ceasefire with Gaza terror groups enters third day; Waqf says police escorted more than 120 Jews to the site, clearing Palestinians under 45 from area; Israeli police denies age restriction, says 5 arrested for breach of peace

Gilad Cohen, News Agencies | Published: 05.23.21, 14:15

Israel on Sunday morning reopened the Temple Mount in Jerusalem to Jewish visitors, 20 days after it was closed to them due to Ramadan and the subsequent clashes at the site that is holy to both Jews and Muslims.

The decision was made by security officials and supported by Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Lion, who said he trusted any police decision on the matter.

Police escorted more than 120 Jewish visitors to the site, according to the Waqf, the Islamic authority overseeing the compound.

The Waqf said police cleared young Palestinians out of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound on the mount, and barred entry to Muslims under the age of 45.

Muslims who entered were required to leave their IDs with police at the entrance. It said six Palestinians were detained, with four later released.

Israeli police denied there was any age restriction and said they arrested five suspects who "violated the public order."

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said the site was open for "regular visits" and that police had secured the area to prevent "incidents."

The Waqf said Sunday it was the first time Jews had been allowed to visit the site since May 4, almost exactly a week before a 12-day war broke out between Israel and Palestinian terror groups in Gaza.

A short time after its reopening Sunday, images began circulating on social media showing right-wing Israeli activists at the site alongside captions claiming they pictured armed Jews preparing to invade the al-Aqsa compound.

Israeli police had briefly clashed with Palestinian protesters after Friday prayers in an early test of the truce to end the fighting that had taken effect hours earlier.

The al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest site in Islam. It is built atop the remains of the ancient Jewish temples and is the holiest site in Judaism. As part of a decades-long agreement with the Waqf, Jews are allowed to visit but not pray there.

Israeli police repeatedly clashed with Palestinian protesters on the Temple Mount in the days leading up to May 10, when the Hamas terror group that rules Gaza fired long-range rockets at Jerusalem.

In recent years, increasing numbers of religious and nationalist Jews have visited the site. The Israeli government has repeatedly said it has no intention of changing the status quo, under which the Waqf oversees the site under Jordanian custodianship.

The decision to reopen the site to Jewish visitors was praised by the Temple Mount Heritage Foundation, an Israeli organization that works to end what it calls the "unconscionable discrimination" that prevents Jews from praying at the site.

The foundation's CEO Tom Nisani said Sunday: "This is a very important morning that serves to save some of the national honor of the people of Israel. Opening the mount is good news."

Nisani also urged the government to completely end the Waqf's administrative powers on the Temple Mount, "to open it to Jews around the clock and from all its gates with complete freedom of movement and worship, and to stop surrendering to Hamas' threats that only lead to more terrorist acts."

On Friday, sporadic clashes broke out at the site between thousands of Palestinians worshippers and Israeli police forces. Several dozen were arrested and the Red Crescent said 15 people were wounded.

Another 33 people were arrested overnight Saturday in connection with the clashes the day before.

"The Israel Police will not allow violent riots of any kind or harm to come to officers," said the police in a statement.

05.23.21

IDF to Keep money from Hamas & send foreign aid direct to PA civilians

05.23.21

IDF: Keep aid money to Gaza out of Hamas hands

Following latest round of fighting, IDF chief Kochavi advises government to funnel humanitarian funds through Palestinian Authority to prevent Gaza's terror groups from using it to rebuild military capabilities

Yossi Yehoshua | Published: 05.23.21 , 12:58

Following the latest round of fighting between Israel and Gaza Strip terrorist factions that ended early Friday, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has recommended keeping international funds for the reconstruction of the Palestinian territory out of the hands of the ruling Hamas terror group.

IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi said that rather than allowing foreign aid to be funneled directly through Hamas, funds should instead be transferred via the Palestinian Authority, which will then disburse it to Gaza's civilians.

According to the military, such a move was necessary to prevent Hamas from using aid funds to expand its military capabilities — acquiring rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles, constructing subterranean tactical tunnels and training naval commandos — with money intended for the seaside enclave's residents as the group has done before.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has, thus far, allowed the money to pass through Hamas purportedly to weaken the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority, Israel's long-standing negotiating partner that is headed by Hamas' rival, Fatah.

Netanyahu, reportedly, told members of his Likud party earlier this year that support for Hamas was necessary to foil efforts to establish a Palestinian state.

According to IDF Spokesperson Brig. Gen. Hadai Zilberman, the government also dismissed Kochavi's recommendation to take "aggressive action" against Hamas that he made some two weeks before the fighting broke out on May 10.

Kochavi made the recommendation after Hamas' leader in Gaza, Yahyah Sinwar, began pushing for a more aggressive approach against Israel after he came close to losing an internal leadership election.

Meanwhile, Hamas resumed sporadic rocket fire and arson attacks on southern Israel, the latter using explosive devices sent from Gaza via balloons.

