

Newsletter Tuesday September 18, 2018

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IAF targets Palestinian terror cell planting bombs near Gaza border
hundreds of Palestinians tried to breach the security fence • Balloon carrying a

Newsletter Tuesday September 18, 2018

Russia, Turkey to form buffer zone in Idlib as Syria vows to 'liberate' it

Report: Israel, Turkey in talks to restore ambassadors

Newsletter Sunday September 16, 2018

Syria: Israel launched missile attack on Damascus airport

Newsletter Sunday September 16, 2018

US closes last remaining aid channel for Palestinian civilians

Newsletter Friday September 14, 2018

US marines team with rebels in southern Syria in large exercise

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Under missile attack, Syria accidentally downs Russian aircraft

Surveillance plane carrying 15 "falls" off radar 22 miles off Syria's Latakia coast, Russian Defense Ministry says • Crew presumed dead • U.S. officials: Plane downed by Syrian anti-aircraft artillery • Russia assigns Israel indirect blame for incident.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Russia says Israel did not give it enough time to have the plane land safely | Illustration: YouTube

Russia's military said Tuesday that one of its aircraft with 15 people on board has "disappeared" over Syria's coast. The fate of the crew remains unknown but they are presumed dead.

The Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement that an Il-20 plane went off radar 35 kilometers (22 miles) off the Latakia coast late Monday as it was returning to a nearby Russian base.

The Ilyushin 20 is a reconnaissance aircraft with an electronic intelligence platform, equipped with a wide range of antennas, infrared and optical sensors. The aircraft's airborne radar and satellite link allow the Russian military to monitor Syrian skies in real time.

The reasons why the plane disappeared off the Russian military's radar remain unclear.

CNN quoted an unnamed U.S. official as saying the Russian airplane was shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft artillery, as Syrian forces mistook it for an Israeli aircraft.

Russian media was also quick to point a finger at Israel, saying that air traffic controllers at Hmeimim Air Base "lost contact" with the aircraft during "an attack by Israeli F-16 fighter jets on Latakia."

Russian state news agency TASS reported that "the Il-20 went off the radars during the attack of four Israeli F-16 aircraft on Syrian targets in the province of Latakia."

Russia's RT news agency also attributed the strike to Israel, saying it targeted a power station and several Syrian army facilities.

The Russian Defense Ministry confirmed Israeli fighter jets were spotted in the area. It called Israel's actions "a deliberate provocation" and accused the IDF of creating a "dangerous situation" in Latakia.

It said that the Syrian military had accidentally shot down the Il-20 after it was indirectly placed in its path by Israel's actions.

One Russian official said Israel had warned Russia about the strike in Syria only one minute beforehand, adding that it was not enough time to get the Russian military plane to safety.

The RIA news agency quoted a Russian defense official as saying that it was "not possible that the Israeli military did not see the Russian plane as it was preparing to land."

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reportedly spoke with his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman, on Tuesday, and told him that Israel was "fully to blame" for the incident.

A Russian Defense Ministry official said Moscow "reserves right to take appropriate measures after Israel's hostile actions."

The Russian reports were preceded by Syrian media reports saying "foreign jets" and "foreign drones" were spotted over Latakia.

The Syrian Arab News Agency reported an "an hourlong attack on Latakia" saying, "Air defenses have confronted enemy missiles coming from the sea in the direction of Latakia and intercepted a number of them."

SANA said that a "technical research center" and an "aluminum production facility" were damaged in the strike, as was the area's power grid.

The state-run Ikhbariya TV said 10 people sustained minor-to-moderate injuries in the strike.

The U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said huge explosions were heard in the city.

The **strike targeted the munition depots at the Technical Industry Institution** on the eastern outskirts of Latakia, the Observatory said.

It was not immediately clear what activities the state institution was engaged in.

The Israeli military did not comment on the report.

Latakia is a major port city and is considered the main Alawite region affiliated with Syrian President Bashar Assad's family.

The city houses the strategic port of Tartus, which is home to a major Russian naval facility.

