



Christian Friends of Israel

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Western Wall “Deal” Causes Problems



The Western Wall in Jerusalem

The so-called “Kotel Deal” enacted in 2016, called for religious pluralism at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It recognized both Reform and Conservative, along with Orthodox Judaism while at the same time allowing both men and women to pray together at the wall.

An article in the *JPost*, by Yaakov Katz says, “Diaspora Jewry was justified Monday, June 25, in blasting the government after the [negative reaction] it received from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet and its decision to freeze the Western Wall deal from 2016 that was supposed to have led to the establishment of an egalitarian prayer plaza at the holy site.

“Sunday,” Katz wrote, “will go down in history as a shameful day for the Jewish state and will sadly lead to a greater divide between Israel and the Diaspora. Nevertheless, now is the time to consider how to move forward.

“The main problem for the *haredim* with the original Kotel deal from 2016 was that it included the establishment of a committee to be jointly chaired by officials from the Prime Minister’s Office and representatives of the different movements (primarily Reform and Conservative). The *haredim* could not live with the establishment of this committee, which would have given the movements de facto legal recognition in Israel. [Hereafter “movements” refers to non-Orthodox Jewish religious groups.]

“Now, with the Kotel deal canceled – or “frozen” as the Prime Minister’s Office likes to say – this committee will not be established. While this is a blow for the movements, the cancellation of the committee opens the door to allow for the construction of a larger and more respectable plaza for egalitarian prayer than the one that is currently at the southern section of the Western Wall.

“On June 25, Netanyahu met with *haredi* party leaders and informed them that renovations will go ahead and according to one high-ranking official, construction will begin soon. While this is not what the movements ultimately envisioned, it would be a step in the right direction.

“President of the Union for Reform Judaism Rabbi Rick Jacobs hinted on Sunday that his movement will take the issue of the Kotel to the High Court of Justice. The battle there will be less about the establishment of a third prayer plaza, but more about whether Women of the Wall can hold their services in the existing women’s section at the Kotel.

“Based on previous rulings, it seems like there is a good chance the court will side with the movements. There are two possible outcomes here. On the one hand, Women of the Wall and the movements might win the right to have a third prayer plaza at the main section. On the other hand, if the renovations that the Prime Minister’s Office are planning for the egalitarian plaza lead to a dramatic improvement, the court might rule that they should pray there instead.

“In short, this is a gamble, but it might be the only move left for the movements.

“The movements have tried to reach a deal with Netanyahu for the last five years since the prime minister asked Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky to lead efforts to find a compromise at the Kotel. The movements could now decide to simply wait for a change in government one day in Israel and hope that *haredi* influence in a new coalition will be less than it is today.

“The Jewish Agency and the movements have very little support for their cause among Israelis. It is true that polls show that most Israelis support the establishment of a third prayer plaza at the Kotel, but they do not care enough to fight for it and make it an issue that they will consider in the next elections.

“Israelis don’t yet understand the practical implications of the government’s decision. They need to realize that there is a real possibility Diaspora Jews will cancel trips to Israel, retract donations to Israel and revoke membership in organizations like AIPAC. *The Jerusalem Post* has long warned that the continued *haredi* monopoly over religion and state in Israel and the suppression of progressive Judaism will lead to an even wider divide with Diaspora Jewry.

“Now is the time for the Jewish Agency to explain to Israelis why they need to care more about this issue and what effect it will have on Israel if American Jews move farther and farther away.”

Syrian Conflict Inches Closer To Israel



The border between Syria and Israel

Tensions are rising on the border between Syria and Israel, as fresh clashes between rebels and forces loyal to the Syrian regime erupted Wednesday, June 21. Israel now risks being dragged into the conflict next door as fighting comes closer to the border and threatens the Druze community, which also has a presence in Israel and whose members may attempt to flee across the border. (The Druze are a definite part of Israel, and their young people often serve in the IDF.)

Fighting came close enough to Israel Wednesday that it set off missile-warning sirens in northern Israeli towns. At least 33 people were killed in clashes between rebels and some fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra,

al Qaeda's branch in Syria, Wednesday afternoon in Quneitra province. Rebels had surrounded a predominantly Druze and pro-regime town on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.

The Druze town of "Hader is now totally surrounded by rebels, who just took a strategic hilltop north of the village," Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told Agence France-Presse. "The regime has not sent reinforcements yet, but the Druze villagers are standing with the government."

Syria's Druze minority had largely refrained from siding with either the rebels or the regime since the war broke out in 2011. However, fighting in Idlib province and in southern provinces neighboring the Druze heartland of Sweida has increased over the past two weeks, forcing some to take up arms and defend their land. Last week, Jabhat al-Nusra militants targeted Druze civilians in the Idlib province, executing at least 20 civilians and prompting outrage from Druze communities in Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

The Druze are a religious and ethnic minority with a history of persecution for their beliefs. Today, the majority of the 1.5 million Druze live in Lebanon, Israel, Syria and Jordan, where they tend to live in predominantly Druze areas. The Druze faith is monotheistic and originated from the Ismaili sect of Shiite Islam, but many Druze today do not consider themselves Muslim.

