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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Jerusalem Post

The Benjamin Netanyahu Era Is Over, Sources in Likud Say

While the Likud's ministers and Knesset members (MKs) are projecting a united front in support of party leader Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a growing number of them believe that his days at the party's helm are numbered, sources in the party said. In addition to the catastrophic events of October 7 and a growing sense amongst the party's base that Netanyahu will not deliver on his promise to destroy Hamas and return all hostages, MKs have noted the party's poor performance in most polls of 18 seats, compared to its current 32. If the Likud will no longer be the ruling party in a future election, nearly all of its current 18 ministers (will be relegated to serve as opposition MKs. Therefore, MKs have begun to gravitate toward possible successors, including Nir Barkat, Yisrael Katz, Yuli Edelstein, and Yoav Gallant.

Times of Israel

Netanyahu Vows No Palestinian State, Attacks Israeli Media

During a combative press conference, Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected the prospect of Palestinian statehood after the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and vowed to resist the United States on the matter. He also denied blindsiding his defense minister over a deal to send medicines into Gaza for Israeli hostages, accused Israeli media of spreading pessimism about the progress of the war, and said Hamas and Iran were hoping to see his government fall and elections held mid-war. On the issue of Palestinian sovereignty, Netanyahu was speaking after a report that the Biden administration is looking past the premier to advance a two-state solution, and after US Secretary of State Blinken said Israel cannot achieve "genuine security" without a pathway to a Palestinian state.

Israel National News

Report: Hostage Deal Proposal Will Include Palestinian State

The Financial Times reported that Arab states are working on a plan for a ceasefire and the release of hostages in Gaza that would be included in a broader plan to normalize relations with Israel if it would agree to "irreversible steps" toward a Palestinian state. An Arab official said they hope to present the plan in the coming weeks, with the hope of ending the war and preventing it from spreading. The plan, which Arab officials have discussed with their American and European counterparts, would include Western nations agreeing to formally recognize a Palestinian state, or supporting the Palestinians being granted full membership at the United Nations. The official added that "the real issue is you need hope for Palestinians, it can't just be economic benefits or removal of symbols of occupation." Regarding the current Israeli government, the official said "Given the Israeli body politic today, normalization is maybe what can bring Israelis off the cliff."

US Overrules Own Policy to Supply Israel with Weapons

The Guardian published an article exposing, according to its claim, internal documents from the US State Department that reveal methods used by US administrations to protect Israel from US human rights laws, allowing it to continue supplying Israel with weapons despite allegations of violations of such rights. According to the report, US officials have examined more than 12 cases since 2020 in which serious human rights violations were alleged to have been committed by Israeli security forces, during which substantial efforts have been made to allow the allegedly responsible units to continue receiving access to American weapons despite the accusations made against them. The article added that former US officials said that, in doing so, the officials contributed to the feeling of strength Israel has allegedly confessed to during its ongoing war in Gaza. This was done even though military units of other US allies, including Ukraine, that receive American assistance have faced sanctions due to human rights violations.

EU Parliament Conditions Ceasefire on Hamas Dismantling

The European Parliament has made a groundbreaking decision to tie a call for a ceasefire in Gaza to the condition of dismantling the terrorist organization Hamas and the immediate, unconditional release of all abductees. The resolution, passed with a resounding majority of 312 supporters against 131 opponents, sets a precedent in the European stance on the Israel-Hamas conflict. The European Parliament's resolution also censures Hamas for its misuse of civilian infrastructure, construction of attack tunnels, and the use of human shields. Additionally, it expresses shock at the considerable wealth amassed by Hamas leaders at the expense of impoverished Palestinian citizens. The resolution goes further by condemning countries that provide financial, material, and operational aid to Hamas. It calls for a thorough investigation to identify the sources of funding and weapon systems of the organization.