Recent intelligence reports suggest that **Iran has been using Syrian military facilities** in Latakia as part of its plan **to build its own naval base** there.

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IAF targets Palestinian terror cell planting bombs near Gaza border

Palestinians report two fatalities in strike • Incident follows riots in northern Gaza, where

hundreds of Palestinians tried to breach the security fence • Balloon carrying a

fragmentation **grenade launched into Israel from Gaza**, neutralized safely.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

An IDF strike on terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip | Illustration: AP

The Israeli Air Force on Monday targeted a **Palestinian terrorist cell planting explosives on the Israel-Gaza Strip border.**

Gaza's Health Ministry said Tuesday that paramedics recovered two bodies from the scene of the strike.

"An IAF aircraft targeted terrorists who were spotted approaching the security fence and placing a suspicious-looking object next to it," the IDF Spokesperson's Unit said in a statement.

Palestinian sources said the strike followed a tense day on the border, as hundreds of Palestinians rioted in northern Gaza and attempted to breach the border fence.

The Palestinians said that dozens of protesters were hurt, mostly from tear gas inhalation.

Earlier Monday, a balloon carrying a fragmentation grenade was sent into Israel from Gaza.

The grenade landed in an open area and caused no harm, as it did not detonate. Police sappers were called to the scene and subsequently neutralized the grenade safely.

"This demonstrates that not only is arson terrorism not waning, they [the Palestinians] are taking it to the next level," Eshkol Regional Council head Gadi Yarkoni said. "They are using explosives designed to maximize damage."

"The balloon and grenade were found in a peanut field during a routine patrol by our security guards," Yarkoni explained. "This field was slated to be harvested in the coming days. We averted a disaster."

He further urged the government "to **show zero tolerance for the terrorism** that is rearing its head near our communities. We cannot allow this threat to become our daily routine."

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Russia, Turkey to form buffer zone in Idlib as Syria vows to 'liberate' it

Offensive on rebel stronghold called off, they will have to leave Idlib by mid-October, Russian, Turkish officials say • Turkish leader says deal aims to avert humanitarian crisis • Syria's U.N. envoy: Syrian government is prepared to fight rebels.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Smoke rising over Hobeit village, near Idlib, after a Syrian forces strike | Photo: AP

Russian and Turkish troops are to enforce a new demilitarized zone in Syria's Idlib region from which "radical" rebels will be required to withdraw by the middle of next month, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Monday after a meeting with his Turkish counterpart.

Russia, the biggest outside backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad in the seven-year conflict, has been preparing for an offensive on the city of Idlib, which is controlled by rebels and now home to about 3 million people.

But after Putin's talks with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, who has opposed a military operation against the rebels in Idlib, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said there would not be an offensive now.

Erdogan, who had feared another cross-border exodus of Syrian refugees to join the 3.5 million already in Turkey, said the deal would allow opposition supporters to stay where they were, and avert a humanitarian crisis.

Putin told a joint news conference with Erdogan: "We agreed that by Oct. 15 [we will] create along the contact line between the armed opposition and government troops a demilitarized zone of a depth of 15-20 kilometers [9-12 miles], with the withdrawal from there of radically minded rebels, including the Nusra Front.

"By Oct. 10, at the suggestion of the Turkish president, [we agreed] on the withdrawal from that zone of the heavy weapons, tanks, rockets systems and mortars of all opposition groups. The demilitarized zone will be monitored by mobile patrol groups of Turkish units and units of Russian military police," Putin said, with Erdogan standing alongside him.

EPA

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Monday

Neither Putin nor Erdogan explained how they planned to differentiate "radically minded" rebels from other anti-Assad groups. It was also not immediately clear how much of the city of Idlib fell within the zone.

Idlib is held by an array of rebels. The most powerful is Tahrir al-Sham, an amalgamation of Islamist groups dominated by the Nusra Front, an al-Qaida affiliate until 2016.

Other Islamists, and groups fighting as the Free Syrian Army banner, are now gathered with Turkish backing under the banner of the National Front for Liberation.

