Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, September 1

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Times of Israel

**Man Shot Dead Inside Supermarket in Northern Town**

A man was shot dead in the northern town of Fureidis, as the crime wave enveloping Israel's Arab community showed no signs of abating. Police said they were called to the scene in the suburb of Haifa and found three men wounded by gunshots. Ahmed Marai, 25, was brought to Hillel Yaffe Medical Center in critical condition and was subsequently pronounced dead. Two other men in their 20s were moderately wounded and were evacuated to nearby hospitals for treatment, medics said. Police said they opened an investigation into the incident, were collecting evidence at the scene and later planned to hold a situational assessment. Channel 13 news reported that the shooting took place inside a supermarket. Marai became the 163rd member of Israel's Arab community to be killed in violent criminal incidents in 2023. Read More “Woman Shot Dead in Haifa Home; Man Injured” (Times of Israel)

Reuters

**Palestinian Trucker Kills Israeli Soldier in Ramming Attack**

A Palestinian truck driver killed an Israeli soldier in a ramming attack near a checkpoint on the boundary with the occupied West Bank, and was shot dead during an ensuing pursuit, the Israeli military said. The incident came hours after Palestinians wounded four Israeli soldiers in a roadside bombing in the West Bank, which has seen spiraling violence in recent months amid an almost decade-long deadlock in United States-sponsored peacemaking efforts. The truck driver, a 41-year-old Palestinian with a permit to work in Israel, ran down a group of off-duty soldiers on the Israeli side of Maccabim checkpoint, killing one and injuring three others along with a roadside vendor, the military said. Security forces pursued the driver into the West Bank, shooting him near the Palestinian village of Nilin, Israeli police said. Dig Deeper “Israeli-Palestinian Tensions Rise with Fresh Attacks in Jerusalem, West Bank” (Al-Monitor)

Arutz Sheva

**New Hamas Rocket Can Hit Israel’s Northern Border**

A Telegram channel bearing the name of Mohammed Deif, supreme commander of Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, reported that a missile that threatens the majority of Israeli territory has recently become operational. According to the report, the new rocket has a range of 118 Miles, can reach Rosh Hanikra, on Israel's northern border, from Gaza, and its warhead weighs one ton. It was also reported that the rocket is manufactured by the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades in the Gaza Strip, and its explosives are imported from Iran. On August 17th, 2023, this model of rocket was launched from the Gaza Strip toward the Mediterranean Sea, and according to the report, the launch was meant to send a message to Israel. Dig Deeper “Hamas Said Considering Resuming Mass Protests Along Gaza Border” (Times of Israel)
Jordan Is Behind Recent Shakeups in the PA, Experts Say

Rumors of imminent changes within the Palestinian Authority (PA) government continue to swirl, despite official denials from Ramallah. Earlier this month, PA President Mahmoud Abbas fired 12 provincial governors in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in what many say is part of an “overhaul” in personnel in the political and security structure. The shakeup continued some days later with the announcement of the retirement of 35 of his foreign envoys, all of them over the age of 65. Experts believe the dismissals are an attempt to promote newer leadership and quell increasing domestic, regional, and international criticism of the PA. Ramallah-based political analyst Esmat Mansour said that Abbas’s visit to Jordan contributed to the speed with which he carried out the firings. Analysts say the Palestinian leadership is scrambling to appease regional players while satisfying the disgruntled Palestinian street, which sees the PA as ineffective, incompetent, and a tool in the hands of Israel.