Protesters March in Tel Aviv, Demanding a Cease-Fire

Some 30 Israeli civil society groups, led by Standing Together and Women Wage Peace, led a protest in Tel Aviv against the ongoing war in Gaza. According to organizers, citing the police, over 2,000 people took part in the protest. The protest was initially scheduled for last week, but police did not give the organizers approval to hold it. The event's invitation reads, "Before us, as people who live in Israel, we have two alternatives: either Israeli-Palestinian peace, the only thing that will bring peace, or perpetual war that guarantees one thing – many more years of war, suffering and killing." Protesters marched through the city, holding signs reading, "cease-fire now," "only peace will bring security" and "peace from the river to the sea." They chanted, "there will be no security here until there is peace," "Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies," "Not Ben-Gvir, not Hamas, we're sick of extremists," "end the occupation" in Arabic and calls of "Now!" which are ubiquitous at rallies to return the hostages.

Hezbollah Rejected US Overtures, Still Open to Diplomacy

Iran-backed Hezbollah has rebuffed Washington's initial ideas for cooling tit-for-tat fighting with neighboring Israel, such as pulling its fighters further from the border, but remains open to US diplomacy to avoid a ruinous war, Lebanese officials said. US envoy Amos Hochstein has been leading a diplomatic outreach to restore security at the Israel-Lebanon frontier as the wider region teeters dangerously towards a major escalation of the conflict ignited by the Gaza war. Attacks by Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis on shipping in the Red Sea, US strikes in response and fighting elsewhere in the Middle East have added urgency to the efforts. "Hezbollah is ready to listen," a senior Lebanese official familiar with the group's thinking said while emphasizing that the group saw the ideas presented by veteran negotiator Hochstein on a visit to Beirut last week as unrealistic. Hezbollah's position is that it will fire rockets at Israel until there is a full ceasefire in Gaza. Hezbollah's rejection of the proposals presented by Hochstein has not been previously reported. Despite the rejection and Hezbollah's volleys of rockets in support of Gaza, the group's openness to diplomatic contacts signals an aversion to a wider war, one of the Lebanese officials and a security source said, even after an Israeli strike reached Beirut on Jan. 2, killing a Hamas leader. Israel has also said it wants to avoid war, but both sides say they are ready to fight if necessary. Israel warns it will respond more aggressively if a deal to make the border area safe is not reached. [Read More "US Strikes Houthi Anti-ship Missiles, Shipping Disruptions Grow" \(Reuters\)](#)

Associated Press

Pakistani Retaliatory Strikes in Iran Kill at Least 9

Pakistan launched airstrikes against alleged militant hideouts inside Iran, killing at least nine people as it retaliated for a similar attack days earlier by Iran and raising tensions with its neighbor as conflict across the region escalates. The unprecedented attacks by both Pakistan and Iran on either side of their border appeared to target Baluch militant groups with similar separatist goals. The countries accuse each other of providing a haven to the groups in their respective territories. The flare-up between Iran and Pakistan comes as the Middle East remains unsettled by Israel's war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and on the heels of Iranian airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Those airstrikes were in response to a suicide bombing in Iran by Islamic State militants in early January that killed over 90 people. Iran and nuclear-armed Pakistan have long regarded each other with suspicion over militant attacks, but analysts say this week's tit-for-tat strikes were at least partially prompted by internal political pressures. Iran is dealing with unrest against its theocracy and has faced pressure for action ever since the Islamic State suicide bombing. It is also seeking to flex military power at a time when militant groups it supports in the region — Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthi rebels in Yemen — are engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Pakistan, meanwhile, could not leave the airstrikes by Iran unchallenged, and it faces a crucial February general election in which its military is a powerful political force. [Dig Deeper "Iran-Pakistan Flare-up Rooted in Restive Borderlands, Not Mideast Strife" \(Reuters\)](#)