"With this agreement, we have precluded experiencing a large humanitarian crisis in Idlib," Erdogan said.

"The opposition will continue to remain in the areas where they are. In return, we will ensure that the radical groups, which we will determine with Russia, will not operate in the area under discussion," he said.

Ahead of the trip to Russia, Erdogan had said Turkey's calls for a cease-fire in Idlib region were bearing fruit after days of relative calm but that more work needed to be done.

Putin this month publicly rebuffed a proposal from Erdogan for a cease-fire there when the two met along with Iran's president for a three-way summit in Tehran.

Syria's U.N. ambassador said Monday that Damascus was committed to "liberate it [Idlib] from terrorism and foreign occupation," adding that there is no de-escalation zone in rebel-held Idlib because "armed groups refused to dissociate themselves from terrorist groups."

Bashar Ja'afari told the U.N. Security Council on Friday that "the situation is as it is now in Idlib because the countries sponsoring terrorism do not want to distinguish between terrorists and armed opposition."

Ja'afari said, "Those who facilitated the entry of foreign terrorist fighters into my country, especially the Turkish government, still have a chance to remove them from Idlib province."

But he warned that "in case the armed terrorist groups refuse to lay down weapons, refuse to leave Syrian territory to go back to where they came from, the Syrian government is prepared."

Ja'afari said Syria is aware of the humanitarian consequences that might result and "we take all precautions and preparations to protect civilians, to provide safe passage for them to leave, just as we have done in similar situations."

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[Report: Israel, Turkey in talks to restore ambassadors](#)

Israeli-Turkish ties, once close, have been plagued with crises over past few years • In latest row, Turkey accused Israel of using "disproportionate force" to handle Gaza riots • Ankara has already returned its economic attaché to Israel.

Israel Hayom Staff

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan | Photo: Reuters

Israel and Turkey are reportedly holding backchannel negotiations aimed at mending diplomatic fences and restoring their nearly severed diplomatic ties, Israeli media reported on Monday.

Once close regional allies, Israel and Turkey froze diplomatic ties in 2010, after 10 Turkish nationals were killed in clashes when the Israeli Navy raided a flotilla trying to breach the Gaza Strip blockade.

A reconciliation deal in 2016 stipulated that Israel would pay \$21 million in restitution to the victims' families and the two countries would restore full diplomatic ties.

But relations have never fully recovered, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan – a harsh critic of Israeli policies on issues pertaining to the Palestinians – often trade barbs on social media.

The most recent war of words between Netanyahu and Erdogan was sparked when the Turkish leader accused Israel of using "disproportionate force" against "peaceful protesters" in the Gaza Strip.

The comment followed border riots in which more than 60 Palestinians, most of them members of Hamas and other terror groups, were killed.

Erdogan placed the blame for the deaths squarely on Israel, writing on Twitter that Israel is a "terrorist state" that commits "genocide."

Netanyahu responded by tweeting, "The most moral army in the world will not be lectured to by those who for years have bombed civilians indiscriminately."

This prompted Turkey to recall its ambassadors from Israel and the United States and to expel the Israeli ambassador and consul general from Turkey in May.

Israel responded by expelling the Turkish consul in Jerusalem.

Five months on, it seems the two countries are trying to broker a rapprochement.

According to Monday's reports, the behind-the-scenes talks aim to see both countries return their respective ambassadors in October, following the Jewish holidays.

Officials privy to the effort say the Israeli and Turkish delegates are due to meet in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates.

Turkey has returned its economic attaché to Israel in recent weeks, they said.

Newsletter Sunday September 16, 2018

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Syria: Israel launched missile attack on Damascus airport

War monitor says attack targeted arms shipment meant for Iranian forces or Hezbollah • Air defenses intercept several missiles, Syrian state media claims • Hangars were disguised as belonging to U.N. and global courier company HDL, Israeli media reports.