Following the ceasefire, the IDF chief advised the government to deliver an overwhelming military response to every attack on Israeli soil, be it rocket fire or airborne explosive devices.

Kochavi also instructed the General Staff to prepare for another round of fighting against Hamas, which could potentially begin in the near future. Hamas has already announced that any attempt on the life of any members of its leadership would be met with rocket fire.

More than 4,000 rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza during the 11 days of fighting, the vast majority of which were intercepted by the IDF's Iron Dome missile defense system or landed in open areas. Some rockets did, however, strike population centers, causing extensive property damage and 12 deaths.

The Hamas-run Health Ministry in the Strip reported that 248 people had died in the IDF's repeated strikes on what Israel called terrorist targets. Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who himself served as the IDF chief of staff during the 2014 Gaza war, said Friday that he would not allow the intensive rocket fire on Jerusalem and central Israel to happen again.

05.23.21

Israel's Gaza challenge: Stopping metal pipes turning into rockets

05.23.21

Israel's Gaza challenge: Stopping metal tubes turning into rockets

Current and former officials say it is all but impossible to prevent goods meant for the reconstruction of the Strip from being turned into low-cost, locally-made rockets, whose quantity and quality are being gradually improved by Gaza's terrorist factions
Reuters| Published: 05.23.21 , 11:31

The latest Israel-Gaza conflict showed the ability of Hamas to build an arsenal of home-made rockets largely with civilian materials and Iranian expertise, analysts and officials said, adding that it is a feat it can likely replicate.

The low cost of such arms and the need to rebuild Gaza leaves Israel and the international community with a quandary of how to meet Gazans' basic needs yet keep ordinary items such as pipes, sugar and concrete from being put to military uses by the terror group that controls the Palestinian enclave.

Current and former officials see no easy answers, saying it is all but impossible to seal off even a relatively small area such as Gaza and to prevent goods for reconstruction from being turned into locally-made rockets.

Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both deemed foreign terrorist organizations by the U.S., the EU and of the western world, have boosted the quantity and quality of their rockets since the last Gaza conflict with Israel in 2014.

"We were extremely surprised by Hamas' capacities this time around. They had long-distance rockets they didn't have before. That is all down to Iran," said a senior European official on condition of anonymity.

Israel said Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other groups fired around 4,360 rockets from Gaza during the conflict, of which around 680 fell short into the Gaza Strip.

Israel's Iron Dome interceptors, which are activated against rockets that threaten its population centers, had a successful shoot-down rate of around 90%, the military said.

It said 60 or 70 rockets still struck population centers, implying an accuracy rate of around 15%. Others fell in open areas, nonetheless triggering panic and sending Israelis scrambling for shelters as they flew overhead.

The majority of the rockets, analysts said, were short-range, unsophisticated and homemade.

"They're extremely simple to fabricate and they use metal tubing, metal pipes. They often, believe it or not, will use detritus from Israeli missiles," said Daniel Benjamin, a former U.S. State Department coordinator for counterterrorism.

"It's just virtually impossible to make a place completely airtight," said Benjamin, now president of the American Academy in Berlin.

The latest hostilities began on May 10 when Hamas fired a volley of rockets at Jerusalem after weeks of clashes between Israeli police forces and Palestinians during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Rocket factories

Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri said the group had developed its own expertise producing rockets and needed no help.

"Therefore, any attempt to tighten the blockade on Gaza to limit the abilities of the resistance will be worthless," he told Reuters by phone from Mauritania, where he is visiting.

Palestinian terror groups have used rockets for years. Before Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, its Gaza settlements were frequent targets for short-range mortar and rocket fire from nearby Palestinian towns.

Rockets only became the go-to weapon for Hamas after the military barrier that Israel began building around and through the West Bank in 2003 made it harder for suicide bombers and other terrorists to cross into Israel and carry out attacks.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad smuggled in factory-grade missiles via the Egyptian Sinai until the 2013 ouster of Islamist president Mohammed Morsi. After he was replaced by Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Cairo largely choked off that route by destroying tunnels into Gaza.

Egypt's crackdown triggered what one Israeli official called a strategic shift by Hamas to develop local rocket fabrication capabilities with Iranian assistance, provided both by Iranians visiting Gaza and Gazans traveling abroad.

Now, Israeli and Palestinian sources say, the terror groups use Iranian funding and instruction to make rockets inside Gaza that have ranges of 200 km (125 miles) or more, some with warheads carrying hundreds of kilograms of TNT and shrapnel.

One Iranian security official said Hamas now had at least three underground factories to produce rockets in Gaza.

In the conflict's final days, Islamic Jihad leader Ziad Al-Nakhala boasted about his group's ability to improvise weapons from everyday materials.

"The silent world should know that our weapons, by which we face the most advanced arsenal produced by American industry, are water pipes that engineers of the resistance turned into the rockets that you see," he said on Wednesday.

'Suitcases of money'

Money, in many ways, is not the issue.