Parallel Universe

By Sima Kadmon

- The Likud's leaked overture to Lapid and Liberman to join the war cabinet was neither premature nor too late. It simply never happened. Lapid says no one made any overture that could be taken seriously, and he has no intention of serving under Netanyahu in any case. Liberman was just as resolute. [Liberman said] There were several overtures about a month ago, but they were leaked this week to distract the public's attention from the embarrassing medication affair to a political matter that never happened. Or, in other words: it's spin. "I'm willing to get under the stretcher when it's about the war," said Liberman, "but I won't join the cabinet or the coalition. I'll join a war cabinet in wartime.
- And to leave nothing vague, the second it's over—I'm out." "The problem," said Liberman, "is that Netanyahu would like to keep the war going until the next election, and Gantz and Eisenkot are granting him legitimacy." After Netanyahu's press conference last night, it seems there was something to Liberman's remarks. Netanyahu intends to stay [in power] for many years. He said it in all kinds of ways: "Israel will not compromise on less than absolute victory. [It will not settle] only for striking, not only for attacking—absolute victory. We will keep fighting with all our might until all the hostages are released and Hamas is eradicated." And if that were not enough, Netanyahu explained what he intends for the day after. "The day after," he said, "is the day after Hamas is eradicated."
- While Netanyahu talks about war continuing on all fronts until all the missions are accomplished, the coalition's Minister Gideon Saar demanded to hold a security cabinet meeting (which was held last night) to discuss the system of running a war that is scaling back the number of troops and transitioning to the third stage, and that is not being prosecuted based on achievements but on dates. Saar, so it seems, is unsatisfied with the way the war is being prosecuted, and no one can say that he did not know. I do not recall him demanding to convene the security cabinet for an urgent meeting ever since he joined the government either. He does not want to quit the government and does not intend to do so, but he feels something has to change. Hamas, as he and Eisenkot think, is not feeling the pressure. Quite the contrary: it sees that Israel is only releasing the pressure. If dozens of rockets are fired on Netivot the day the IDF leaves the central Gaza Strip, where are we and what pressure are we applying? It's not inconceivable that is why Netanyahu called the press conference—to take preemptive action, making it harder for Saar and anyone who is thinking about criticizing him in the security cabinet.
- The obvious should be said: Netanyahu proved once again what a loser he is when he took credit for the initiative to send medication to the hostages, while once again blaming the army for failing to demand to inspect it. It was enough to see the way he stood next to an empty cardboard box, as if he were standing next to the archive of binders that was lifted from Iran, when two days later it turned out that it was Qatar and France who were behind the initiative and execution and Netanyahu was not involved at all.

- **And when it turned out that the trucks carrying the medication were not going to be inspected, he could have immediately ordered them to be inspected and only then dealt with placing blame. But then he wouldn't have been Bibi. Netanyahu opted to issue a statement first, saying he had not dealt with the inspection arrangements that are determined by the IDF and the security officials, meaning: I'm responsible for only the good things, not the fiascos. Netanyahu chose to deny that as well. He both passed the blame on to the IDF and denied doing so. Who, me? What are you talking about?**
- **The debate on whether to stop the fighting in exchange for the release of all the hostages not only crosses parties but also the government. Worse, it cuts across the war cabinet. The result is confusion. If Netanyahu and Gallant declare we are going all the way until Hamas is no longer in power in Gaza, then why are they announcing a pivot to stage three, pulling out several brigades, and switching to low intensity? And if they say we are toppling Hamas, why have we left Rafah totally open? And if they say only force will bring about the hostages' release, why are they allowing fuel and supplies into Gaza, along with trucks filled with flour and medications that have not been inspected? Field commanders say the IDF is performing well, even if the strategy has allowed a stream of more fuel into the tunnels and more weapons via Rafah.**
- **We seem to be in two separate universes: Netanyahu's declarations and real life. Even Netanyahu's mouthpieces are having a hard time keeping up with this distorted loop: after a year in which they were sent out to curse and humiliate Aharon Barak, now he has been sent to The Hague to rescue the State of Israel and Netanyahu; after a period of time in which they had to speak in his name about demolishing and smashing Hamas, it turns out that we are far from it; worst of all: they have had to demonstrate equanimity, not to mention indifference and apathy about releasing the hostages, and depicting their families as a burden on the IDF—while the one behind the messages presents a different position. "Ending the war will send a message of weakness, and the next massacre will be only a matter of time," said the one who is responsible for and guilty of the October 7 massacre.**
- **How much nerve and effrontery does it take to say such a thing, as if he were not part of it? Lashing out at the media, the commentators, the politicians and saying that while our soldiers are risking their lives, others are trying to undermine them, when if there is anything that could weaken them, it is the struggles within the cabinet. Netanyahu is also shocked that there are people who are thinking about elections, who want to stop everything, start propaganda campaigns, and divide the people instead of uniting it. What eye-rolling hypocrisy. Here Netanyahu goes again: the divider, the inciter, who keeps telling lies and half-truths. I asked Lapid if he is prepared to do something together with Gantz if he quits the war cabinet and a popular call for elections is heard. "I'm willing to cooperate with him in any way," said Lapid, "including one in which ultimately he, Gadi [Eisenkot], Yuli [Edelstein], or Gallant becomes prime minister."**