Jerusalem Post

US Exploring Land Delineation Between Lebanon, Israel

The US is exploring the possibility of resolving the long-standing border dispute between Lebanon and Israel, senior White House adviser Amos Hochstein said at the end of a two-day visit to Lebanon. Hochstein said it was "natural" to look into the issue following the delineation in 2022 of the maritime border between the two countries, which paved the way for offshore exploration activities to begin on behalf of Lebanon last week. Hochstein said he visited southern Lebanon during his trip "to understand and learn more about what is needed to be able to potentially achieve an outcome," he said. The current demarcation line between the two countries is known as the Blue Line, a frontier mapped by the United Nations that marks the line to which Israeli forces withdrew when they left south Lebanon in 2000. Tensions have flared along it this summer, with rockets being fired at Israel during flare-ups of Israeli-Palestinian violence, and members of Hezbollah or its supporters facing off with Israeli forces. Read More “UN Security Council Votes to Extend UNIFIL Mandate for Another Year” (I24 News)

I24 News

Iran Claims Thwarting Sabotage Attack on Missile Program

Iran's Defense Ministry issued a statement saying that it had thwarted an alleged sabotage attack organized by Israel's Mossad against the country's missile program. According to the statement, Israeli spy services has always been targeting Iran's missile industry due to its "strategic effectiveness" in "creating deterrence against enemy threats." "Due to the country’s self-sufficiency in the field of designing and producing all kinds of systems and missiles needed at various ranges, in recent years multi-layered information and security projects have been designed and implemented under the guise of buying parts to deceive the services of a rival," the defense ministry said. It added that the operation was organized by a "completely professional network" of Israeli agents, who intended to install alien parts into the production cycle of Iran's advanced rockets.
Libya’s Prime Minister Rejects Normalization with Israel

One of Libya’s rival prime ministers rejected the prospect of normalizing relations with Israel days after news broke of a secret meeting between the countries’ two foreign ministers. Last Sunday, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen publicly announced that he and Libya’s foreign minister had held a private meeting in Rome the previous week, the first ever between top diplomats from both countries. The next day, Libya’s Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah suspended Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush and launched an investigation into the meeting. It is illegal to normalize ties with Israel under a 1957 law in Libya, which has long been hostile toward Israel and supportive of the Palestinians. The meeting ignited angry street protests in several Libyan cities, prompting Mangoush to flee to Turkey for fear of her safety. Her exact whereabouts remain unknown. Libya slid into chaos after a NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi in 2011. For years, the country has split between the Western-backed government in Tripoli and a rival administration in the country’s east. Each side has been backed by armed groups and foreign governments. Read More “Decades After Israel’s Osirak Strike, Iraq Says It’s Seeking Civilian Nuclear Program” (Times of Israel)

Netanyahu to Meet Biden on UN Sidelines in New York

Prime Minister Netanyahu will meet with US President Joe Biden on September 21 when both leaders are in New York for the annual UN General Assembly, according to Israeli diplomatic sources. If it indeed takes place, the meeting will end a lengthy period that saw the American leader keep Netanyahu at arm’s length as the premier impatiently awaited an invitation, underlining the deep malaise between the US and the hardline government in Israel. However, it remained unclear if the pair would also sit down at the White House in Washington, as Netanyahu has sought. This would be seen as a significant diplomatic upgrade from a sideline meeting far outside the seat of American power. There was no immediate comment from the Prime Minister’s Office or the White House, both of which had last month confirmed plans for a meeting while declining to name a time or place. Walla news, citing American sources, reported that Biden was still on the fence about whether to invite Netanyahu to the White House following the UN General Assembly. Dig Deeper “Former Shin Bet Chiefs Urge Biden Not to Host Israel’s Netanyahu at White House” (Ha’aretz)
Biden Isn’t Fooled by Netanyahu. So Why Meet Him?

By Alon Pinkas

- After nine barren months full of acrimony, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be going to Washington – or, alternatively, New York – to meet with US President Joe Biden. The endless gloating/resentful chatter about Biden’s reluctance to invite Netanyahu now needs to make way for a much more important question: the quality of the meeting, assuming one takes place. There are three issues that are redefining both the substance and contours of the US-Israel relationship. First, the US’ revised strategic posture and pivot away from the Middle East toward the Indo-Pacific theater, specifically China. Second, Netanyahu’s antidemocratic constitutional coup. And third, his extremist-messianic right-wing government’s annexationist and confrontational policies in the West Bank. On none of the three has Netanyahu shown himself to be an ally of the US. In fact, he has steered Israel in a diametrically opposed direction to America and has done so with arrogance and bravado.