Qatar, with Israeli acquiescence, has provided substantial funding to Hamas in recent years, by some tallies, millions of dollars a month, chiefly to pay administrative salaries, some of which can then be siphoned off.

"It's not rocket science, so to speak. A guy from Qatar comes every month with his suitcases of money accompanied by Israeli soldiers to pay Hamas administrative staff. That then disappears," said the senior European official.

An Iranian diplomat in the region said millions of dollars were handed over to Hamas representatives almost every month, either carried into Gaza or neighboring countries.

"It does not mean money always came from inside Iran. We have businesses (in the region) that funded Hamas and it's not a secret," the diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A western official who follows Hamas activities closely said the group was able to tap investment portfolios worth hundreds of millions of dollars in companies across the Middle East.

"It controls about 40 companies in Turkey, UAE, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Algeria which deal mainly in real estate and infrastructure," the official said.

A second official said the group was also able to obtain resources from charities sympathetic to its cause across Europe.

U.S. President Joe Biden said on Thursday that aid would be sent quickly to Gaza, but coordinated with the Palestinian Authority - Hamas' Western-backed rival in the West Bank - "in a manner that does not permit Hamas to simply restock its military arsenal".

That is easier said than done.

It would likely require on-the-ground monitoring, and it is not obvious whether Hamas would permit that or who might do it.

Dennis Ross, Washington's former lead diplomat on Israeli-Palestinian peace, said someone, possibly the Egyptians and others, would need to have a physical presence in Gaza to inspect imported goods and monitor their use.

"If Hamas says 'no' then you put the spotlight on them," he said, adding one could pressure the militants by saying, "We'd like to be providing material to Gaza, but Hamas won't permit it."

An Israeli official was blunt about the challenge.

"Someone has to find a better way to monitor what's going in, how it's supervised and what it's used for," he said.

05.23.21

Wuhan Virology Lab Staff were sick in autumn 2019, reviving the lab leak theory

05.23.21

Report: Wuhan Lab Staff Sought Hospital Care Before COVID-19 Outbreak Disclosed the Wuhan Institute of Virology in china from a birds eye view

Sunday, 23 May 2021 06:07 PM

Three researchers from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) sought hospital care in November 2019, months before China disclosed the COVID-19 pandemic, The Wall

Street Journal reported Sunday, citing a previously undisclosed U.S. intelligence report.

The newspaper said the report – which provides fresh details on the number of researchers affected, the timing of their illnesses, and their hospital visits – might add weight to calls for a broader probe of whether the COVID-19 virus could have escaped from the laboratory.

Even Dr. Anthony Fauci admits now he is "not convinced" SARS-CoV-2 has a natural origin.

"No, I am not convinced about that," Fauci told Politifact's Katie Sanders at a virtual event called "United Facts of America: A Festival of Fact-Checking." "I think we should continue to investigate what went on in China until we continue to find out to the best of our ability what happened.

"Certainly, the people who investigated it say it likely was the emergence from an animal reservoir that then infected individuals, but it could have been something else, and we need to find that out. So, you know, that's the reason why I said I'm perfectly in favor of any investigation that looks into the origin of the virus."

The Journal report came on the eve of a meeting of the World Health Organization's decision-making body, which is expected to discuss the next phase of an investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

A National Security Council spokeswoman had no comment on the Journal's report but said the Biden administration continued to have "serious questions about the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, including its origins within the Peoples Republic of China."

She said the U.S. government was working with the WHO and other member states to support an expert-driven evaluation of the pandemic's origins "that is free from interference or politicization."

"We're not going to make pronouncements that prejudge an ongoing WHO study into the source of SARS-CoV-2, but we've been clear that sound and technically credible theories should be thoroughly evaluated by international experts," she said.

The Journal said current and former officials familiar with the intelligence about the lab researchers expressed a range of views about the strength of the report's supporting evidence, with one unnamed person saying it needed "further investigation" and additional corroboration."

The United States, Norway, Canada, Britain, and other countries in March expressed concerns about the WHO-led COVID-19 origins study, and called for further investigation and full access to all pertinent human, animal and other data about the early stages of the outbreak.

Washington is keen to ensure greater cooperation and transparency by China, according to a source familiar with the effort.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Sunday.

China's foreign ministry noted Sunday a WHO-led team had concluded a lab leak was extremely unlikely after a visit in February to the virology institute.

"The U.S. continues to hype the lab leak theory," the ministry said in response to a request for comment by the Journal. "Is it actually concerned about tracing the source or trying to divert attention?"

The Trump administration had said it suspected the virus might have escaped from a Chinese lab, which Beijing denies.

A State Department fact sheet released near the end of the Trump administration had said "the U.S. government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses." It did not say how many researchers.

China refused to give raw data on early COVID-19 cases to the WHO-led team probing the origins of the pandemic, according to one of the team's investigators, Reuters reported in February, potentially complicating efforts to understand how the outbreak began.

Newsmax's Eric Mack contributed to this Reuters report.
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