The Rafah Test

By Lilach Shoval

- Fifteen weeks have elapsed since Hamas forced this war on Israel on that Black Saturday of October 7, and Israel remains far from achieving the goals it set for itself: toppling Hamas's military and governing ability, and returning the captives, not necessarily in that order. In fact, the military is speaking about many more months, even more than a year until the end of the military campaign in the Gaza Strip. Despite the fact that it has been more than a month and a half since Israel and Hamas resumed fighting following the pause for the hostage release and despite the fact that the IDF is operating in virtually every corner of the Gaza Strip (except Rafah), as of this writing there is no concrete deal on the horizon, frequent reports to the contrary notwithstanding. The IDF continues to claim that only continued military pressure will get Sinwar to show flexibility and to compromise on a hostage deal with Israel, even if that takes time.
- This is also the view of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who said that Israel would accept nothing less than total victory over Hamas. As of this writing, however, it appears that not only is Israel not upping the military pressure at this stage, but is ramping it down by reducing troop levels in northern and central Gaza. The military's considerations regarding troop levels include the fact that there are areas like northern Gaza where Hamas has been severely hurt; therefore, there is no need to retain that troop level there. Similarly, the military must relieve its forces and allow units to prepare for many months of fighting. De facto, it appears that Sinwar, deep in the hole at the moment, has no interest in showing flexibility in his positions.
- Rather, to the contrary: it is likely he is convinced that the more he waits, the more he will get in return for releasing the Israeli hostages. When the murderer sees reduced troop forces in the Gaza Strip, the humanitarian aid flowing into Gaza, the massive pressure being put on the Israeli government by families of the hostages and by the public and the rising feeling of urgency in the Israeli public and broadcast by media outlets, he is likely to feel that time is on his side. There are some fundamental issues that require decisions by the political echelon and that serve to postpone military action. The first is the question of Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor. According to estimates, quite a few Hamas terrorists are taking cover in Rafah under the protection of more than a million Palestinian civilians acting as human shields for them.
- Without action in this area, and without finding a solution to demobilize the Philadelphi Corridor, Israel will not be able to guarantee the defeat of Hamas in the foreseeable future. Another equally troubling issue is the question of "the day after," about which no in-depth discussion has yet taken place. Without setting clear goals, Israel may miss a historic opportunity to shape the reality in the Gaza Strip according to what is appropriate and right for it [i.e. for Israel]. Just as fundamental, the northern border requires attention. For the past three days, senior Israeli officials have been heard threatening and warning about the growing likelihood of war in the north.

- **Israel would still prefer to try to reach a political settlement that will keep Hizbullah away from the border and allow the residents of the north to return to their homes. This is due to the desire to exhaust every possibility to avoid the heavy price of a war with Hizbullah if it is possible, with an additional aim of generating international legitimacy for military action if there is no other choice. But estimates are that the chances of a political arrangement that would solve the problem are very low, although not nonexistent. Meanwhile, in the north, rockets were fired from Lebanon towards settlements in western Galilee and the southern Golan Heights. In response, the IDF attacked Hizbullah's terrorist infrastructure in southern Lebanon. In Eilat, after about a month and a half of silence, a siren sounded in the city. The IDF said that it was a false alarm.**