Daniel Siryoti, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

A previous Israeli airstrike in Syria | Photo: AP

Israel attacked several targets in the Damascus International Airport on Saturday night, Syrian state media said, adding that Syrian air defenses intercepted some of the incoming missiles.

A war monitoring group said the attack targeted an arms shipment meant for Iranian forces or the Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah terrorist group.

According to Syrian reports, the target of the strike was a weapons depot in the airport that contained weapons delivered from Iran. Additional reports suggested that the strike destroyed a Russian-made S-200 Syrian missile defense battery.

Additional reports noted underground explosions, which were heard across Damascus. The state news agency SANA posted pictures showing what appeared to be air defenses firing into the air.

"Our air defense systems thwarted an Israeli missile aggression on Damascus International Airport," Syrian state news agency SANA cited a military source as saying.

Witnesses at a major trade fair in the capital Damascus said they saw flares shooting up into the night sky.

An IDF spokesperson declined to comment, saying that Israel does not discuss foreign reports.

However, in a possible message to Iran, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday morning that the Jewish state's red lines were "sharper than ever."

Speaking before the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, the prime minister added: "We must do everything to prevent war. Its victims destroy families and are an open wound in the heart of the nation. At the same time, if war is forced upon us, we must do everything to win it with minimum losses.

"Israel is always working to prevent our enemies from arming themselves with advanced weapons. Our red lines are sharper than ever and our determination to enforce them is stronger than ever," he said.

On Sunday morning, Israel's Hadashot TV reported that an Iranian Boeing-made cargo aircraft was targeted in the attack, along with several hangars disguised as belonging to the United Nations and global courier company DHL, in an effort to conceal their true purpose from Israeli intelligence.

Israel rarely acknowledges attacks inside Syria, but has said it would use military action to prevent weapons transfers to its enemies.

Earlier this month, an Israeli military official said the Jewish state has struck over 200 Iranian targets in Syria over the past 18 months.

Israel is widely believed to have been behind a series of airstrikes mainly targeting Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria that have joined the country's war fighting alongside the regime.

An Israeli official said earlier this month that the targets were connected to Iran's elite Quds force and included air force components, support infrastructure, and weapons storage and manufacturing facilities.

U.S. and Israeli officials have repeatedly insisted that Iran and Hezbollah withdraw from Syria, which shares a border with Israel.

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| US closes last remaining aid channel for Palestinian civilians

In latest punitive measure against Palestinians, Trump administration ends \$10 million budget for programs promoting coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians • U.S. to continue funding programs fostering friendship between Israeli Jews and Arabs.

Daniel Siryoti

Israeli and Palestinian children shake hands after taking part in a soccer game to promote coexistence | Illustration: Rafael Ben-Ari

The United States is ending funding for programs aimed at bringing Israelis and Palestinians together as part of a larger move to end U.S. aid provided to Palestinian civilians.

According to a report in The New York Times, the Trump administration has blocked funds allocated for meetings between Israelis and Palestinians, effectively shutting down the last remaining channel for Palestinian civilians to receive American aid.

Although Congress approved the funding in 2017, United States Agency for International Development officials reportedly told congressional aides the \$10 million budget for coexistence programs between Palestinians and Israelis would not be allocated.

In a statement, Friday, USAID said funding for programs fostering coexistence between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs was set to continue.

While USAID was "currently unable to engage Palestinians in the West Bank and [the] Gaza [Strip] as a result of the administration's recent decision on Palestinian assistance," it was "continuing its support for civil society working on these issues within Israel," the statement said.

The move is the latest in a series of punitive measures taken by the Trump administration against the Palestinians, which so far has included Washington suspending its multimillion-dollar contribution to the U.N. aid agency that supports Palestinian refugees, shuttering the PLO's mission in Washington and recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. These moves have prompted Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to refuse to engage with any of Trump's envoys.

In an interview with The New York Times Friday, U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner said that none of these measures had diminished the chances of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process being successful.

Kushner said that U.S. President Donald Trump's tougher policies had actually improved the chances for peace by stripping away the "false realities" that surround Middle East peacemaking.

