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Diplomatic maelstrom

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The cabinet ministers' diagnosis last week that Israel is facing its most complex strategic situation in decades is turning out to be correct. Even before the focus shifts to the Palestinian arena, with the bid by the Palestinian Authority to have the United Nations recognize it as a state, Israel has had to deal with the return home of senior envoys from three of the region's most important countries. So far this month, Ankara expelled Israel's ambassador to Turkey, Israel's ambassador to Egypt was forced to flee Cairo in the middle of the night amid a mob attack, and yesterday all Israeli diplomats were evacuated from Amman due to warnings that Jordanians intended to copy the Egyptian demonstrations. In all three cases, it seems very unlikely that the ambassadors will return in the near future.

The claim by Benjamin Netanyahu's political rivals that this is all the prime minister's fault is baseless. And yet, Netanyahu should have considered compromising with Turkey over an apology for killing its citizens on the Mavi Marmara. The U.S. administration's proposal was reasonable and did not undermine Israel's dignity. More important, apparently, is Netanyahu's behavior toward U.S. President Barack Obama. The White House has not yet forgotten the lesson in history that Netanyahu gave Obama in front of the cameras during his last visit in May.

Israel's dependence on the United States, in spite of the latter's regional weakness, is evident daily, whether in the form of America's huge defense assistance or the president's intervention during the incident in Cairo last week, which was the only thing that kept the embassy security guards from being massacred. As far as the Palestinian problem is concerned, it's true that it was Obama who drove Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to proceed with the superfluous UN declaration. But Netanyahu's firm refusal to provide some diplomatic hope

that would create a path out of the mess contributed to the crisis.

This past Tuesday, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to Cairo to speak to the Egyptian people directly, sidelining temporary ruler Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. As opposed to what the Israeli press reported, no new strategic anti-Israel alliance was formed. The political situation in Egypt is too fluid: The parliamentary elections are supposed to take place two months from now, but they are likely to be postponed. The Egyptian economy is facing growing problems and the immediate interest of the supreme military council would seem to be to calm things down on the Israeli front. None of this prevented Erdogan from delivering a harsh anti-Israeli speech, borne on waves of affection from the Egyptian public.

In the background, the Turkish press continued to publish the government's threats against Israel: Turkish combat planes will now identify Israeli planes as enemy planes, Turkish warships will escort flotillas to Gaza, and more. Of all the possible threats, the one that particularly disturbs the General Staff is a provocation by a Turkish ship against Israeli vessels, which could end in a violent confrontation.

The report by daily Yedioth Ahronoth that Foreign Minister Avidgor Lieberman recommends fostering closer ties with the Kurdish underground, the PKK, as retaliation for Erdogan's incitement, was not favorably received in Turkey. Yet the fact that the international community is completely ignoring Turkey's crimes against the Kurds is also worrisome.

In April, in a step described as historic, Turkey allowed independent Kurds to run in the parliamentary elections. But less than two years ago the pro-Kurdish party in the parliament was declared illegal. At the same time, the Turkish army, under Erdogan's close supervision, is carrying out a campaign to kill Kurds outside Turkey. Last month the Turkish army killed about 160 Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. In May 2010, the army killed 150 rebels in the same region, and three months later the weekly German magazine Der Spiegel reported that chemical weapons were used against the Kurds in September 2009. Middle East expert Dr. Ely Karmon said this week that emphasizing the accusations against Israel was intended to distract attention from the Turkish repression of the Kurds, among other things.

Palestinian tent protests?

The West Bank's economy expanded by 8 percent in the first half of 2010, but only 4 percent in the first half of this year, according to the World Bank report published this week. The report was published ahead of the Palestinian Donors' Conference, which will take place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. While this growth rate is still far higher than in many other countries, it is significantly less than what the Palestinians have become accustomed to. In addition, the growth has barely managed to bring the West Bank back to its pre-intifada state.

The 2011 Palestinian budget was drafted based on a forecast of \$967 million in donations. Yet by the end of June, only \$293 million had been received. The construction sector is clearly slowing, while Palestinian exports to Israel did not increase at all compared to 2010.

Most experts and commentators have been assuming that the potential economic price would deter the Palestinian public from launching a new intifada, but it seems like the economic situation is less positive than they had thought. This is especially relevant for the average Palestinian, who did not benefit much even during the relatively good years; the fruits were

concentrated among businessmen and well-connected PA employees. That is a problem for the PA, too, which is not certain it will be able to channel public fury exclusively at Israel without taking some of the heat itself.

On the Israeli side, Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Yair Naveh finished reviewing various Israel Defense Forces units this week, and declared that the army is ready for possible mass unrest in the West Bank. Hundreds of millions of shekels have been invested in preparing for such action, code-named Operation Summer Seeds. This includes arms acquisitions, training and infrastructure work.

Last month the Central Command held a comprehensive exercise examining potential scenarios. In recent weeks most of the command's regular units have been concentrated on the West Bank. Some are still in training, as part of the preparation for September. Today additional units will enter the West Bank, boosting the forces maintaining day-to-day security by about 20 percent. This is still an initial, limited stage of activity. If violent incidents break out, the IDF is prepared to double the number of soldiers deployed in the West Bank, which will require calling up reserves - at first only isolated brigades prepared for the task.

The Central Command has already listed problematic friction points, starting with the Qalandiyah checkpoint at the northern entrance to Jerusalem, the city of Hebron, the settlements around Nablus and areas where settlements are very near Palestinian cities. In addition, several regional defense groups, staffed by reservists who live in the settlements, will be recruited in areas considered problematic, such as the settlement of Psagot, which is adjacent to El Bireh and Ramallah.

This is where the second intifada began, exactly 11 years ago. This time, unlike in September 2000, the commanders are teaching the soldiers that even when blocking a mass march on a checkpoint, they need to minimize Palestinian casualties.

Security coordination with the PA has thus far been going smoothly, and the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas in May has had no negative repercussions for Israel. The IDF preparations are focused on the West Bank. In the south, the command is still busy preventing attacks from Sinai. Currently it has no reliable information stating that Hamas intends to lead parallel demonstrations on the Gaza border. Although Israel did not handle well the attacks on the borders with Lebanon and Syria on Nakba Day in May and Naksa day in June - the large number of dead among the demonstrators seems to have dampened the organizers' desire for a repeat performance for now.

Anti-Iran messianics

Mass behavior is almost impossible to forecast. And under such sensitive circumstances, even a move or a mistake by a single person - a checkpoint commander who opens fire under pressure, an attack by a Hamas member, an extremist settler who tries to torch a mosque - could fuel the conflagration. That is the main reason why no one is willing to risk predicting what will happen in the coming weeks.

Netanyahu mentioned the Iranian threat again this week, in an address in honor of the 10th anniversary of September 11, while Dick Cheney, George W. Bush's vice president during that critical period, said he believed Israel would act alone against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Enrichment activity at the facility built deep inside the mountain near Qom has intensified in

recent weeks, and the centrifugal quality has been upgraded, according to International Atomic Energy Agency reports and official Iranian declarations. A senior Israeli official told an American Jewish delegation that conducting all their enrichment procedures in Qom will give the Iranians almost total immunity from an aerial attack.

Anyone who has spoken with Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak in small forums in recent months was astonished to hear a firm, determined, almost messianic tone regarding the nuclear threat and how it should be handled. An Israeli attack against Iran, despite the Obama administration's opposition, is liable to prove foolish. Not only is it not certain that it will postpone Iran's nuclear program, but such an attack will almost certainly lead to a regional war that will cause serious damage to the Israeli home front.

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