- So the question is, why is he reportedly being invited? Surely Biden and his advisers understand that the very occurrence of such a meeting vindicates Netanyahu, allows him to innocently roll his eyes and vainly say “I told you I got this.” There are two explanations for the apparent invite. One, Biden has already made his point abundantly clear and Netanyahu was humiliated sufficiently to justify a meeting in which he is expected to come up with concrete ideas. This is not a casual “wussup dude, what’s your take on...” meeting between an American president and an Israeli PM who get along and have a trustful and intimate relationship. Furthermore, by holding the meeting, even if it turns out to be unfruitful or even disastrous, Biden is deflecting criticism ahead of an election year that he insulted Netanyahu and “didn’t invite an ally.”

- Biden and his political advisers and campaign managers know that 75 to 80 percent of American Jews will vote for him and for congressional Democrats down the ballot, and not one dollar in campaign contributions from an American Jew will be withheld because he stood up to Netanyahu’s antics when American interests were challenged. The second explanation is about the so-called US-Saudi-Israeli tripartite deal, according to which the US and Saudi Arabia will forge a defense pact – including US security guarantees, a multibillion-dollar arms deal and a nuclear reactor – in exchange for Saudi recognition of Israel, a cooling-off of expanding relations with China, and tangible Israeli measures to ease relations with the Palestinians and avoid unilateral steps advancing the annexation of most of the West Bank and 3 million Palestinians.

- Biden needs to explore and be convinced that Netanyahu is on board, understands the deal and draws the right political conclusions from it. This, in Biden’s mind, warrants a meeting – as long as Netanyahu comes up with the prerequisite, adequate answers. Otherwise, it is doubtful Biden can get such an agreement in Congress and probably will not pursue it at all. The cost-benefit for the US is too high to gamble on Netanyahu’s credibility and ability to deliver.
To paraphrase Shakespeare, Biden has a “Hamlet”-esque dilemma: “To meet, or not to meet: that is the question: Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them.” Ahead of a possible visit, the Palestinians presented their demands to the Saudis, who encouraged the dialogue so as not to appear to have ignored or betrayed Palestinian interests while apparently pursuing a tripartite deal with the Americans and Israel.

The Palestinian demands reportedly include the transfer of lands (in Area B) from Israeli control to the PA; a halt to further Israeli settlement building and expansion; a Saudi consulate in East Jerusalem; and resumption of Saudi financial aid, which was severed in 2021. Even if these requests are accepted by the Saudis and if they gain US support – both very likely – it is extremely unlikely, nay impossible, that a right-wing, annexationist Israeli government will acquiesce.

Earlier in the week, finance minister and annexationist Bezalel Smotrich already announced that “Israel will not consent to any relief measures for the Palestinians for an agreement with Saudi Arabia.” Smotrich also criticized Washington following a US condemnation of settler violence, saying that after Iraq and Afghanistan, the Americans “will not preach to us about human rights.” Netanyahu, on brand, ignored the anti-American vitriol of his minister. If Biden and Netanyahu do end up meeting, whether at the White House between September 18-20 or 22-23 or on the margins of the UN General Assembly gathering in New York around September 19-21, the question is how Biden will approach the meeting.

Will he limit the focus of the conversation to a significant change in Israeli policy in the West Bank, in the context of a possible deal with the Saudis? Or will he also raise the issue of democracy versus autocracy – and, more specifically, Netanyahu’s crude and relentless assault on Israeli democracy? The US president has been unequivocal, consistent and vocal in his criticism of Netanyahu’s autocratic constitutional coup. He has warned directly and indirectly that this distances Israel from the “shared values” at the core of the US-Israel relationship, and even justifies a “reassessment of relations” – as described by Thomas Friedman in The New York Times.