Kushner lambasted the Palestinians for maligning the Trump administration in the wake of the aid cuts, saying that Palestinian leaders "deserved to lose aid after vilifying the administration."

"Nobody is entitled to America's foreign aid," he stated.

In the case of the Palestinians, Kushner argued, U.S. funding had "evolved into a decadeslong entitlement program with no plan to make them self-reliant."

Still, he insisted that the rift between Ramallah and Washington was not unbridgeable.

"In every negotiation I've ever been in, before somebody gets to 'yes,' their answer is 'no.'"

Newsletter Friday September 14, 2018

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[US marines team with rebels in southern Syria in large exercise](#)

Pentagon signals to Russia and Iran that American forces will not leave the war-torn country anytime soon • Russia says U.S. presence in Syria is illegal, is harboring terrorists • Washington sees outpost in southern Syria as a bulwark against Iran.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

The U.S. flag flutters on a military vehicle in Manbej countryside | Photo: Reuters

A Syrian rebel commander said on Thursday rare military exercises with U.S. Marines in southern Syria sent a strong message to Russia and Iran that the Americans and the rebels intend to stay and confront any threats to their presence.

Col. Muhanad al Talaa, commander of the Pentagon-backed Maghawir al Thawra group, told Reuters the eight days of drills that ended this week at the U.S. military outpost in Tanf were the first such exercises with live-fire air and ground assault, involving hundreds of U.S. troops and rebel fighters.

"These exercises have a big importance and have beefed up the defenses of the area and raised the combat capabilities and morale and that of civilians in the area," Talaa told Reuters by phone from Tanf, near Syria's borders with Jordan and Iraq.

A U.S. military spokesman said the exercises were a show of force and that the Pentagon had notified Moscow through "deconfliction" channels to prevent "miscommunication or escalate tension."

"The exercise was conducted to reinforce our capabilities and ensure we are ready to respond to any threat to our forces within our area of operations" Col. Sean Ryan said.

Russia and the Syrian government have repeatedly called on Washington to pull out its troops from Tanf base, where it has declared a 55 kilometer (35 mile) radius "deconfliction zone" off-limits to others.

Rebels say hundreds of U.S. marines arrived this month in Tanf to join special operations troops already based in the garrison and participate in the drills, amid heightened U.S.-Russian tensions in Syria and a naval buildup in the Mediterranean.

The "deconfliction zone" has become a safe haven for at least 50,000 civilians who live in the Rukban camp that lies within it. Russia's defense ministry in August repeated an accusation that Washington has been harboring Islamic State terrorists within the zone.

"We are staying whether the Russians or Iranians want or not," the rebel commander added.

The outpost, surrounded by desert, was established during the battles against Islamic State militants who used to control eastern Syria bordering Iraq.

After Islamic State were driven out, U.S.-led coalition warplanes struck Iranian-backed militias on several occasions to prevent them advancing, in what Washington has described as self-defence.

Tanf lies on the strategic Damascus-Baghdad highway, once a major supply route for Iranian weapons into Syria.

This makes the base a bulwark against Iran and part of a larger campaign against Iran's military expansion in the Middle East.

Control of the area has long been a goal of the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies.

Rebels say the U.S. military's new policy to bolster Tanf's capabilities is a big shift.

"The American position has changed completely towards the Iranians. Before it was just putting a line to the Iranians not to approach the areas," Talaa added.

Tehran's failure to end its military presence in Syria could provoke a U.S. military response, Talaa added.

"If Tehran does not respond to the demands of the Americans there is a big likelihood they will be hit. It's inevitable the Iranians leave Syria. This should happen quickly and in a decisive way," he added.

Turkey warned Thursday that any military operation in Syria's Idlib would bring disaster to the region.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said his country was working with Russia, Iran and allies to stabilize Idlib and to prevent a humanitarian tragedy there, Anadolu said.

Russian media reported that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will discuss Syria, Ukraine and Iran with his German counterpart, Heiko Maas, in Berlin on Friday

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