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Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, May 23

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Reuters

Suspect charged with murder in fatal DC shooting of two Israel embassy aides

A Chicago-born man arrested as the lone suspect in the fatal shooting of two Israeli embassy employees in Washington was charged on Thursday in federal court with two counts of first-degree murder in a killing widely condemned as an act of antisemitism. Elias Rodriguez, 31, is accused of opening fire on a group of people on Wednesday night as they left an event for young professionals and diplomats hosted by the American Jewish Committee, an advocacy group that fights antisemitism and supports Israel.

i24 News

France & Saudi Arabia reportedly working on proposal for Hamas to disarm

Ahead of a United Nations conference scheduled next month, called by France and Saudi Arabia, the two countries are working on a plan for Hamas to disarm, according to a report in Bloomberg on Thursday. Citing sources familiar with the discussions, the US news site said that Saudi Arabia is discussing the matter with the Palestinian terrorist group, while it is unknown whether France has also contacted Hamas.

i24 News

France rallies allies to recognize Palestinian state at UN summit

France is intensifying its diplomatic efforts to convince Western nations to recognize a Palestinian state, with the aim of announcing this recognition in a coordinated manner at a peace summit at the United Nations next month. French

President Emmanuel Macron is organizing this conference on June 17 in partnership with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as the Elysée Palace is banking on several European countries, including Belgium, Portugal, and Luxembourg, who could publicly support the creation of a Palestinian state at this event.

Times of Israel

After delays, Palestinians say first food aid beginning to be distributed in Gaza

Flour and other food aid will start reaching some of Gaza's most vulnerable people on Thursday, aid workers said, as the United Nations confirmed that aid groups "collected and dispatched" around 90 of some 200 trucks that Israel has allowed to enter this week, but Palestinian officials said it is nowhere near enough to make up for shortages caused by an 11-week blockade.

Jerusalem Post

IDF control of Gaza Strip jumps over 50%, on the way to vast majority

IDF control of the Gaza Strip has jumped more than 50% in recent weeks. At that pace, the IDF is well on its way to controlling the vast majority of the enclave. Whether IDF control of Gaza will stop at about 70% or reach 100%, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a major speech on Wednesday night, is a matter of debate and interpretation. Even before Operation Gideon's Chariots intensified earlier this week to further defeat Hamas and take over more Gazan territory, the IDF had taken control of about 50% of Gaza since it renewed hostilities when negotiations for releasing more hostages broke down in March.

Times of Israel

Defying AG's order, Netanyahu selects IDF general as next Shin Bet chief

Directly defying an order from the attorney general, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced on Thursday evening that he was appointing IDF Maj. Gen. David Zini as the next Shin Bet chief. The announcement came a day after the High Court of Justice issued a ruling that Netanyahu's firing of outgoing Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar was made "improperly" and "unlawfully," and that he had a conflict of interest.

Arutz Sheva

Iranian FM: Zero bombs = deal, zero enrichment = no deal

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Thursday made clear Iran's stance ahead of a fifth round of indirect nuclear negotiations with the US in Rome. "Figuring out the path to a deal is not rocket science: Zero nuclear weapons = we DO have a deal. Zero enrichment = we do NOT have a deal. Time to decide..." Araghchi wrote in a post on social media site X. Iran has repeatedly insisted that its right to uranium enrichment is "non-negotiable," a stance directly at odds with chief US negotiator Steve Witkoff, who has labeled it a "red line," reiterating that the United States "cannot allow even one percent of an enrichment capability."

Ynet News

IDF launches wave of airstrikes across Lebanon, citing Hezbollah targets

head of a strike in the southern Lebanese village of Toul, the IDF issued an Arabic-language evacuation warning, identifying a Hezbollah-linked building; the site was hit about an hour later, followed by multiple strikes across the country.

The Israel Defense Forces launched a broad wave of airstrikes across Lebanon on Thursday, targeting what it described as Hezbollah military infrastructure, including rocket launchers and weapons depots. The assault began with an unusual public warning: an Arabic-language message from IDF Spokesperson Lt. Col. Avichay Adraee directed at residents of Toul, a village north of the Litani River in southern Lebanon.

Commentary:

Yediot Ahronot

A Futile War

By Avi Issacharoff

- Barring any last-moment surprises, the IDF will continue today to increase its troop numbers in the Gaza Strip in the context of Operation Gideon's Chariots. Just like a year and half ago, this time too IDF troops will conquer Hamas strongholds at the expense of residential neighborhoods in Gaza, will surround refugee camps and will hit enemy forces.
- There is no doubt at all that blows will continue to be rained down on Hamas, both on the military and the organizational level. The IDF might, for example, try to attack Hamas's refugee camp brigade in the central Gaza Strip, which was comparatively less damaged than other Hamas brigades. The Israeli troops, provided with quality intelligence from the GSS and from Military Intelligence, will also target Hamas's top commanders, though not many are left relative to the beginning of the war. The IDF will probably succeed in killing a few thousand Hamas operatives, most of whom were drafted after the war started on October 7, 2023.
- More innocent people will be killed, more houses will be demolished, more neighborhoods will be flattened and the scope of destruction will rise increasingly. The pictures that we saw in Rafah and in Khan Yunis, which were reminiscent of a biblical apocalypse movie, will be repeated in different neighborhoods of Gaza City and/or in areas such as Deir al Balah, Al-Boureij, Maghazi and more.