"We are closely watching the situation on the border, and I ordered [our forces] to do everything necessary," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at a special Wednesday session in the Knesset.

Netanyahu did not give further details on whether or not Israel would get involved in the Syrian conflict to protect the Syrian Druze, nor did he discuss the issue of Druze refugees who may be fleeing toward Israel.

Unconfirmed photo reports that circulated [recently] showed Syrian Druze reportedly attempting to cross the border into Israel, fleeing violence that had reached their doorstep. On Monday, men waving Druze flags were inspecting vehicles crossing the border to reach the field hospital on the Israeli side, in order to make sure no militants with Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State group got through, according to a video posted to social media.

"The Syrians should stay in Syria, and if they reach the fence we will interrogate them," a senior Israeli Defence Forces official told Israeli media on Wednesday. "We won't let people enter Israel just like that."

However, many of Israel's roughly 120,000 Druze have taken it upon themselves to support their kin across the border. The Golan Heights, which overlook Syria, are home to roughly 20,000 Druze – the majority of whom do not hold Israeli citizenship.



Majdal Shams

Druze residents of the Golan town Majdal Shams took to the streets Wednesday and rallied in support of the Syrian Druze community. Israel's Druze have reportedly already raised roughly \$2.6 million for their Syrian counterparts to buy whatever is necessary for protection, including weapons.

"Israel is not a part of this fighting and doesn't want to be a part, because if we say we're going to be part of the fighting, it makes it worse for our people in Syria," a Druze member of Israel's parliament, Ayoub Kara, told the *Times of Israel*. "But I, as a Druze – I'm going to do what I can to support my nation. I'm very loyal to my nation."

Tense Northern Border

According to a *JPost* article it is only a matter of time before another war breaks out on Israel's northern border. Some Israelis living there stand to be evacuated to avoid being harmed.

The article says, "Israel's northernmost town of Metulla with a population of close to 2,000 people sits on the Lebanese border and despite the ever-present risk of conflict with Hezbollah, the community continues to grow. Metulla is one of the communities that is expected to be evacuated in the event of a war between Israel and the Shiite Lebanese terror group.

"The next war will be pretty bloody for both sides. Israel will evacuate its population and I suggest the Lebanese do the same," said Lt. Col. (Res.) Sarit Zehavi, the head of Alma, an organization that gives briefings on Israel's security challenges on the northern border.

"Israel has never carried out a mandatory evacuation of any community since the founding of the state. However, the IDF is now concerned about the very real possibility of ground attacks by the terror group against Israeli civilians in border communities in addition to the threat posed by Hezbollah's stockpile of more than 100,000 rockets.

"Hezbollah knows how to fight and how to move large forces," Zehavi said, stressing that the group will likely not "occupy" any Israeli villages, but aims to create fear by massacring Israeli civilians.

"It will be a totally new battlefield than what we saw in 2006," she said in reference to the Second Lebanon War, explaining that the group has significantly increased its battlefield knowledge due to its fighting in Syria.

"Everything they learn in Syria, including from the Russians, is being brought here.

"Israel and Hezbollah fought a 34-day war in 2006, and since then hostilities between them have been limited to occasional cross-border fire and alleged Israeli airstrikes against Hezbollah leaders and military equipment in Syria.

"Though Israel has the dilemma of responding and deterring Hezbollah while not escalating the conflict, it's all about deterrence and about making them understand that the cost of conflict will be very high," Zehavi said.

She added that there are two scenarios which would lead to a war on the Lebanese front.

"One would be Iran deciding to give the order to attack Israel and the other would be a miscalculation by either side which would escalate into a full blown war," she asserted as she pointed out a large poster put up by Hezbollah on a hill overlooking new houses being constructed in Metulla.

"Next to the poster, which Zehavi said was put up last week to commemorate the Iranian anti-Israel 'Quds Day,' fly two Hezbollah flags and a large Palestinian flag. With a photo of the Dome of the Rock and an armed Hezbollah militant, the face of Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khomeini glowers down over the dome and Hezbollah has written 'we are coming' in Hebrew and Arabic.



Metulla and mount Hermon (CC BY-SA 3.0, by Adiel Lo, via Wikimedia)

“Hezbollah, which is supported by the majority of the Shiite population [of Lebanon] has not only inserted itself into every aspect of civil life but is said to be using civilian homes to store its weapons warehouses, and rebuilt and improved its arsenal with the help of Iran.

“The border area with Lebanon has been flagged by the IDF as vulnerable to enemy infiltrations and has seen nine infiltrations since 2009, Zehavi said, stressing that while the army hasn’t found any tunnels in the north and the terrain allows for militants to hide prior to an attack, “Hezbollah knows how to dig.”

“The border fence with Lebanon was originally built in the 1980s and while sections of it have been upgraded several times with engineered barriers including reinforced concrete panels of several feet high and concrete walls and fortified watchtowers, it is considered by some to be in poor condition.

“This has led to Israel investing significant amounts of money and effort into strengthening its defenses along the border with Lebanon over the past several years creating obstacles such as artificial cliffs and building high concrete barriers to help prevent any such ground attacks by Hezbollah.”

***“Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me”
(Psalm 56:9).***

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