Netanyahu thus far ignored him completely and defiantly, dismissing the criticism as a result of a lack of understanding and familiarity with the subject matter. This enabled and encouraged his vociferous ministers and minions to vulgarly lash out at the US, at Biden himself and Vice President Kamala Harris. Will Biden use this opportunity to pressure Netanyahu about his anti-democratic crusade? Or will he take his word that “it’s just a correction, a minor recalibration in the relations between the three branches.

Trust me, we have one, maybe two, more distorted laws to amend, and then I will open it up to a general debate and reach broad consent as you suggest.” If Biden falls for that, I have both Rehoboth Beach and the Brooklyn Bridge to sell him. But he won’t. He knows Netanyahu too well, knows his endless half-truths, political spin, persistent manipulation, constant obfuscation and sheer mendacity as his default modus operandi. Netanyahu believed he could fool Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and Donald Trump with impunity. In his mind, Biden is no different.
• The thing is, he is different – which is why the focus should shift from “Wow, there’s a meeting” to the quality of that meeting.
What Does the Libyan Debacle Teach Israelis Ahead of Saudi Talks?

By Michal Milstein

- Media and politicians were justified in paying attention to the fallout over the publicized meeting of Foreign Minister Eli Cohen with his Libyan counterpart Najla Mangoush in Rome. After news of the "covert" meeting broke, riots began in Libya and Mangoush was forced to flee to Turkey after being fired. The desire to claim credit for the meeting, while throwing caution to the wind, was in the interest of a quick political win at home, and in complete disregard of diplomatic considerations. It ultimately caused untold damage to any future contacts with the other nations in the Middle East and certainly raised concerns about them becoming public. But it also reveals a deeper understanding of how current and future contact with the Arab world would be accepted by their citizens. Before Mangoush was sacked, rioters took to the streets to express their outrage over talks with Israeli officials.

- Israel has learned what to expect in the region after the signing of the Abraham Accords, and what the limits of its acceptance by regional leaders, may be. Israelis attending the Soccer World Cup games in Qatar suffered abuse from Arab audiences, and any attempts to forge warm relations with Jordanians or Egyptians in those countries, both having signed peace deals with Israel in past decades, were given the cold shoulder. The riots demonstrate the gap between the apparent welcome extended to Israeli officials based on strategic considerations, and the emotions held by most Arabs, when it comes to Israel. Public opinion polls show Israel is still considered an enemy in most Sunni Muslim countries, even those as far away as Tunisia and Algiers.

- This is a lesson that must be learned by Israeli leaders who opt to promote the optimistic but false notion that mutual economic and strategic goals can bring about a breakthrough in ties with the Arab world, including with the man-on-the-street while circumventing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, West Bank settlements and police clashes with worshipers on Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif, all together. This is a critical conversation to have, while efforts to forge Israeli-Saudi relations are ongoing. Many observers are focused on the internal political obstacles that may be in the way of those efforts, on the US administration and the Palestinian leadership. Few ask about how the average Saudi citizen feels about Israel – granted there is little known regarding the subject. A best-case scenario would be a similar response to that exhibited in the UAE. A worse option which is not unlikely, would be a popular uprising against the Saudi regime.

- The Libyan debacle should indicate to the decision-makers in Jerusalem that they should review the foundations on which Israel's Middle East strategy relies. Along with an abundance of caution regarding any public contact with regional leaders, and a deep understanding of public perceptions among their citizenry, Israel should examine the effects of the conflict with the Palestinians, on the Arab world. The challenges some countries have faced since the 2011 Arab Spring pushed the Palestinian struggle to the sidelines, but it still holds sway over public opinion.
Talks with the Palestinians will not necessarily change the disdain Arabs feel towards Israel, but they may reduce its potency and improve ties with most Arab governments. On the other hand, continued tension between Israel and Palestinians, especially if one-sided policies to change the reality on the ground continue, hostility in the Arab world will grow, ultimately foiling attempts for diplomatic agreements.