- But the truth, difficult as it may be, must be said: These are all actions that were already taken in the year and seven months of this war, and while it may be true that the picture in the Gaza Strip has since changed, it has not changed in a way that changes the equation. Hamas is still standing on its feet. It has not surrendered and is not prepared to release hostages.
- In this regard, despite the military and the government's efforts to "rebrand" the war, this [operation] is just more of the same. There is no trick that hasn't been tried, no operation that wasn't conceived of before.
- The IDF will dislodge the Palestinian population for the umpteenth time, perhaps instead of to Mawasi to someplace like Rafah. The Palestinians will flee to protected areas and will continue to receive the newly-resumed supply humanitarian aid there. The bottom line is that everyone who expects a different result from doing the same thing, is likely to be disappointed.
- Without a political achievement, without changing the governmental situation in the Gaza Strip, this war is unlikely to produce new results. Hamas will continue to try to attack troops and will sacrifice more of its people for the sake of the mission and, at the same time, will hope for the most massive attack possible on the local civilian population so that international criticism of Israel might increase. Hamas is counting on Israeli actions that will cause innocent civilian casualties in the hope that these will lead to an American ultimatum to Israel to stop the war. All that remains for Hamas's operatives to do is to survive and attack from inside the local population so that it might suffer casualties.
- There has been a lot of talk in the media in the last few weeks about Israel and the IDF's new plan, in the context of "changing policy," to hold onto territory. In other words, to be a substitute to Hamas or to permanently conquer the Gaza Strip. But the significance of doing this is that very quickly, Israel will find itself forced to provide humanitarian aid to two million Palestinians on a regular basis. Beyond that, and the truth must be said in this case too: the IDF does not have enough manpower to allow it to maintain a permanent presence in every alleyway in every refugee camp. There is no such animal, not with the manpower that the IDF has today, and not with the ever-mounting burnout among the reservists.
- Even control "only" over key points in the Gaza Strip will not produce the desired change. The question that needs to be asked today is: What is Israel's goal in the current operation? Is it only the hostages' release,

which is unlikely to happen as a result of the military operation? Or perhaps it is changing reality in the Gaza Strip?

- At the moment, it appears that the goal of the new “operation,” or the war’s continuation, is the Netanyahu government’s goal: to continue the war at any price, unrelated to its outcome, chiefly for political reasons. More razed houses, more dead Palestinians and, sadly, more dead soldiers. These cannot be war objectives.
- The goal must be the hostages’ release, removing Hamas from power and delivering a mortal blow to its military capabilities. The current operation can yield a partial blow to Hamas’s military strength, but not anything more than that. It is not expected to topple the Hamas regime since Hamas no longer cares about sovereign control over the Gaza Strip, only about its military survival. And its military survival can only be at risk if an alternative governmental entity takes power that will force it to hand over its weapons.
- Israel’s very decision to refrain from discussing “the day after” only helps Hamas in its survival efforts.

Israel Hayom

A Double-Digit Number of IDF Brigades in Gaza

By Lilach Shoval and Ronit Silverstein

- Amid the deadlocked negotiations, the IDF recently expanded its fighting in the Gaza Strip. The objective is to defeat Hamas in a way that will create conditions for freeing the hostages. To that end, the IDF intends to deploy a double-digit number of brigades in the Gaza Strip, and to seize control of most of it.
- By most assessments, the high-intensity operation will last roughly three months, followed by several months more in which the troops will clear the area [of hostile forces]. Military officials said that the IDF will be able to halt the operation at any stage, if instructed to do so by the political leadership, in order to facilitate the release of hostages. The IDF officials added that they hoped that the military pressure would induce greater Hamas flexibility.
- Islamic Jihad assumed responsibility for the rocket fire early yesterday evening on the Gaza periphery and Ashkelon. The IDF announced that a single rocket that was fired at the city was intercepted. No one was injured, and no impact was reported.

- Hagit Bar-Ilan, a resident of Ashkelon, told Israel Hayom: “For the past while, all of the city’s residents have been hearing all day and all night the sounds of the explosions from the fighting in Gaza. We can hear the high- intensity fighting in Gaza every day, with booms [and] powerful and frightening air strikes. I was in my car. I had just returned home from the store, and the siren began. I ran as quickly as I could into my building, despite the fact that there isn’t any point running into it because the building isn’t explosion-proof at all. I saw passengers who were on a bus get off and run quickly in the direction of my building, but it isn’t explosion- proof.”
- Meanwhile, activists with Tzav 9 and a reservists organization made their way yesterday to the access road to the Kerem Shalom crossing to block the trucks that were supposed to deliver aid to Gaza. After a few hours of protests, the police detained Tzav 9 Director Reut Ben Haim. A second demonstrator was subsequently detained after he ignored the police’s instructions and made his way onto the road in an effort to stop the aid trucks bodily.
- A large number of police officers are now deployed at the Kerem Shalom crossing to help the IDF secure the delivery of aid to Gaza.
- Yesterday, 93 trucks were allowed into the Gaza Strip to deliver aid in response to American pressure. The trucks transported flour, baby food, medical equipment and medicine.